

Chapter One

Important Considerations on Historical Inquiry Pertaining to the Truth in Ancient Texts

Excessive epistemology becomes cognitive cannibalism. But a little bit of it is important as a hedge against easy assumptions and arrogant certainties in any branch of knowledge.¹

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1.1. Introductory Comments

In *The History Primer*, J. H. Hexter asked his readers to consider the difference between grading an examination in mathematics and one in history. In the former, students either get it or they do not. “Really bad mathematics, therefore, is the consequence of an utter failure of comprehension and results in answers that are simply and wholly false. This sort of total disaster is far less likely in a history examination.” When writing about the past, “even an ill-informed stupid student is not likely to get everything all wrong. A slightly informed, intelligent student will do better. . . . [While n]obody bluffs his way through a written mathematics examination,” the same cannot be said of students of history. “Partly because writing bad history is pretty easy, writing very good history is rare.”²

And so our journey begins. What is *history*? One might think this question would be easy to answer and that professional historians would all agree that history is a synonym for the past. Indeed, a number of historians and philosophers define history in this manner. Philosopher of history Aviezer Tucker defines history as “past events.”³ Philosopher Stephen Davis asserts that “*history is understood as the events that occurred in the real past and that historians attempt to discover [ital. his].*”⁴ However, it turns out that many others have provided differing definitions. Indeed, the term *history* may be referred to as an *essentially contested concept*, which is a word for which no consensus exists related to its meaning.⁵ What are some other definitions of *history* that are offered? Historical Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan offers the following: “History is the past reconstructed interactively by the present through argued evidence in public discourse.”⁶ Samuel Byrskog defines history as “*an account of what people have done and said in the past, which means that various kinds of biased, pragmatic and didactic features can be part of the writing of history.*”⁷ Historian Michael Oakeshott offers this definition: “‘What really happened [is] what the evidence obliges us to believe.’ The historical past, itself a construction based on reasoning from evidence, is ultimately a construction within the historian’s

¹ L. T. Johnson (1996), 84.

² Hexter (*The History Primer*, 1971), 59.

³ Tucker (2004), 1.

⁴ Davis (1993), 24.

⁵ Walter Bryce Gallie introduced the term *essentially contested concept* in a paper delivered on March 12, 1956 to the Aristotelian Society.

⁶ Crossan (1998), 20.

⁷ Byrskog (2002), 44, emphasis in original.

‘world of ideas.’”⁸ New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson offers the following: “History is, rather, a product of human intelligence and imagination. It is one of the ways in which human beings negotiate their present experience and understanding with reference to group and individual memory.”⁹ Philosopher of history Hayden White offers this definition: “the term *history* refers both to an object of study and to an account of this object” and “can be conceived only on the basis of an equivocation . . . in the notion of a general human past that is split into two parts one of which is supposed to be ‘historical,’ the other ‘unhistorical.’”¹⁰ More definitions can be found in abundance.¹¹ Although much discussion is to follow, throughout this dissertation I will use Tucker’s definition and refer to history as *past events that are the object of study*.

Historiography is another essentially contested concept. White writes that historiography concerns quests *about* history and questions *of* history. It is both philosophy and method.¹² Tucker refers to it as “representations of past events, usually texts, but other media such as movies or sound recordings.”¹³ According to this definition, Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*, Tacitus’s *Annals*, and Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* are all examples of historiography. Thus, historiography can be defined as the history of the philosophy of history and as writings about the past. Historiography is not historical method but includes it, since method enables one to write about the past. Throughout this dissertation I will use the term *historiography* to refer to matters in the philosophy of history and historical method. Philosophy of history concerns epistemological approaches to gaining a knowledge of the past. It attempts to answer questions such as “What does it mean to *know* something?” “How do we come to know something?” “Can we know the past and, if so, to what extent?” “What does it mean when historians say that a particular event occurred?”¹⁴

1.2. Theory

1.2.1. Considerations in the Philosophy of History

There are numerous challenges to knowing the past. Since the past is forever gone, it can neither be viewed directly nor reconstructed precisely or exhaustively.

⁸ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1933), 107, cited by Rex Martin (2005), 140.

⁹ L. T. Johnson (1996), 81-82.

¹⁰ White (1987), 55.

¹¹ Anchor (1999), 121; Barnett (*Crux*, 1997), 3; Blackburn (2000), 272; Fasolt (2005), 10; Holscher (1997), 322; Iggers (1983), 68.

¹² White (1978), 81. Gilderhus (2007) refers to historiography as “the history of historical writing” (16).

¹³ Tucker (2004), 1. See also R. J. Miller, “Back to Basics: A Primer on Historical Method” in Scott, ed. (2008), 7.

¹⁴ *Historicism* is another essentially contested concept. Although I will not be using this term throughout this dissertation, I will here list a few definitions of the term throughout the literature: Momigliano (1977): “historicism is the recognition that each of us sees past events from a point of view determined or at least conditioned by our own individual changing situation in history” (366); Ankersmit (2003): “a dialogue with the past in order to gain true historical insight” (255, also see 254 where Ankersmit identifies *historicism* as an essentially contested concept); Pieters (2000): *new historicism* determines what meaning there is to be found in a past event; Zammito (1998): *historicism* is a realist historian (331).

Accordingly, historians cannot verify the truth of a hypothesis in an absolute sense.¹⁵ Our knowledge of the past comes exclusively through sources. This means that, to an extent, our only link to the past is through the eyes of someone else, a person who had his own opinions and agendas.¹⁶ Therefore, just as two newspapers offering reports of the same event can differ significantly due to the political biases of the journalists,¹⁷ reports coming to us from ancient historians have likewise been influenced to varying degrees by the biases of the ancient historian. Moreover, many ancient historians lacked interest in their past. Instead, they were more concerned with having their present remembered.¹⁸

Historians, ancient and modern alike, are selective in the material they report. Data the reporting historian deems uninteresting, unimportant, or irrelevant to his purpose in writing are usually omitted.¹⁹ For example, Lucian complained when he heard a man tell of the Battle of Europus in less than seven lines but afforded much more time to the experiences of a Moorish horseman.²⁰ Amazingly, neither Philo nor Josephus, the most prominent non-Christian Jewish writers of the first century, mentioned the Emperor Claudius's expulsion of all Jews from Rome in c. AD 49-50. Only Suetonius and Luke mention the event and each gives it only one line in passing.²¹ A contemporary example is found in Ronald Reagan's autobiography, in which he

¹⁵ Harris (2004), 198-99. See also Gilderhus (2007), 124. Rex Martin (2005) complains that "we most often have no such access to that past at all (not even in memory); we are not in that past now, never have been, and never will be" (141). R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008), 10.

¹⁶ Droysen (1893): "How superficial, how unreliable our knowledge of earlier times is, how necessarily fragmentary and limited to particular point the view which we can now gather therefrom" (118). Willitts (2005) is more pessimistic than most regarding the historical Jesus: "The fact is our knowledge of Jesus is always mediated to us through sources. It seems to me that probity whispers that the quest for 'what actually happened' is not possible, and we should be more attentive to its voice" (105).

¹⁷ On February 26, 1987, "The Tower Commission Report" was released and listed the results of the committee's investigation of the Iran-Contra scandal that occurred during the U. S. presidency of Ronald Reagan. I recall being surprised on the following morning when reading the quite contradictory reports of what the Commission concluded on the front pages of the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*.

¹⁸ Finley (1965): "The plain fact is that the classical Greeks knew little about their history before 650 B.C. (or even 550 B.C.), and that what they thought they knew was a jumble of fact and fiction, some miscellaneous facts and much fiction about essentials and about most of the details" (288). Finley goes on to demonstrate that Thucydides devoted little space to Greece's past and that he was primarily concerned with the present. In his past, he employs "astonishingly few concrete events," he employs myth, and we have no independent accounts by which we may check him (289). "These mistakes, coupled with the absence of all dates and virtually all fixed events between 1170 and 700, destroy any possibility of a proper history of early Greece" (290). On the historiography of Herodotus, see Hartog (2000), 384-395; Barrera (2001), 190-205. On Mesopotamian historiography, see A. K. Grayson, "Mesopotamian Historiography" in Freedman, ed. (1992), 205-06. On Israelite historiography, see Thompson in Freedman, ed. (1992), 3:206-12. Thompson is a minimalist who adopts a methodologically skeptical approach. See also I. Provain, V. P. Long, and T. Longman III (2003), Part I, "History, Historiography, and the Bible" (1-104); D. M. Howard Jr. and M. A. Grisanti, eds. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003). On Greco-Roman historiography, see D. Lateiner, "Greco-Roman Historiography," in Freedman, ed. (1992), 3:212-19.

¹⁹ See also Byrskog (2002, 257-58) who provides as examples Herodotus (1:16, 177), Thucydides (III 90:1; IV 50:2), Polybius (I 13:6; 56:11; 79:7; XXIX 12:6), Xenophon (*Historia Graeca* IV 8:1; V 1: 3-4; 4:1; VI 2:32). B. Fischhoff, "For those condemned to study the past: Heuristics and biases in hindsight," in Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, eds. (1982) observes, "The eye, journalist, and historian are all drawn to disorder. An accident-free drive to the store or a reign without wars, depressions, or earthquakes is for them uneventful" (338).

²⁰ Lucian, *How to Write History*, 28.

²¹ Suetonius, *Claudius* 25; Acts 18:2.

comments on his first marriage. However, readers desiring to learn about this relationship will be disappointed, since Reagan offers a total of two sentences:

The same year I made the Knute Rockne movie, I married Jane Wyman, another contract player at Warners. Our marriage produced two wonderful children, Maureen and Michael, but it didn't work out, and in 1948 we were divorced.²²

My wife's grandfather kept a daily diary for years. His entry for April 2, 1917, the day the U.S. entered WWI against Germany, was as follows:

The weather was cloudy and windy today. {Born to Herman and Edyth to-day a son.} Pa and I cultivated in oats again to-day.

The following Sunday (Easter, April 8, 1917), he wrote the following:

The weather is very nice and warmer. The ground is very much [?]. Pa {ect.} [sic.] didn't go to church to-day. I went alone on Pearl [a horse]. There were quite a few there in spite of the mud. In the afternoon we all went up to Fred's.

Albert Weible contributed entries every day. Yet he never mentioned the war. If we think of history as an exhaustive description of the past, then history is certainly unknowable. However, if we regard history as an adequate description of a subject during a specific period, we are in a position to think that history is knowable to a degree. Although incomplete, adequate descriptions provide enough data for answering the questions being asked. "Bush was the President of the United States in 2006" is an accurate statement. It is incomplete, since it fails to mention that he was also a husband and father during the same time. Whether the statement is adequate or fair depends on the purpose of writing and the questions being asked. The Evangelists never actually described the physical features of Jesus because it was not relevant to their purpose in writing. This omission can hardly be said to hinder us regarding many questions of historicity. Thus, an *incomplete* description does not necessitate the conclusion that it is an *inaccurate* description.

The selectivity of historians goes beyond the events or narratives they choose to report. Historians select data because of their relevancy to the particular historian and these become evidence used by them for building their case for a particular hypothesis. Detectives at the scene of a crime survey all of the data and select specific data that become evidence as they are interpreted within the framework of a hypothesis of what occurred. Data that are irrelevant to that hypothesis are archived or ignored. Historians work in the same manner. Suppose an ancient historian selected specific data while discarding other data deemed irrelevant. If the ancient historian was mistaken in his understanding of what occurred, modern historians may find themselves handicapped, since what may be data relevant to the questions they are asking may now be lost, unless it is reported or alluded to in a different source. Therefore, historians may inquire whether there is a high probability that data no longer extant would serve as evidence. Of course, this speculation would produce an

²² Ronald Reagan (1990), 92.

argument from silence and an *ad hoc* component to any hypothesis. But this is sometimes necessary when historians suffer from a paucity of data.

Memories are selective and are augmented by interpretive details. In time, they may become uncertain, faded, or distorted. Authorial intent often eludes us and the motives behind the reports are often difficult to determine.²³ This is a challenge when we consider the four earliest extant biographies of Jesus, known as the canonical Gospels. There is somewhat of a consensus among contemporary scholars that the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bios*). *Bioi* offered the ancient biographer great flexibility for rearranging material, inventing speeches in order to communicate the teachings, philosophy, and political beliefs of the subject, and often included encomium. Because *bios* was a flexible genre, it is often difficult to determine where history ends and encomium begins.²⁴

Another factor that contributes to the difficulty of knowing the past is the occasional unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Lucian writes of those who lie about being eyewitnesses, when in fact they were not.²⁵ But even reports by eyewitnesses attempting to be truthful have challenges. Zabell notes that the eyewitness must “(1) accurately perceive it; (2) remember it with precision; (3) truthfully state it; and (4)

²³ Zammito (1998), 334.

²⁴ See chapter 3.2.1. The only manual pertaining to proper historiography that has survived from antiquity is Lucian’s *How to Write History*, written in the latter half of the second century AD. Lucian provides minimal information concerning the genre of history writing (*How to Write History* 7 in *Lucian*, Volume VI in Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959]). The purpose of history was to report what was of profit or benefit to the readers. The reporting should be truthful (9, 51). Lucian (42) cites Thucydides’ statement that he is writing so that future readers who find themselves in a similar situation may gain wisdom. We also observe examples of this feature in Eusebius and Tacitus. In *Ecclesiastical History* 8.2.3, Eusebius admits that in his history of the Church he will not include reports of Christians who abandoned their faith as a result of the heavy Roman persecution that began in March 303, but will only include reports that will be useful to Christians in his day and for their posterity. Tacitus states a similar purpose in *Annals* 3.65: “My purpose is not to relate at length every motion, but only such as were conspicuous for excellence or notorious for infamy. This I regard as history’s highest function, to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds” (Translation, Perseus Project: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078&layout=&loc=3.65> [accessed October 3, 2006]). Lucian (*How to Write History* 9) taught that “history has one task and end: τὸ χρήσιμον (useful, beneficial, profitable), “which is gathered only from the truth.” For Lucian, praise for the subject was acceptable within reasonable limits (9). Complete fiction and excessive praise, especially when taken to the point of lying, were to be avoided (7), although Lucian claims many historians were guilty of going too far in order to gain favor with those they praised and for financial gain (10, 13, 40). Instead, the historian should write without fear of retribution or hope of profit from his subject (38). Although a chronological order of events was preferable, ancient historians were permitted to rearrange them. However, misplacing a location by a large margin was unacceptable (24, 49, 51). An understanding of politics and a gift for explanation are the most valuable qualities to be possessed by historians (34, 51). Truth was not to be sacrificed for the sake of hurting an enemy or protecting a friend. He writes for future readers, rather than the historian’s peers (39–41, 61). The historian should either be an eyewitness or get his information from sober and reliable sources (47). A speech could be invented with the conditions that the language and content employed suited the subject delivering it and if it could be supported by evidence. The historian was permitted to exhibit his oratory skills at this point (58–59). For writing history apart from biography, Lucian’s dictum was “The sole mission of the historian is this: To tell it as it occurred” (39). Finley (1965) is unsatisfied with Lucian, commenting that his “one point of interest for us is that five hundred years after Aristotle, Lucian was still steering history against poetry” (282).

²⁵ *How to Write History* 29. Lucian provides an example in *The Passing of Peregrinus* 40.

successfully [sic.] communicate it to others.”²⁶ Moreover, even bona fide eyewitnesses who were both sober and sincere often provide conflicting testimonies. Did the *Titanic* break in half as many eyewitnesses claimed or did it go down intact according to other eyewitnesses? What really happened in the exchange between Wittgenstein and Popper at Cambridge the evening of October 25, 1946? Did Wittgenstein throw down a hot poker, storm out of the room and slam the door behind him or was this a “gross exaggeration” of the event? There are numerous reports from eyewitnesses that are in conflict.²⁷

The past has come to us fragmented. Ancient historians were selective in what they reported and much of what was written has been lost. Approximately half of the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus have survived. All but a fragment of Thallus’s Mediterranean history written in the first century has been lost. Suetonius is aware of the writings of Asclepiades of Mendes, but they are no longer extant. Nicholas of Damascus was the secretary of Herod the Great and wrote a *Universal History* in 144 books, none of which has survived. Only the early books of Livy and excerpts from his other writings have survived. Although Papias was an influential leader in the early second-century Christian church, only a few citations and slight summary information remain from his five books titled *Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord*. Around the same time, another church leader named Quadratus wrote a defense of the Christian faith for the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Had Eusebius not mentioned his work and quoted a paragraph from it in the fourth century, all traces of it would probably have been forever lost. Hegesippus’s *Recollections*, contained in five books written in the second century, likewise survive only in fragments preserved mostly by Eusebius.²⁸

A watchword with some revisionist historians is *history is written by the winners*.²⁹ When attempting to understand the past, we look primarily at sources that tell a narrative of a battle, an era, a person, etc. Usually the narrative is written by someone from an advantaged position. Therefore, we are getting our story from the perspective of the party in power rather than from those who are not. For example, our knowledge of ancient Rome comes primarily from ancient historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, Cicero, Caesar, Livy, Priscus, Sallust, Plutarch, and Josephus. Nearly all of these were Romans. Thus, the history of Rome to which we are privy is

²⁶ Zabell (1988), 334.

²⁷ See Edmonds and Eidinow (2001), 1-5 for the story and the Appendix (306-12) for the conflicting eyewitness testimonies.

²⁸ It is worth noting that although crucifixion was widely practiced throughout the Roman Empire, archaeology has produced only a single artifact confirming crucifixion. The skeletal remains of a young man named Yehohanan Ben Hagkol were discovered in Jerusalem in 1968. Embedded in one of his ankles was one of the nails used. Those who removed him from the cross and buried him were apparently unable to remove it. The artifact is catalogued as Israel Antiquities Authority, 95-2067/5.

²⁹ Ehrman (*Lost Scriptures*, 2003), 2. George Orwell seems to have originated the maxim “History is written by the winners”; see Orwell, “As I Please,” *Tribune*, 4 Feb. 1944, in G. Orwell, *As I Please, 1943-1945*, Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters 3, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus (Boston: David R. Godine, 2000), 88. In his novel *1984*, Orwell provided a frightful picture of how “winners” can control history. Also see Franzmann (2005): “It is a truism that official history is written by the winners, and stars the winners only. The history of Christianity reads as a long list of those religious professionals who either won in the debates over major doctrinal issues, or managed to consolidate positions of power through political alliance. History focuses on them as the ones who define and maintain orthodoxy. On the other hand, heretics are relegated to the edge of the histories; they are the opponents, the losers” (127).

largely from a Roman perspective. Even Josephus had been conquered and was writing from a perspective in support of Rome. Thus, it might be argued that what we read is biased and slanted from a pro-Roman position. However, it is not always true that history is written by the winners. Thucydides and Xenophon are two of our most important ancient historians and they both wrote from the losing side. Moreover, as Zagorin notes, “A significant part of contemporary German historiography is the work of scholars of a defeated nation seeking to explain how the German people submitted to the Nazi regime and the crimes it committed.”³⁰

Ehrman and Pagels argue that there were a number of groups which thought of themselves as Christians but were rejected as heretical by the group who eventually won acceptance by the majority. Accordingly, they argue, the history of Jesus and the early church was written by the winners, the Proto-Orthodox, and the church now reads their writings as authoritative.³¹ Had the Gnostic Christians won, we would instead be reading a different set of canonical Gospels and other writings regarded as authoritative.

While this assertion is true to an extent, there are a number of major obstacles weighing against the conclusion it attempts to support. We may note primarily that it is often proper for those Christians who side with orthodoxy to say that the Gnostics got things wrong when referring to the teachings of the historical Jesus and his disciples. The Gnostic literature is later than the New Testament literature, usually quite later. Moreover, that the Gnostic literature contains authentic apostolic tradition is dubious, with the possible exception of the *Gospel of Thomas*. But there is even uncertainty regarding *Thomas*. Pagels dates the *Gospel of Thomas* c. A.D. 80-90 and admits to not knowing who wrote it or if the community from which it came (if it actually came from a community) was linked at all to the apostle Thomas³² or if any of its unique logia originated with Jesus.³³ However, she maintains that an original disciple of Jesus is behind the *Gospel of John*.³⁴ Moreover, there are good reasons for holding that many of the writings of the New Testament contain apostolic teachings. We are now a few decades removed from the day when New Testament scholars held that Paul invented present orthodox Christian doctrines. Instead, there are good reasons for holding that Paul’s teachings were compatible with the teachings of the Jerusalem apostles.³⁵ Moreover, many New Testament scholars believe that the apostolic teachings are enshrined in the sermon summaries in Acts.³⁶ Thus, there is a high probability that we can identify a significant core of the apostolic teachings.

The past only survives in fragments preserved in texts, artifacts, and the effects of past causes. The documents were written by biased authors, who had an agenda, who were shaped by the cultures in which they lived (and which are often foreign to us), who varied in both their personal integrity and the accuracy of their memories, who had access to a cache of incomplete information that varied in its accuracy, and who

³⁰ Zagorin (1999), 13. See also R. Evans (1999), 182.

³¹ Ehrman (*The New Testament*, 2008), 3-14; Pagels (1989), 102-18.

³² Pagels (2003), 57.

³³ See my television discussion with Pagels, segment 5 at <http://www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=784449&ct=1201303>.

³⁴ Pagels (2003), 59.

³⁵ See chapter 3.2.3.4.d.

³⁶ Dodd (1964), 1-32; Hemer (1990), 415-33; Stanton (1974), 67-85. See chapter 3.2.3.3.

selected from that cache only information relevant to their purpose in writing. Accordingly, all sources must be viewed and employed with prudence.

1.2.2. Horizons

Horizon may be defined as one's "pre-understanding."³⁷ It is how historians view things as a result of their knowledge, experience, beliefs, education, cultural conditioning, preferences, presuppositions, and worldview. Horizons are like sunglasses through which a historian looks. Everything she sees is colored by that horizon. Take baseball, for example. In a baseball game, if there was a close play at second base, do you think the runner was safe or out? Depends on whether your son is the guy stealing second or the shortstop tagging him. When we read books about Jesus, we find ourselves in agreement or disagreement with certain authors, which is usually on the basis of whether the Jesus they reconstruct is like the one we prefer.

For better and for worse, historians are influenced by their culture, race, nationality, gender, ethics, as well as their political, philosophical, and religious convictions. They cannot look at the data vacuous of biases, hopes, or inclinations. No historian is exempt.³⁸ Horizons are of great interest to historians, since they are responsible more than anything else for the embarrassing diversity that exists among the conflicting portraits of the past offered. How can so many historians with access to the same data arrive at so many different conclusions regarding what actually occurred? Horizons.

³⁷ Meyer (1979), 97. Pre-understanding is the hearer's total relationship (intellectual, emotional, moral) to the thing expressed.

³⁸ Allison ("Explaining," 2005): "to observe the obvious, people's arguments regarding the origins of Christianity are unavoidably driven by large assumptions about the nature of the world, assumptions that cannot often if ever be the upshot of historical investigation" (133); R. Evans (1999): "We know of course that we will be guided in selecting materials for the stories we tell, and in the way we put these materials together and interpret them, by literary methods, by social science theories, by moral and political beliefs, by an aesthetic sense, even by our own unconscious assumptions and desires. It is an illusion to believe otherwise" (217); McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998): "I conclude that the cultural bias now being discussed, which does not involve false or misleading descriptions of the past, is inescapable, and provides the main reason for saying that history is subjective. In this way I agree that history is subjective" (35); Meier (1991): "Whether we call it a bias, a *Tendenz*, a worldview, or a faith stance, everyone who writes on the historical Jesus writes from some ideological vantage point; no critic is exempt" (5); Moore-Jumonville (2002): "In the end, differences in hermeneutical method around the turn of the century (as today) had to do with one's presuppositions and the relationship one constructed between theology and criticism" (167); A. G. Padgett, "Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus" in Davis, Kendall, and O'Collins, eds. (1998): "World-views don't just give us the questions we ask; they also affect our understanding of the evidence and our historical judgment. There just is no such thing as data apart from some interpretation" (293-94); Waterman (2006): "we as observers must bear in mind an inevitable bias in our own theological interests. The latter is the so-called 'historian's subjectivity,' which is influential in choosing and judging historical materials" (86-87; cf. 12). Contra is Thompson (2006) who, in answer to Alan Millard's claim that skeptical scholars allow their personal beliefs to direct their investigations as much as his own faith guides his, opines that Millard's claim is "a most serious and, to my knowledge, untrue allegation" (7). Thompson may be correct that a believer's "faith-oriented fantasy" is "capable of recreating myths of the past in which the voice of the text can find resonance and confirmation" (12). However, no less can be said of the created myth of skeptics. In "The Practice of American History: A Special Issue" of *The Journal of American History* 81:3 (Dec., 1994), "A Statistical Summary of Survey Results" provided data, some of which is germane to our present discussion. Of particular interest is the response of historians to the question of "allegiances or identities as important to them as historians." The leading answer was "Ideological commitments" (41%), followed by "Education" (38.7%), then "Nationality" (31.3%). "Religion" (14.8%) placed seventh (1193). Biases and agendas come in many forms.

Elton writes, “The historian who thinks that he has removed himself from his work is almost certainly mistaken.”³⁹ Iggers comments that historians “have increasingly recognized the limits of objectivity . . . [and have] become more aware of the biases that compromise their honesty.”⁴⁰ He adds that “objectivity is unattainable in history; the historian can hope for nothing more than plausibility . . . [which] assumes that the historical account relates to a historical reality, no matter how complex and indirect the process is by which the historian approximates this reality.”⁴¹ Anchor notes that our thinking of the past cannot be “sharply divided between a realm of ‘facts,’ which can be established beyond controversy, and a realm of ‘values’ where we are always in hopeless disagreement.” Rather, “our subjectivity is in large part itself a product of the historically evolved communities to which we belong.”⁴² Indeed, “historians, like everyone else, are historically situated, and that their reconstructions of the past are inevitably informed by their various existential interests and purposes; hence the multiplicity of their perspectives of the past.”⁴³ Iggers writes that “[h]istorical scholarship is never value-free and historians not only hold political ideas that color their writing, but also work within the framework of institutions that affect the ways in which they write history.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Elton (1967), 105.

⁴⁰ Iggers (2005), 144.

⁴¹ Iggers (2005), 145.

⁴² Anchor (1999), 116-17.

⁴³ Anchor (1999), 114. See also Padgett in Davis, Kendall, and O’Collins, eds. (1998), 295.

⁴⁴ Iggers (2005), 475. See also Appleby, Hunt, Jacob (1994): “No longer able to ignore the subjectivity of the author, scholars must construct standards of objectivity that recognize at the outset that all histories start with the curiosity of the particular individual and take shape under the guidance of his or her personal and cultural attributes. . . . Our version of objectivity concedes the impossibility of any research being neutral (that goes for scientists as well) and accepts the fact that knowledge-seeking involves a lively, contentious struggle among diverse groups of truth-seekers. Neither admission undermines the viability of stable bodies of knowledge that can be communicated, built upon, and subjected to testing” (254); Eddy and Boyd (2007): “if the postmodern turn has taught us anything, it is that there is no such thing as an unbiased, objective author/reader” (398); Gorman (2000): “We all bring philosophical baggage to our reading” (253); Gowler (2007): “although many recent studies attempt—or say that they do—to bracket theological concerns from their investigations, such objectivity is, in practice, impossible” (27-28); Haskell (1990), 150; Jenkins, “Introduction,” in Jenkins, ed. (1997): “For the attempt to pass off the study of history in the form of the ostensibly disinterested scholarship of academics studying the past objectively and ‘for its own sake’ as ‘proper’ history, is now unsustainable” (6); Kofoed (2005): “There is no such thing as an ‘impartial historian.’ No history is written without some kind of ‘grid,’ some larger narrative with all the oversimplifications and blind spots that entails, and either ‘camp’ in the battle between maximalists and minimalists need to recognize the ‘path-dependent’ character of their results” (110); Meyer (1994) comments that conflicting views in New Testament studies “are not disagreements grounded in the limitations of evidence, which yield forthwith as sufficient evidence comes to light; they are disagreements grounded in disparity of horizons, which rarely find a resolution without some change of horizon” (59). Regarding the components of the horizon of the historian he concludes that “in the end they account more fundamentally and adequately than anything else for the kind of history he produces” (110); O’Collins (2003): “There is no such thing as a view from nowhere or presuppositionless research, and it is neither possible nor desirable to undertake such research” (2); Thiselton (1992): “Understanding thus has the structure of seeing ‘something as something’. But what we see it as depends on our horizons, our world, and the set of concerns which determine what is ready-to-hand” (280); Willitts (2005): “the glaring reality that every scholar functions within some confession, whether this confession is the theological tenets of the church or of tradition criticism or of something else” (104). See also Linda Orr, “Intimate Images: Subjectivity and History—Staël, Michelet, and Tocqueville” in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 89-107.

When the historicity of Jesus in general and the resurrection in particular are the subjects of inquiry, the horizon of the historian will be in full operation throughout the entire process.⁴⁵ Accordingly, it is of no surprise to find similar comments in reference to a history of Jesus and discussions on his resurrection. Craffert asserts, “[W]idely acknowledged but poorly understood in the traditional debate about Jesus’ resurrected body, is the role that world-view elements or one’s understanding of reality plays in these questions.”⁴⁶ Grant notes that “the life of Jesus is a theme in which the notorious problem of achieving objectivity reaches its height” so that “it is *impossible* to be objective.”⁴⁷ Smit writes that “for us no innocent reading of the resurrection message is possible.”⁴⁸ Thus, what is granted membership by some historians into their club of historical facts is rejected by others.⁴⁹ Dunn writes, “The simple and rather devastating fact has been the Gospels researchers and questers of the historical Jesus have failed to produce agreed results. Scholars do not seem to be able to agree on much beyond a few basic facts and generalizations; on specific texts and issues there has been no consensus. The lengthy debate from the 1960s onwards about appropriate criteria for recognition of the actual words of Jesus has not been able to produce much agreement about the criteria, let alone their application.”⁵⁰ Also referring to Jesus research in the Gospels, Sanders writes, “one should begin with what is relatively secure and work out to more uncertain points. But *finding agreement about the ground rules* by which what is relatively secure can be identified is very difficult.”⁵¹

Anchor observes that our concept of history, realist or postmodern, and our concept of our external world, theist or otherwise, largely determine our conclusions.⁵² Indeed, the nature of reality itself is at stake.⁵³ Accordingly, those historians who believe they have experienced the supernatural will have a different pool of interpretations of present reality than those historians who have had no such experiences. Theistic or Christian historians may be accused of allowing their horizon to muddy their ability to

⁴⁵ Willitts (2005): “Presuppositions consist of everything one brings to the texts one is handling—philosophical beliefs, theology, and culture—and they influence decisions at every stage in the process of historical Jesus study” (72).

⁴⁶ Craffert (2002), 95.

⁴⁷ Grant (1977), 200. See also Tabor (2006): “It is impossible to gaze upon ‘facts’ without interpretation. All historians come to their investigations with selective criteria of judgment forged by both acknowledged and unrecognized predisposed interests and cultural assumptions. There is no absolutely objective place to stand. . . . When it comes to the quest for the historical Jesus our need to be aware of our own prejudices seems particularly acute. No other figure in history elicits such passionate responses nor engenders such opposite conclusions” (316-17); Wright (2003): “The challenge for any historian, when faced with the question of the rise of Christianity . . . comes down to . . . the direct question of death and life, of the world of space, time and matter and its relation to whatever being there may be for whom the word ‘god,’ or even ‘God,’ might be appropriate. Here there is, of course, no neutrality. Any who pretend to it are merely showing that they have not understood the question” (712; cf. 717).

⁴⁸ Smit (1988), 177.

⁴⁹ The “club of historical facts” metaphor is from R. Evans (1999), 67. For similar thoughts, see also Lorenz (1994), 305; Tucker (2004), 14.

⁵⁰ Dunn (2003), 97. Marxsen (1990) goes even further, stating, “all attempts to reach the historical Jesus had failed and . . . they have failed for good” (13).

⁵¹ Sanders (1985), 3, emphasis added. See also Marxsen (1990): “The difficulty which one now confronted was whether there are criteria which can help one reach historical judgments in spite of all the obstacles. None have been found, at least none which are acceptable to all scholars” (20).

⁵² Anchor (1999), 120.

⁵³ Gregory (2006), 140.

make accurate assessments pertaining to the historical Jesus and his resurrection.⁵⁴ Many times, this is undoubtedly true. But it should also be noted that non-theist historians may be guilty of prejudice in the other direction.⁵⁵ Coakley writes, “New Testament scholarship of this generation . . . is often downright repressive—about supernatural events in general and bodily resurrection in particular.”⁵⁶ Examples of a bias against the supernatural abound. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* refers to Charles Hartshorne as “one of the most important philosophers of religion and metaphysicians of the twentieth century.”⁵⁷ Hartshorne wrote the following comments in reference to a debate on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus between then-atheist philosopher Antony Flew and Christian philosopher Gary Habermas: “I can neither explain away the evidences [for the resurrection] to which Habermas appeals, nor can I simply agree with [the skeptical position] . . . My metaphysical bias is against resurrections.”⁵⁸ Flew himself later said, “this is in fact the method of critical history. You try to discover what actually happened, guided by your best evidence, as to what was probable or improbable, possible or impossible.

⁵⁴ So, Theissen and Winter (2002) write, “Christian faith makes the figure of Jesus central to its own life’s orientation—it does exactly what, from the perspective of a rigorous academic ethos, is guaranteed to corrupt objective scholarly work” (252). However, Marsden (1997) comments, “What if someone suggested that no feminist should teach the history of women, or no gay person teach gay studies, or no political liberal should teach American political history? Or—for those who see religion as mainly praxis—perhaps the analog should be that no musician should be allowed to teach an instrument that she herself plays” (13).

⁵⁵ McCullagh (1984), 234. See also Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), who admits to being a “cryptic deist” (215): “It is, furthermore, evident that some we might think of as having no theological agenda are partly motivated by an animus against traditional Christian doctrine, which is in reality just another sort of theological agenda. The trite truth is that none of us is without philosophical bias or theological interest when we sit down to study Christian origins, so the alleged lack thereof seems a dubious criterion for classifying scholars who quest for Jesus” (13). Similarly J. M. G. Barclay, “The Resurrection in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship” in D’Costa, ed. (1996): “It is important to remain conscious that behind these historical judgements [pertaining to the empty tomb] may lie strong theological, or anti-theological, commitments” (22). He adds, “Those willing to discard the story of the empty tomb as history may also be influenced by theological factors” (23). Likewise Gregory (2006): “Traditional Christian church history . . . has in recent decades been rejected by most professional historians because of its biases for and against particular traditions” (135, see also his comments on 136-37); Meeks (2006): “So, if in many of the churches there persists a pervasive anti-intellectualism, in the universities there grows up a pervasive intellectual antireligionism” (112); W. Pannenberg, “History and the Reality of the Resurrection” in D’Costa, ed. (1996): “There are strong a priori prejudices against the possibility of such an event as well as against any affirmation of its actual occurrence. They precede any examination of the historical evidence for the early Christian proclamation of the event of Jesus’ resurrection” (62). He later adds that an a priori attitude against miracles “continues to dominate the scene.” Given this, “the [negative] verdict on the issue of Jesus’ resurrection should not be presented as resulting from historical scrutiny of the Biblical evidence, but as what it is: a prejudice that precedes all specifically historical examination of the tradition” (66); Pannenberg (1998): “Desire for emancipation from a conservative or fundamentalist background is often more influential in biblical exegesis than is commitment to sound historical judgment” (22).

⁵⁶ Coakley, “Response” in Davis, Kendall, O’Collins (1998), 184. Via (2002) notes that most postmodern biblical scholars tend to be atheists (113-15). See also Gregory (2006), 137. On a similar note, Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005) suggests that most of what is coming from the social sciences are the results of less theological scholars who are like the liberal scholars of a century ago looking down into the well and seeing a reflection of their secularized selves. This growing secularity may constrict our ability to find a religious Jesus (1-23). Wright (2003) notes his sense of “[w]alking into the middle of this 360-degree barrage of cold epistemological water” when discussing the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus (686).

⁵⁷ This is an online encyclopedia located at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hartshorne>.

⁵⁸ See the response by Charles Hartshorne in Miethe, ed. (1987), 142.

And the miracles are things that you just take to be impossible.”⁵⁹ A. N. Harvey confidently asserts that the biblical picture of Jesus is “incompatible with historical inquiry” and requires a “sacrifice of the intellect” to hold it.⁶⁰ It is clear that the horizon of atheist New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann is a driving force behind his historical conclusions when he *a priori* rules out the historicity of the ascension of Jesus reported in Acts 1:9-11 “because there is no such heaven to which Jesus may have been carried.”⁶¹ Jewish scholar Alan Segal writes with a similar tone: “When a heavenly journey is described literally, the cause may be literary convention or the belief of the voyager; but when reconstructing the actual experience, only one type can pass modern standards of credibility.”⁶² It seems that Crossan does not believe in the existence of God apart from metaphorical constructions.⁶³ If God does not exist, neither do supernatural events. Given God’s non-existence and the absence of supernatural events, Crossan is left with attempting to explain the data in natural terms and chooses metaphor. Thus, by starting out with a horizon that miracles—including resurrections—are impossible, Crossan can never conclude that Jesus was resurrected.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Flew’s comments in a transcript of a debate between him and Habermas with John Ankerberg as moderator in Ankerberg, ed. (2005), 71.

⁶⁰ Harvey (1997), xxvi. Bultmann (1976): “An historical event which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable” (38-39); Harrington (1986), says that believing that the corpse will one day be reanimated and transformed is to “ask too much of my credulity” (99).

⁶¹ Lüdemann (2004), 114. See Viney (1989) for a similar remark (135-36) and Tabor (2006) who writes, “Women do not get pregnant without a male—ever. So Jesus had a human father . . . Dead bodies don’t rise . . . So, if the tomb was empty the historical conclusion is simple—Jesus’ body was moved by someone and likely reburied in another location” (234). Waterman (2006) takes issue with such assertions, referring to them as the results of “a naïve reductionistic view” (178). He adds that “there is no scholarly conclusion of ‘natural science’ regarding the empty tomb; in my view, [to assert otherwise] is an irresponsible and nonsensical comment in the name of science” (193). See also Padgett in Davis, Kendall, O’Collins (1998), 295-96. Craig (*Assessing*, 1989) distinguishes between “innocuous and vicious presuppositions. A presupposition remains innocuous so long as it does not enter into the verification of the hypothesis. . . . A presupposition becomes vicious, however, when it actually enters into the argumentation and purports to be a ground for the acceptance of the hypothesis” (xvii). Using Craig’s distinctions, statements from especially Hartshorne, Flew, Lüdemann, and Tabor may lead one to believe they are guilty of vicious presuppositions.

⁶² Segal (2004), 411. A few pages later he writes, “It is always conceivable that, against our best logic, [the resurrection] actually happened” (450). A. F. Segal, “The Resurrection: *Faith or History?*” in Stewart, ed. (2006) writes that “the scholar does not make claims that go beyond the canons of rationality today” (136).

⁶³ See the comments by Crossan in Copan, ed. (1998), 50-51. This book includes a transcript of a debate between John Dominic Crossan and William Lane Craig. During the discussion period, Craig stated, “if the existence of God is a statement of faith, not a statement of fact, that means that God’s existence is simply an interpretive construct that a particular human mind—a believer—puts on the universe. But in and of itself the universe is without such a being as God. . . . It seems to me that, independent of human consciousness, your [i.e., Crossan] worldview is actually atheistic, and that religion is simply an interpretive framework that individual people put on the world, but none of it is factually, objectively true.” Buckley (moderator): “Another one of his metaphors.” Craig: “Exactly! God himself is a metaphor.” Crossan: “If you were to ask me . . . to abstract from faith how God would be if no human beings existed, that’s like asking me, ‘Would I be annoyed if I hadn’t been conceived?’ I really don’t know how to answer that question.” . . . Craig: “During the Jurassic age, when there were no human beings, did God exist?” Crossan: “Meaningless question.” Craig: “It’s a factual question. Was there a being who was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe during that period of time when no human beings existed? It seems to me that in your view you’d have to say no.” Crossan: “Well, I would probably prefer to say no because what you’re doing is trying to put yourself in the position of God and ask, ‘How is God apart from revelation?’”

⁶⁴ See also Tabor (2006), 233-34; Wedderburn (1999), 218.

This approach by Harvey, Segal, and others has come under criticism. For example, Miller refers to the exclusion of the possibility of miracles as “an obsolete nineteenth-century worldview.”⁶⁵ Wright asserts that following these scholars would be to “stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own, a new cognitive dissonance in which the relentless modernist, desperately worried that the post-Enlightenment worldview seems in imminent danger of collapse, devises strategies for shoring it up nevertheless.”⁶⁶ Although Robert Funk, who founded the Jesus Seminar, referred to the group’s members as “those whose evaluations are not predetermined by theological considerations,”⁶⁷ many scholars would be quick to disagree with him. Seminar member Bruce Chilton writes, “Several of us who have participated in the ‘Jesus Seminar,’ although we have appreciated the experience, have criticized our colleagues for voting along what seem to be ideological lines.”⁶⁸ Quarles makes a similar observation: “The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar have imposed their view of Jesus on the Gospels rather than deriving their view from the Gospels and other pertinent sources. The criteria utilized by the Seminar were slanted in such a way that they tended to preclude material that might have portrayed a Jesus very different from the one they think they have discovered.”⁶⁹ Accordingly, only the naïve would maintain that historians who are agnostics, atheists, or non-Christian theists approach the question of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus without any biases.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ R. J. Miller (1992), 17n33.

⁶⁶ Wright (2003), 707. Johnson (1996) notes “the spirit of modernity with its inability to stomach the miraculous” (34).

⁶⁷ Funk and the Jesus Seminar (1998), 1. On the acts of Jesus, the Seminar approved of only 16% of the 176 reported events of Jesus.

⁶⁸ B. Chilton, “(The) Son of (The) Man, and Jesus” in Chilton and Evans, eds. (*Words*, 2002), 281.

⁶⁹ C. L. Quarles, “The Authenticity of the Parable of the Warring King: A Response to the Jesus Seminar” in Chilton and Evans, eds. (*Words*, 2002), 429. Similarly, Pannenberg (1998): “Unfortunately, however, what passes as the authority of historical competence in the Jesus Seminar is often claimed for judgments that are not unprejudiced” (22).

⁷⁰ McKnight (2005) notes that some historians of Jesus who deny being Christian claim greater objectivity in their research. However, he contends that it becomes clear upon reading their conclusions that their reconstructed Jesus “tends, more often than not (and I know of almost no exceptions), to lean in the direction of their own belief systems” (24). Moreover, agnosticism should not be confused with indeterminism and can become dogma. Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005) confesses that he is unable to transcend his horizon. Raised in a liberal Presbyterian home, he holds that the canonical Gospels contain more accurate tradition than is usually conceded by many scholars but that he is also a “cryptic deist” (140, 215). This “cryptic deism” appears to lock him in a position where he is unable to follow where the products of his Gospel research appear to be leading him. In other words, his horizon pulls him in opposite directions. The result is an epistemological agnosticism where Allison holds we are incapable of knowing these matters and he is unhappy with all who think otherwise. Therefore, he scolds professional philosophers Antony Flew who is a deist and conservative Christian Gary Habermas for being overly confident in their conclusions (339), elsewhere referring to Habermas as an “apologist” (“Explaining,” 2005), 124. Consider also the following statements: “Even if we naively think [the Gospel narratives] to be historically accurate down to the minutest detail, we are still left with precious little” (338). How can this be? If it could be demonstrated that every detail of the Gospels is accurate, we would know quite a lot about Jesus, even though numerous questions would remain. He also states, “Let us say, although it cannot be done, that someone has somehow convinced us, beyond all doubt, that the tomb was empty and that people saw Jesus because he indeed came to life again. Even this would not of itself prove that God raised him from the dead,” since it could just as easily be explained as a cosmic joke played on humanity by aliens (339-40). While Allison is correct in the strictest sense, William Lane Craig seems to me correct in a more professional sense when he writes, “Only a sterile, academic skepticism resists this inevitable inference [that if Jesus was raised it was God who did it]” (Craig [1981], 137). I cannot help but wonder if Allison is influenced more than he realizes by his deistic worldview.

It is no surprise that during the twentieth-century somewhat of a proverb circulated and continues to this day that historical Jesus scholars end up reconstructing a Jesus that reflects their own convictions and preferences. The comments of the Catholic scholar George Tyrrell are often cited as being true of contemporary historical Jesus research: “The Jesus that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face seen at the bottom of a deep well.”⁷¹ Similarly, Schweitzer comments, “each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus. . . . each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.”⁷² More recently, Johnson speaks of “a bewildering variety of conflicting portraits of Jesus, and a distressing carelessness in the manner of arriving at those portraits.”⁷³ Crossan complains of the numerous—and contradictory—portraits of the historical Jesus. For him, this “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.”⁷⁴

Allison discusses the sobering fact of the inability of most historical Jesus scholars to transcend their horizon:

[W]e may justly suspect that many or even most New Testament scholars hold the view of Jesus that they do because it was instilled in them at a young age by their education. And once they came to see things a certain way, they found it difficult to change their minds. Intellectual inertia can be obstinate. Ask yourself: Can you name any important historians of Jesus whose views in their fifties or sixties were radically different from their views in their twenties or thirties?⁷⁵

We all see what we expect to see and want to see—like highly prejudicial football fans who always spot more infractions committed by the team they are jeering against than by the team they are cheering for. . . . If we hold a belief, we will notice confirming evidence, especially if we are aware that not everyone agrees with us. Disconfirming evidence, to the contrary, makes us uncomfortable, and so we are more likely to miss, neglect, or critically evaluate it.⁷⁶

⁷¹ George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1910), 44.

⁷² Schweitzer (1961), 4. See also Meeks (2006), 30-31.

⁷³ L. T. Johnson (1996), 141.

⁷⁴ Crossan (1991), xxviii. Rex Martin (1998) rejoices over such diversity: “One can get a feel for the problem that would be posed by interpretational convergence in historical studies on one grand, synthetic account by reflecting on the fact that such a convergence would be analogous to there being all but universal agreement on just one *philosophical* view.” Martin notes that it would have been harmful had a universal agreement been attained on the philosophical view of the Catholic church, the Communist Party, or historians who dreamed of the hegemony of their own interpretations. Thus, “[t]he seeming-descensus that results, far from being an embarrassment to historical studies, should be regarded as one of its best features” (32). See also Gilderhus (2007), 85-86.

⁷⁵ Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), 135. R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008): “It is rare for a scholar to examine the historical evidence and draw conclusions that go against his own deeply held religious beliefs” (16).

⁷⁶ Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), 136. See also Davis (1993), 17-18; M. Martin (1991), 75. Martin, however, sees this only as a problem with Christians who believe Jesus rose from the dead and seems unaware that the knife cuts both ways as skeptics are also guided by their horizons.

Allison admits that he is a member of that group:

[If] in the near future, someone truly demonstrates that my sort of Jesus cannot be the historical Jesus, others would no doubt be quicker than me to home in on the truth. I would have to reconfigure my entire reconstruction of early Christianity, a task requiring courage and prolonged intellectual effort. Maybe I would not be up to it. I find this troubling. It raises embarrassing questions to which I have no answer. I am stuck with nothing better than what Chesterton says somewhere: “The nearest we can come to being impartial is to admit that we are partial.”⁷⁷

Biases can lead historians to errant conclusions. Many times when prosecuting attorneys want justice for the victims in their cases, they work toward bolstering their arguments and adding new ones for the conviction of a particular suspect rather than considering all of the data objectively. Tragically, this has resulted in numerous false convictions.⁷⁸ In a similar manner, bias on the part of historians may actually prohibit them from arriving at an accurate description of a past event.

Horizons can serve both as assets and liabilities. If we live in a reality that is deistic or atheistic, historians maintaining a bias against the supernatural will actually be assisted in their investigations by their bias. However, if we live in a theistic reality, a bias against the supernatural may actually prohibit certain historians from making a correct adjudication on miracle claims in general and the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus in particular.⁷⁹ Indeed, the bias of theist historians may drive them to discover valuable data that non-theists overlooked or too quickly discarded.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), 137. Similarly, McKnight (2005) writes, “Rarely, so it seems to me, is it the method that strikes the critic first. Instead, as we read the representation of Jesus—say in Crossan’s or Chilton’s [sic.] studies—we either assent or dissent. We do so on the basis of whether or not the Jesus represented is like the Jesus we represent him to be in our mind” (45-46). Fredriksen (1999) notes that within the study of the historical Jesus, “diversity—and controversy—dominate” (7).

⁷⁸ The following is a sobering true story that illustrates how devastating the consequences can be when one neglects to consider all of the data and when some of the data must be strained in order to fit a theory. A man wearing a cowboy hat with a feather abducted and then brutally beat and raped a woman three times before leaving her for dead. She managed to survive, however, and shortly following the crime, 22-year-old Robert Clark was arrested. The evidence used against him at his trial was that he was driving the car used in the crime; he hid from police in the closet when they came for him at his mother’s house; he concocted a story that a dancer at a lounge gave him the car, a story that when checked out was false; he admitted to wearing a cowboy hat with a feather; the victim picked him out of a lineup. However, other evidence did not fit. The victim told police that her attacker was slightly taller than herself at 5’7”. Clark is 6’1”. Two months later while in jail awaiting trial, Clark decided to tell the truth about how he got the car. It had been given to him by a friend named Tony Arnold, whom he was trying to protect. The detective never attempted to find Arnold, because he did not trust Clark. A witness testified that she saw Arnold rather than Clark driving the car used in the crime. But the defense attorneys decided not to use the witness since the victim was certain it was Clark and that if for some reason she did not recognize Arnold, it would be devastating to Clark. The rape kit was missing that included the two cotton-tipped swabs with seminal fluid and could have proven Clark’s innocence. Clark was convicted and sentenced to two life sentences plus twenty years. He spent the next twenty-four years in prison. The problem was that he was innocent. In 2003, the New York based *Innocence Project* which helps exonerate inmates using DNA evidence looked into Clark’s case. Although the two swabs were lost, enough evidence remained to perform new DNA tests and they showed that Clark did not commit the crime. He was released. They had convicted the wrong man (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* [Dec. 11, 2005], A1, A17).

⁷⁹ Padgett in Davis, Kendall, O’Collins, eds. (1998): “[T]he secular unbeliever is just as distorted and warped by his prejudice and world-view as the believer is; second, who is to say that Christian faith

Horizon and bias do not necessarily prohibit historians from partial objectivity. Haskell maintains that even a “polemicist, deeply and fixedly committed as a lifelong project to a particular political or cultural or moral program” can be objective, “insofar as such a person successfully enters into the thinking of his or her rivals and produces arguments potentially compelling not only to those who already share the same views, but to outsiders as well.”⁸¹ Indeed, reports given by even very biased historians are not to be dismissed *a priori* as providing inaccurate information. It only calls for alertness on the part of historians when studying them. Wright observes that “it must be asserted most strongly that to discover that a particular writer has a ‘bias’ tells us nothing whatever about the value of the information he or she presents. It merely bids us be aware of the bias (and of our own, for that matter), and to assess the material according to as many sources as we can.”⁸² McCullagh similarly writes, “The fact that people have certain preferences does not mean they cannot reach true,

does not give us better insight into the data than unbelief does? Why should unbelief, rather than faith, lead to the best explanation of the evidence? Would it be so strange if the followers of Jesus have an inside track in the understanding of Jesus? Why is faith so damaging to reason, anyway? Granted that faith has a kind of prejudice, perhaps it is a helpful prejudice” (294-95). See also Meyer (1979), 102; R. Brown (*Death*, 1994), 2:1468.

⁸⁰ Those strongly biased toward a particular position are motivated to note weaknesses in an opposing position. Earl Doherty is a hyperskeptic who asserts that Jesus never existed. Accordingly, Doherty (1999) takes up arms against Crossan’s portrait of Jesus, claiming that it is based on the “unaddressed and unproven assumption by Crossan and others—that there was an historical Jesus” (219). While Doherty finds himself at odds with the nearly universal consensus of contemporary scholars on that issue, his view drives him to find a weakness in Crossan’s portrait, which asserts that almost nothing in the Passion narratives reflect actual events and that it is doubtful that even the basics were known by his followers (see Crossan [1995], 145). Doherty writes, “If not even the basics were known, how could that death have made such an impact that people would bother to set it in scripture? What would have captured the imagination of preachers and believers across the empire if nothing of its historical circumstances was known or integrated into the story? What could have been the fuel that launched this amazing response to Jesus—especially since his teachings made no impact? Who would have noticed or cared if some simple, illiterate Galilean peasant had come into town with a few followers, done a bit of preaching and eating, only to get himself seized and executed by the authorities under unknown circumstances? Who would have been so overwhelmed by this event that they immediately ransacked scripture to create a story about him, delved into the full range of contemporary Greek and Jewish philosophy about intermediary forces between God and humanity and turned this illiterate peasant into the equivalent of the Logos and personified Wisdom? Who would have made him creator and sustainer of the universe and regarded that unknown, obscure death as the redemptive moment of God’s salvation history?” (245).

⁸¹ Haskell (1990), 135. He also chides those who suggest that we are obligated to ignore historians who are biased: “the idea that political activists might be read out of the profession is laughable: several recent presidents of the Organization of American Historians would have to be placed high on the list of deportees” (150). Elsewhere, “I see nothing to admire in neutrality. My conception of objectivity (which I believe is widely, if tacitly, shared by historians today) is compatible with strong political commitment. . . . scholars are as passionate and as likely to be driven by interests as those they write about. [Objectivity] does not value even detachment as an end in itself, but only as an indispensable prelude or preparation for the achievement of higher levels of understanding” (134). McCullagh (2000) opines that detachment does not require a position of non-committal; but detachment “from preferred outcomes while inquiry proceeds” (55). See also Byrskog (2002): “an apologetic aim in no way necessitates rhetorical and narrative forgery” (249); Dunn (2003), 106.

⁸² Wright (1992), 89. Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005): “Typically, and even when we seek to be as conscientious as possible, we often no doubt end up seeing what we want and expect to see. . . . The truth one discerns behind the texts is largely determined by desires, expectations, and religious and philosophical convictions already at hand. We cannot eschew ourselves. If this is the right conclusion, then we need to scrutinize not just the texts but also ourselves” (343).

justified conclusions about the past. Their descriptions might be biased, unfair in some way, but they could still be true as far as they go.”⁸³

1.2.3. On the Possibility of Transcending Horizon

How may historians manage their horizons and reduce their negative impact? Horizons are very difficult to control. The stronger the commitment of the historian to his worldview, the lesser the likelihood is that he will be open to accepting a historical description that is in conflict with his worldview. Our horizons heavily influence the way in which we interpret facts. Thus, justifying our historical description may require justifying the horizon behind it. How can we do that if the facts that support it are interpreted according to that horizon? It seems that we are left arguing in a circle, justifying our historical description by justifying the horizon behind it, using facts interpreted by that horizon. We would appear to be at an impasse, caught in somewhat of a circle, a spiral of discourse between the historian and the subject. However, things are not as bleak as they first appear, since at least a few appear to have been capable of deciding in favor of positions that are contrary to their horizon. For example, Geza Vermes left Catholicism for Judaism. Former Bultmanian Eta Linnemann is now a biblical conservative. Former biblical conservative Bart Ehrman is now an agnostic.⁸⁴ Former atheist Craig Keener became a biblical conservative. Oxford’s Alister McGrath describes his move from atheism to Christianity as an “intellectually painful (yet rewarding) transition [since] [e]very part of my mental furniture had to be rearranged.”⁸⁵ C. S. Lewis converted from atheism to Christianity.⁸⁶ Antony Flew, perhaps the most influential atheist philosopher of the final two decades of the twentieth-century, became a deist in 2004.⁸⁷ It also appears that the apostle Paul broke through his horizon, having been a Jew who persecuted the early Christian church to become one of its most aggressive promoters.

Thus, numerous examples demonstrate that it is possible to reduce the influence of one’s horizon. Although conversion is a strong sign that one’s horizon has been transcended, it does not follow that those historians who do not convert were unable to transcend their horizon or be objective in their inquiry. It could be that the historian was objective yet believed that the data confirmed the accuracy of her existing horizon. Once atheist and now deist Antony Flew would not necessarily accuse a lifelong deist of failing to be objective because he remained a deist upon examining the data.

Granted, most historians do not obtain this level of objectivity and some hold their horizon so tightly that they are unable even to come close. Is there any way to adjudicate whether the historian has broken through when conversion to a different horizon has not taken place? A strong logical argument based on solid data is only consistent with a breakthrough, but it cannot establish that a breakthrough has taken

⁸³ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 171. Also see Hemer (2001), 86.

⁸⁴ Ehrman (*God’s Problem*, 2008), 4.

⁸⁵ McGrath and McGrath (2007), 19; cf. 8, 9, 15.

⁸⁶ See Lewis (1955).

⁸⁷ Some may suspect that Flew converted in his old age in response to a fear of dying. But Flew entertained the possibility of God’s existence for several decades prior to his conversion. Moreover, Flew still does not believe in an afterlife.

place. However, the probability of accuracy increases with stronger supporting arguments and weaker competing hypotheses.

How can historians work toward transcending their horizons? Below, I propose six tools that, when combined, can be effective guides that bring us closer to objectivity. Total neutrality may never exist and even if some historians are able to achieve it, an incomplete horizon resulting from our inaccurate or insufficient understanding of reality may still prevent them from arriving at a correct judgment. Let us now look at a few important guidelines.

a) *Method* can serve as a means toward achieving greater objectivity. Method encompasses many parts including the manner in which data are viewed, weighed, and contextualized, criteria for testing the adequacy of hypotheses and the fair consideration of competing hypotheses. Of course, method is not a sure means for avoiding too much subjectivity, but it is helpful. McCullagh writes, “Even scrupulous attention to the standards of justification set out here may not prevent the most prevalent forms of bias in history, namely the failure to consider alternative possibilities as a result of commitment to one’s preconceptions. Only methodological procedures can save historians, to a large extent, from this.”⁸⁸ But method only takes us so far in overcoming horizons. Denton has made a compelling case for holism over tradition criticism.⁸⁹ But one must question whether the differences between the two methods constitute the major reason for the different portraits of Jesus resulting. These differ radically even among those employing tradition criticism like Crossan and John Meier. Substantive gaps exist in the portraits produced by holists E. P. Sanders and Wright. In fact, Meier’s portrait of Jesus is closer to Wright’s than is Sanders’. Thus, differences between these two methods do not seem to be able to account for the large differences present in the portraits that result. Because the historian’s objective is often to discover a Jesus palatable to his own tastes, this pushes the deciding factor behind the historian’s portrait to horizon more than method. He finds what he was looking for. Therefore, attention given to method may reduce the amount of control the horizons of historians have on their research, but is inadequate alone.⁹⁰

b) *The Historian’s Horizon and Method Should Be Public*. It is certain that at least portions of the historian’s horizon can be public or open to scrutiny. For example, historians who hold to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus most likely have a

⁸⁸ McCullagh (1984), 234. See also McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 308.

⁸⁹ Denton (2005). By holism, I mean the analysis and use of data within a larger narrative construct such as understanding Jesus as, for example, an apocalyptic prophet within the Messianism of Second Temple Judaism. By tradition criticism, I refer to the practice of attempting to identify and peel away redaction within a text in order to get back to what was originally written or said and what that meant within its original context.

⁹⁰ By method, I am more concerned with weighing hypotheses than a hermeneutical approach to texts, which is itself often guided by horizon and yields results of great variances. See Barrera (2001): “the idea that a historical method exists is hardly sustainable because the possibility of interpretation always remains open. Every text can be read in different ways; there is not only one kind of hermeneutics to its reading” (200); G. Clark, “General Hermeneutics” in McKnight and Osborne, eds. (2005): “Secondary sources regularly describe the variety of hermeneutical approaches practiced today as ‘dizzying’” (115) and “Hermeneutics as a discipline is as wild and woolly as it has ever been” (117); Fredriksen (1999): “Even though all scholars who work on Jesus look more or less to the Gospels as the mother lode to mine for data, a priori commitments to different methods mean that they actually read different texts” (7).

theistic component to their horizons and this component may be challenged. Methodological naturalists who do not allow for the possibility of the supernatural in historical investigation should have their horizons open to challenge.⁹¹ Historians should likewise be clear about the methods they employ for achieving results.⁹²

c) *Peer Pressure* may also be helpful in minimizing the impact of horizon on the historian's work. Judges of a sporting event such as gymnastics seem to be able to lay aside or at least minimize their prejudices and national pride when acting in the capacity of a judge. How is this accomplished when national pride and prejudice can be so strong? Perhaps it is the knowledge that a number of other judges who are similarly challenged are making judgments and that, if the judgment of a particular judge is far different than those rendered by the other judges, it may reflect a personal bias of a sort. Thus, peer pressure can act as a check on bias and can serve to minimize the effects of horizon. Whether it can serve an adequate role by itself is another question. Peer pressure in academia can be effective, but it can also be a hindrance. As noted earlier, prior to the last decade of the twentieth century, a general consensus among New Testament scholars had emerged that viewed the Gospels as a unique type of mythical genre. This consensus has made a dramatic turnaround as it now views the Gospels as Greco-Roman biography. Stanton admits that he began to arrive at a similar conclusion fifteen years earlier and that he should have been "less timid."⁹³ Accordingly, fear of going against the majority could hinder breakthroughs in historical research. Therefore, while a scholarly consensus can have the positive impact of serving to keep creativity from going off the deep end, a fear of losing respect from a large segment of the academic community in which one lives can be a hindrance to breakthroughs in knowledge. This is especially visible in the field of anthropology, where a strong bias against the supernatural by the consensus of

⁹¹ L. T. Johnson (1996), 174; Swinburne (2003): "What tends to happen is that background theological considerations—whether for or against the Resurrection—play an unacknowledged role in determining whether the evidence is strong enough. These considerations need to be put on the table if the evidence is to be weighed properly" (3). See also Blackburn (2000) who notes that certain epistemological considerations are rarely considered, such as warrants behind historical descriptions that include a cause or causes and whether these descriptions are simply a matter of guesswork that are motivated by the historian's bias or actual events in history (271). Dawes (1998) asserts, "Without critically examining the particular assumptions which shape the historian's judgements, we cannot conclude that the historian's Jesus must on all occasions be preferred" (34). However, one should not make the mistake of thinking that the act of making one's horizon and method public allows one to proceed without placing a check on horizon and method. Wedderburn (1999) may be faulted for such a move: "I will again and again have to stress that the argument which I am advancing goes beyond anything that any of the New Testament writers actually say, however much I may take them as a starting-point. Indeed they may at many points contradict my arguments. . . . And . . . it is far better to realize this [i.e., that the work of theologians goes beyond being hermeneutical in character] and to acknowledge it to oneself and to one's readers, than simply to do it quietly and in secret, or perhaps even to fail to see what one is in fact doing" (104). The purpose and benefit of being public with one's worldview and approach is that it subjects them to public—and hopefully personal—scrutiny so that an attempt to manage them may occur.

⁹² Grant (1977), 201. Christian (2004) comments that most historians are self-conscious regarding the epistemological foundations of their practice. However, their reluctance to reveal them confuses all regarding just what it is that historians do (371). See also Eddy and Boyd (2007), 83, 379.

⁹³ Stanton's comments in the Foreword to Burridge (2004), ix. Waterman (2006) remains unpersuaded but writes, "Although we cannot fully accept the view that the Gospel is a Hellenistic *Bios* . . . or history, it is surely related to the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth" (115).

anthropologists in general and biologists in particular can threaten the careers of those who do not share this bias.⁹⁴

d) *Submitting ideas to unsympathetic experts* may assist in minimizing the negative impact of horizon. This is taking peer pressure to the next step by submitting our interpretation of data and historical descriptions to those who are certain to have a different opinion and a motivation to locate weaknesses in a competing hypothesis. While historians are inclined to catch comments that support the view they embrace while skimming quickly through comments that oppose it, their critics are not so inclined and will labor diligently to identify and expose weaknesses within competing hypotheses. McCullagh comments, “One can be reasonably sure that historical descriptions which have won the approval of unsympathetic or impartial expert critics are not biased, but are well justified and merit belief.”⁹⁵ Of course, this does not guarantee that the critic will accept a hypothesis that is contrary to his horizon, even if the hypothesis is correct. Critics carry biases, too, which can handicap their objectivity.⁹⁶ But some critics have the integrity to allow themselves to be challenged by a hypothesis opposed to their horizon and provide helpful criticisms. Some may admit the strength of an opposing hypothesis, even if they do not decide to adopt it.⁹⁷ Padgett writes, “It is only in the give and take of dialogue and in the evaluation of reasons, arguments, and evidence that our pre-understanding will be found to be helpful or harmful.”⁹⁸ This type of dialogue takes place in peer-reviewed articles, book reviews, and papers read at conferences where criticisms from peers are

⁹⁴ Atheist philosopher Quentin Smith (2001) wrote that “a recent study indicated that seven percent of the top scientists are theist [*Nature* 394 (July 23, 1998), 313]. However, theists in other fields [than philosophy] . . . never argue for theism in their scholarly work. If they did, they would be committing academic suicide or, more exactly, their articles would quickly be rejected, requiring them to write secular articles if they wanted to be published.” The truth of Smith’s statement is readily seen in what happened in early 2005 when editor Richard Sternberg at *Proceedings*, a peer-reviewed scientific journal of the Smithsonian Institution, having completed all the appropriate peer review protocol was humiliated when the journal demoted him for allowing an article on intelligent design written by Cambridge-educated biologist Stephen C. Meyer. The journal then apologized for publishing it. This action was met with strong negative press in the United States which resulted in a public viewing of the video *The Privileged Planet: The Search for Purpose in the Universe* from the book by the same name by Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards (Washington: Regnery, 2004). The event took place on June 10, 2005 and was co-sponsored by the Director of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History and the Discovery Institute. Sternberg’s account of the incident may be found at rsternberg.org (accessed June 18, 2008). See also Marsden 1997), 7.

⁹⁵ McCullagh (1984), 236, cf. 234. See also Appleby, Hunt, Jacob (1994), 261; L. T. Johnson (1996), xi; McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004), 15; Meier (1991), 6; Schinkel (2004), 51; Zammito (2005), 180.

⁹⁶ C. A. Evans (2006): “Some scholars seem to think that the more skeptical they are, the more critical they are. But adopting an excessive and unwarranted skeptical stance is no more critical than gullibly accepting whatever comes along. In my view, a lot of what passes for criticism is not critical at all; it is nothing more than skepticism masking itself as scholarship” (46; cf. 17, 21). See also Witherington (2006): “The scholarly world also has to contend with what I call the ‘justification by doubt’ factor. Some scholars think they must prove (to themselves and/or others) that they are good critical scholars by showing how much of the Jesus tradition or the New Testament in general they can discount, explain away, or discredit. This supposedly demonstrates that they are objective. At most, all it shows is that they are capable of critical thinking. Oddly, the same scholars often fail to apply the same critical rigor and skepticism to their own pet extracanonical texts or pet theories” (5).

⁹⁷ One notes this objectivity with agnostic chemist Robert Shapiro, who acknowledges the integrity of molecular biologist Michael Behe’s description of the profound difficulties involved with the view that the origin of life is the result of natural causes. See Behe (1996), back cover.

⁹⁸ Padgett in Davis, Kendall, and O’Collins, eds. (1998), 295.

provided.⁹⁹ Participation in panel discussions and public debate likewise exposes one's views to scrutiny by peers. No one enjoys receiving criticism that strikes hard at the foundations of one's strongly held hypothesis. However, professional historians cannot be exempt from criticism and, at minimum, even when disagreement with one's critics remains, the historian will gain valuable critical thoughts that must be considered and answered.

e) *Account for the Relevant Historical Bedrock.* Some facts are so strongly evidenced that they are virtually indisputable. These facts are referred to as 'historical bedrock,' since any legitimate hypothesis should be built upon it. If a hypothesis fails to explain all of the historical bedrock, it is time to *drag* that hypothesis back to the drawing board or to *relegate* it to the trash bin. Historical bedrock includes those facts that meet two criteria. First, they are so strongly evidenced, the historian can fairly regard them as historical facts.¹⁰⁰ Second, the majority of contemporary scholars regard them as historical facts.¹⁰¹ Momentarily we will discuss the role of a consensus. For now, I wish to suggest that historians should begin their investigations with a collection of historical facts that belong to historical bedrock. This action does not seek a consensus regarding a particular historical description, but rather on the foundation "facts" employed in hypotheses. Others may likewise be appealed to. But all hypotheses posited to answer a historical question need to include these.¹⁰² The value of such an approach is that it places a check on narrative.¹⁰³ When historians seek to describe the past, they place facts within the framework of a narrative. Numerous interpretations and theories can be quite imaginative.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, many times specific narratives can neither be proved nor disproved and historians from every camp often fail to place a sort of disclaimer informing readers of the tentativeness of their narrative, which is stated as fact.¹⁰⁵ Rather than writing "it could have [or probably] happened as follows" or "I am inclined to think this is what

⁹⁹ Pertaining to the field of historical Jesus studies, *The Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* has an impressive board of reviewers who represent solid scholarship and who possess an impressive range and balance of theological commitments.

¹⁰⁰ McCullagh ("What Do Historians Argue About?" 2004): Some facts are supported by evidence so strong that they are "virtually certain" (22). He adds, "*why* we believe particular facts . . . can be independent of any general interpretation of which they are a part" (23).

¹⁰¹ Meier (1991) speaks of a consensus among a Jew, a Christian, and an agnostic, all honest historians who are well acquainted with first-century religious movements who are locked up in the Harvard Divinity School Library until they hammer out a consensus statement about Jesus (1).

¹⁰² McCullagh, "What do Historians Argue About?" (2004), 24.

¹⁰³ Rex Martin (1998), 36; McCullagh (1984), 236, cf. 234; Johnson (1996) contends that solid method may yield the recognition of "certain statements about Jesus that have an impressively high level of probability" and that these "provide the most important antidote to the less disciplined 'reconstructions'" (112).

¹⁰⁴ See R. Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ" in Price and Lowder, eds. (2005), who argues that "Mark's empty tomb story mimics the secret salvation narratives of the Orphic mysteries" (163) and that the empty tomb is symbolic of the corpse of Jesus (158). Meier (1991) writes, "learned fantasy knows no limits" (94).

¹⁰⁵ Consider the statement by M. Goulder, "The Baseless Fabric of a Vision" in D'Costa, ed. (1996) whose narrative presents the appearances as hallucinations and the empty tomb as an invention. When referring to the descriptions of *resurrection* as an event that happens to corpses in the Gospels and the Pauline corpus he writes, "it is now obvious that these were interpretative additions to counter the spiritual theory; and that neither the eating and touching stories nor the empty tomb story have any basis in the most primitive tradition" (58). Although many exegetes disagree with this conclusion, even many who agree would not go as far to say that Goulder's interpretation is "obvious."

happened,” we often read that “it happened in the following manner.”¹⁰⁶ When we investigate matters such as the resurrection of Jesus, historians in every camp operate with their own biases, agendas, and hopes, all of which serve as unseen advisors. By requiring hypotheses to account for the historical bedrock, a check is placed on the explanatory narratives that are constructed. Any narrative unable to account for the historical bedrock should be returned to the drawing board or be relegated to the trash bin. Of course, this is a *guideline* rather than a *law*, since the majority of scholars has been mistaken on numerous occasions in the past.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, there is a risk involved in requiring hypotheses to account for the historical bedrock before their serious consideration by other historians, since this may result in excluding a hypothesis that denies one or more of the facts belonging to the bedrock but may later turn out being mistaken in light of new information. This risk notwithstanding, minimizing the impact of biases and agendas is a serious matter and the possibility of a mistaken consensus on facts that are strongly evidenced must be weighed against the certain presence of horizons. Guidelines are not to be enforced in a wooden manner. However, when a historian ignores a number of guidelines and his method appears arbitrary and/or careless, his results are probably wrong.

f) *Detachment from Bias* is nonnegotiable. Meyer writes, “Detachment from bias is of the highest importance.”¹⁰⁸ McCullagh agrees: “[Historians], like all people, are often attached to their preconceptions. This kind of bias is the hardest of all to overcome.”¹⁰⁹ Roy Hoover articulates this principle well:

To cultivate the virtue of veracity, you have to be willing to part with the way tradition and conventional wisdom say things are, or with the way you would prefer things to be, and be ready to accept the way things really are. Veracity has to be the principal moral and intellectual commitment of any science or scholarship worthy of the name. That means, as I see it, that as a critical biblical scholar you have to be concerned first of all not with how your research turns out, not with whether it will confirm or disconfirm the beliefs or opinions or theories you had when you began the inquiry. You have to care only about finding out how things really are—with finding evidence sufficient to enable you to discover that and with finding also whether or not what you think you have discovered is sustainable when it is tested by the critical scrutiny of others. . . . but to be open-minded interminably, or to be locked open, as a colleague of mine once put it, is not a virtue. It is a failure to think, a failure to learn, a failure to decide and perhaps a failure of nerve.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ This is sometimes an indicator that there is a lack of an argument. Wedderburn (1999) comments, “Arguments of the form ‘I need it so, therefore it is so’ only need to be stated in this way for their emptiness to be apparent” (7).

¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, appeals to the historical bedrock should not be viewed as an argument that asserts that *X* is a historical fact *because* the majority of historians believe it is. Rather, the argument is that the supporting data are so good that they have convinced the majority of historians to believe that *X* is a historical fact.

¹⁰⁸ Meyer (1994), 112. See also Grant (1977) who writes, “Certainly, every such student will have his own preconceptions. But he must be vigilant to keep them within limits” (200). Marxsen (1990): “whenever we attempt some reconstruction of history, we must take pains to be unbiased” (65).

¹⁰⁹ McCullagh (1984), 235.

¹¹⁰ R. W. Hoover, “A Contest Between Orthodoxy and Veracity” in Copan and Tacelli, eds. (2000), 127-28.

One's bias is not only difficult to overcome, but is often difficult to recognize.¹¹¹ This blindness to one's bias can be seen in Dan Cohn-Sherbok's criteria that must be met before he will believe that Jesus rose from the dead. He writes, "As a Jew and a rabbi, I could be convinced of Jesus' resurrection, but I would set very high standards of what is required." He requires for Jesus to appear globally to multitudes in a bombastic sense with numerous angels and glorious clouds trailing them. The event would have to be photographed, recorded on video, and published in major media. Moreover, all Messianic prophecies in the Jewish Scriptures would need to be fulfilled.¹¹² We may ask whether such an exceptionally high burden of proof is reasonable. If a syndicate of evidences for a particular view is quite strong, then one may rightly require the evidence to be quite strong for an event in conflict with that syndicate. What if the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is much stronger than the syndicate of evidence for the truth of Cohn-Sherbok's form of Judaism? His requirements seem to me more a circumlocution for "I will not be convinced no matter what the evidence." This type of move noted in Cohn-Sherbok is, of course, not unique to him. I have often asked evangelical Christians if they would abandon their Christian faith if a future team of archaeologists uncovered an ossuary containing the bones of Jesus with an old sheet of papyrus on which was written, "We fooled the world until today" and it was signed by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, James, and Paul. Of course, many would suspect forgery. But let us suppose that somehow—I do not know how this might be accomplished—subsequent testing irrefutably demonstrated that these were the bones of Jesus. Since Paul asserted that if Jesus was not actually raised the faith of Christians is worthless (1 Cor. 15:17), this would disconfirm the central Christian belief that Jesus was raised.¹¹³ Many evangelical Christians replied that they would not abandon their faith as a result of such a discovery.

Historians should search "for evidence inconsistent with the preferred hypothesis before being willing to assert its truth."¹¹⁴ They should force themselves to confront data and arguments that are problematic to their preferred hypotheses. Historians must allow themselves to understand and empathize fully with the horizon of the author/agent and, furthermore, allow themselves to be challenged fully by that horizon to the point of conversion.¹¹⁵ They must achieve full understanding of and

¹¹¹ McCullagh (2000), 40. Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (1997) amazingly places the Jesus Seminar between the "skeptical left wing" and the "fundamentalist right" (5) as though it is representative of the middle. While one can certainly be further on the theological left than many of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar, it does not appear to be an accurate description to me to place the Jesus Seminar in the middle. This would locate agnostics such as Allison and Ehrman, as well as a number of others on the side of conservatism.

¹¹² D. Cohn-Sherbok, "The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish View," in D'Costa, ed. (1996), 198.

¹¹³ That is, if by "resurrection" the early Christians were referring to an event that occurred to the corpse of Jesus.

¹¹⁴ McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004), 33. See also McCullagh (2000), where he says that even though we cannot overcome bias completely, giving careful consideration to competing hypotheses goes a long way toward reducing it (56).

¹¹⁵ Denton (2005), 99; Eddy and Boyd (2007): "in the name of epistemological humility and the ideal of objectivity . . . critical scholars [should] be open-minded and humble enough to try to seriously entertain claims that others find plausible, regardless of the fact that their own plausibility structures prejudice them against such claims" (85; cf. 81); R. Evans (1999): "None of this means that historical judgment has to be neutral. But it does mean that the historian has to develop a detached mode of cognition, a faculty of self-criticism, and an ability to understand another person's point of view" (219; also see 104); Fischhoff, "For those condemned to study the past: Heuristics and biases in hindsight" in

empathy for the opposing view. When this is maintained during an investigation, the historian is close to transcending her horizon. While full detachment may be unattainable, temporary detachment is attainable to some degree and provides value.¹¹⁶ Gregory writes,

At a time when some would construe all scholarship as displaced autobiography, many regard the idea of bracketing one's own convictions as a naïve chimera. While such bracketing might well be impossible to realize perfectly, those who have had the experience of self-consciously restraining their own convictions know that it is not something of which scholars are constitutionally incapable. Imperfect self-restraint is better than none. To paraphrase the economist Robert Solow: just because a perfectly aseptic environment is impossible does not mean that one should conduct surgery in a sewer.¹¹⁷

Kahneman, Slovic, Tversky, eds. (1982): "to force oneself to argue against the inevitability of the reported outcomes, that is, try to convince oneself that it might have turned out otherwise. Questioning the validity of the reasons you have recruited to explain its inevitability might be a good place to start . . . Since even this unusual step seems not entirely adequate, one might further try to track down some of the uncertainty surrounding past events in their original form" (343); Gregory (2006): "The first prerequisite is one of the most difficult: we must be willing to set aside our *own* beliefs—about the nature of reality, about human priorities, about morality—in order to try to understand *them*" (147); Haskell (1990): The pursuit of history "requires of its practitioners that vital minimum of ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic, suspend or bracket one's own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers. All of these mental acts—especially coming to grips with a rival's perspective—require *detachment*, an undeniably ascetic capacity to achieve some distance from one's own spontaneous perceptions and convictions, to imagine how the world appears in another's eyes, to experimentally adopt perspectives that do not come naturally" (132). McKnight (2005) acknowledges that "everyone has an agenda, a motivation, and a purpose whenever studying the historical Jesus. . . . What is needed is not so much frank admission and then a jolly carrying on as usual, as if admission is justification, but instead the willingness to let our presuppositions (Subject) be challenged by the evidence (Object)" (33). Detachment should not be confused with disinterest. According to Haskell (1990), "Seeing an analogy between the role of the judge and that of the historian does not imply any overestimation of the value of neutrality: judges, like historians, are expected to be open to rational persuasion, not to be indifferent about the great issues of their day or—bizarre thought—to abstain from judgment. What we demand of them is self-control, not self-immolation. Bias and conflict of interest do indeed arouse our suspicion, not only of judges and historians, but of whomever we depend upon to be fair. The demand is for detachment and fairness, not disengagement from life. Most historians would indeed say that the historian's primary commitment is to the truth, and that when the truth and the 'cause,' however defined, come into conflict, the truth must prevail" (139). See also Meier (1991), 6, and Willitts (2005), 101-02.

¹¹⁶ Baxter (1999): "'Pure detachment' is not available. But in this or that instance, can you not to *some* extent be detached and open-minded, guided by reality out there? An a priori 'No' betokens anti-realism and/or solipsism, and perhaps determinism" (38n9); McCullagh (2000): "Although complete detachment is a pipedream, historians can put commitment to rational standards of historical inquiry ahead of a desire for a certain outcome, thereby significantly reducing the bias of their accounts" (41). See also Eddy and Boyd (2007): "As long as we maintain an epistemological humility and refrain from transforming our psychological certainty into an unassailable metaphysical a priori, we can, in principle, continue asymptotically to strive for objective truth. As long as we remain tentative about our assumptions and our commitment to truth takes precedence over our desire for the reaffirmation of those things of which we are psychologically certain, there is hope that together we can make progress toward the apprehension of actual history, even as we grant that this goal is always approached in an asymptotic fashion" (83).

¹¹⁷ Gregory (2006), 147.

The six actions just discussed by no means guarantee objectivity. Indeed, complete objectivity is elusive. I believe Fischhoff is correct when he writes, “Inevitably, we are all captives of our present personal perspective. . . . There is no proven antidote.”¹¹⁸ Gilderhus opines, “the problem of objectivity no doubt will remain a source of perplexity and consternation.”¹¹⁹ But it does not follow that history is unknowable. Historians will always differ widely in their historical descriptions. This is usually a result of a paucity of data and/or the inability of many historians, specifically those with inaccurate and immature horizons, to overcome their biases.¹²⁰ Accordingly, the answer to a historical question may not be unknowable in an intrinsic sense, but rather unknowable to historians who are handicapped by their horizons.

1.2.4. The Role of a Consensus

Given the prominent role of the horizons of historians in every historical inquiry, we can anticipate that consensus opinions will often elude historians due to “interpretive polarities.”¹²¹ Unfortunately, rather than an objective and careful weighing of the data, the subjective horizons of historians, especially historians writing on religious, philosophical, political, and moral topics, exert the most influence in their final judgments.¹²² Moreover, many member of the audience to whom historians present their research are no less biased than the presenting historians. Accordingly, what is judged as sound and persuasive research to one group may be viewed as inadequate and overly biased by another.¹²³

Of course, no “universal consensus” should be sought, since there will always be those who make their abode on the fringe.¹²⁴ There are a few today who assert that Jesus is a myth who never existed, although it appears that no widely respected scholar holds this position.¹²⁵ There are those who deny there ever was a

¹¹⁸ Fischhoff in Kahneman, Slovic, Tversky, eds. (1982), 349.

¹¹⁹ Gilderhus (2007), 87.

¹²⁰ Even when the data is abundant, a consensus interpretation may be elusive. Johnson (1996) notes that “[t]he divergent interpretations of the life and presidency of John F. Kennedy, for example, demonstrate that the availability of virtually endless amounts of information does not guarantee unanimity in its interpretation” (105).

¹²¹ Rex Martin (1998), 28. See also Novick (1988) who states that it is “impossible to locate” a “scholarly consensus . . . to sustain objectivity” (572). Anchor (1999) warns that “there are many, sometimes incompatible, interpretations of the same events” and “there is no guarantee of consensus in history” (113).

¹²² Denton (2004), 89.

¹²³ Anchor (1999): “As there are always alternative ways to interpret the traces of the past (our evidence), an essential part of the historian’s task is to figure out which among them is best, that is, which among them is *most likely* to be true.” Which explanation seems “most plausible varies not only with the cognitive expectations but also with the normative expectations of the audiences addressed” (114). See also Swinburne (2003), 3.

¹²⁴ Tucker (2004), 33.

¹²⁵ Bultmann (1958): “Of course the doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as founder behind the historical movement whose first distinct stage is represented by the oldest Palestinian community” (13); Bornkamm (1960): “to doubt the historical existence of Jesus at all...was reserved for an unrestrained, tendentious criticism of modern times into which it is not worth while to enter here”; Marxsen (1970): “I am of the opinion (and it is an opinion shared by every serious historian) that the theory [“that Jesus never lived, that he was a purely mythical figure”] is historically untenable” (119); Grant (1977): “To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has ‘again and again been answered

Holocaust.¹²⁶ Moreover, a consensus can be reached due to shared biases, convictions, objectives, and a lack of knowledge. We need to be reminded every so often that a consensus of scholars does not establish the objectivity or truth of their conclusion. Communities in the past have held numerous beliefs that have since been disproved.¹²⁷ Crossan seems wise to me when he states, “I think it’s the job of a scholar to take on the majority every now and then.”¹²⁸

A consensus opinion can be valuable for recognizing objectivity when the group is comprised of scholars on the subject under investigation from all interested camps

and annihilated by first-rank scholars’. In recent years ‘no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus’—or at any rate very few, and they have not succeeded in disposing of the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary” (200); M. Martin (1991): “Well’s thesis [that Jesus never existed] is controversial and not widely accepted” (67); Van Voorst (2000): “Contemporary New Testament scholars have typically viewed their [i.e., Jesus mythers] arguments as so weak or bizarre that they relegate them to footnotes, or often ignore them completely” (16); Burrige and Gould (2004): “There are those who argue that Jesus is a figment of the Church’s imagination, that there never was a Jesus at all. I have to say that I do not know any respectable critical scholar who says that any more” (34); Allison (“Explaining,” 2005): “no responsible scholar can find any truth in it” (121); Maier (2005): “the total evidence is so overpowering, so absolute that only the shallowest of intellects would dare to deny Jesus’ existence” (http://www.4truth.net/site/c.hiKXLbPNLrF/b.2902063/k.67B8/Did_Jesus_Really_Exist.htm, viewed July 8, 2008); R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008): “We can be certain that Jesus really existed (despite a few hyper-historical skeptics who refuse to be convinced” (10); Vermes (2008): “Let me state plainly that I accept that Jesus was a real historical person. In my opinion, the difficulties arising from the denial of his existence, still vociferously maintained in small circles of rationalist ‘dogmatists,’ far exceed those deriving from its acceptance” (ix).

¹²⁶ At the time of writing, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been public in his denials of the Holocaust. Al-Masaa, an official Egyptian government newspaper, defended the Iranian President’s statement, saying the gas chambers were for disinfecting clothing and that no mass extermination of Jews occurred (*World Net Daily*, Dec. 20, 2005: http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=47989, viewed on August 13, 2006). Even in what many might expect to be a rational society, a poll revealed that of one thousand British Muslims aged eighteen and older, 25% have either never heard of the Holocaust or deny that it occurred. An additional 6% said they did not know. If this sample is an accurate reflection of British Muslims in 2006, nearly one third of all British Muslim adults do not affirm the historicity of the Holocaust. (See “Attitudes to Living in Britain—A Survey of Muslim Opinion” by GfK dated April 27, 2006: http://www.imagineate.uk.com/MCC01_SURVEY/Site%20Download.pdf (28) visited on August 12, 2006. The report also stated that even with Osama bin Ladin’s confession that his group was responsible for the terrorist events of 9/11, 45% of British Muslims held that these events were actually performed by the American and Israeli governments as part of a conspiracy to cast Muslims in a negative light, while another 35% of British Muslims were uncertain who was responsible. This means that 80% of British Muslims either deny or question the assertion that Muslims were responsible for the catastrophic events resulting in more than three thousand deaths on 9/11. While most Holocaust deniers are not regarded as scholars, at least one is: <http://www.dailynorthwestern.com/media/storage/paper853/news/2006/02/14/Forum/Iran-Has.The.U.s.s.Number-1920928.shtml?norewrite200608131604&sourcedomain=www.dailynorthwestern.com> (assessed August 13, 2006).

¹²⁷ Tucker (2004), 24-25. R. Evans (1999): “it is highly dangerous to make objectivity in this sense dependent on the existence of a scholarly community. There was, after all, a scholarly community in Germany in the 1920s which remained in existence, largely unaltered in personnel and ideology, under Hitler’s Third Reich” (99).

¹²⁸ Crossan in Copan, ed. (1998), 46. Indeed, this is what Burrige did with his 1992 book *What Are the Gospels?*, which was largely responsible for changing the consensus from viewing the Gospels as a unique genre to understanding them as a subset of Greco-Roman biography.

with the exception of some fringe positions.¹²⁹ Tucker cites agreement among historians of the Holocaust: “Jewish and Gentile, German and British, right-wing and left-wing historians agree that there was a Holocaust.”¹³⁰ Perhaps no other group of historians contains greater heterogeneity than the community of biblical scholars.¹³¹ The Jesus Seminar awards historicity to those sayings and acts of Jesus approved by the majority of its members. However, Seminar membership is very small and consists almost exclusively of scholars belonging to the theological left.¹³² Accordingly, a consensus opinion from this group may at best inform us of what theologians on the left regard as authentic and is no more heterogeneous than a similar vote coming from the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. A group exhibiting greater heterogeneity is the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Annual SBL meetings are attended by members of many theological and philosophical persuasions: liberals and conservatives, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics, and atheists, all from numerous countries and ethnic groups from all over the world. If a consensus opinion is going to be of any value for historians, it must come from such a group. However, a consensus from even this group is valuable only when all of its members opining on a subject have personally researched that particular subject. For example, a consensus opinion of all SBL members on a matter pertaining to a recent archaeological find has little value if less than five percent of all SBL members have a significant knowledge of that find.¹³³ Similarly, little if any value should be assigned to those scholars opining on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus who have not engaged in serious research on the matter.

Even outside of historical investigations concerning religious matters, consensus is more often than not elusive. Gilderhus comments, “The body of literature on almost any historical subject takes the form of an ongoing debate. . . . By the very nature of the subject, history tends to divide scholars and set them at odds. . . . We no longer possess a past commonly agreed upon. Indeed, to the contrary, we have a multiplicity of versions competing for attention and emphasizing alternatively elites and nonelites, men and women, whites and persons of color, and no good way of reconciling all the differences. Though the disparities and incoherencies create terrible predicaments for historians who prize orderliness in their stories, such conditions also aptly express the

¹²⁹ Tucker (2004), 257, cf. 20, 23, 30. R. Evans (1999) looks for “a wide measure of agreement which transcends not only individuals but also communities of scholars” (110).

¹³⁰ Tucker (2004), 39.

¹³¹ Tucker (2004), 54.

¹³² Johnson (1996) takes issue with the claim of the Jesus Seminar that it has “some two hundred scholars.” This is a very small number when we consider that the number of New Testament scholars who are members of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) is at least half of its 6,900 members, in addition to which there are thousands of other New Testament scholars who have chosen not to be a part of SBL. Moreover, the two hundred scholars claimed is “somewhat misleading,” since the actual number of members who meet regularly, read papers, and vote on the sayings and deeds of Jesus “is closer to forty” (2). Even in *The Five Gospels* only seventy-four fellows are claimed. “The numbers alone suggest that any claim to represent ‘scholarship’ or the ‘academy’ is ludicrous” (2-3). Johnson’s statement is now somewhat dated but still seems accurate. As of June 4, 2008 the list of fellows provided by the Westar Institute on its web site is only 145—and that includes eight members who have resigned or are now deceased.

¹³³ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998) writes, “If an historian’s knowledge of the subject is scrappy, not at all comprehensive, then he or she is not in a position to say whether any particular narrative account of it fairly represents it or not” (61).

confusions of the world and the experiences of different people in it.”¹³⁴ Lorenz contends that a proper philosophy of history must elucidate the fact that historians present reconstructions of a past reality on the basis of factual research and discuss the adequacy of these reconstructions; at the same time it “must elucidate the fact that these discussions seldom lead to a consensus and that therefore pluralism is a basic characteristic of history as a discipline.”¹³⁵

It is highly unlikely that a consensus will ever exist pertaining to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. While strong agreement exists regarding a number of “facts” often used as evidence to support the resurrection hypothesis, no consensus will ever exist for the conclusion that the resurrection hypothesis is an accurate description of what actually occurred. After all, how likely is it that historians who are Muslims and atheists will confess that the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation or that Christian historians will confess that the resurrection hypothesis is not the best explanation?¹³⁶ Yet, either Jesus rose from the dead or he did not; and historians holding one of these positions are more correct than those not holding it. Because of the uncertainty of historical knowledge, many historical descriptions will never receive a stamp of approval from the consensus of the relevant scholars. This should not restrain the historian from stating that his hypothesis is probably true. Meyer writes, “The reason why we feel vulnerable is that we cannot easily avail ourselves of a knock-down proof that everyone will accept. This honest reflection, however, overlooks the fact and issue of horizon. We should not expect that hermeneutical questions are resolvable in the sense that all will catch on and agree, and only the flat-earthers be at a loss.”¹³⁷

1.2.5. The Uncertainty of Historical Knowledge

We have just considered various obstacles faced by historians that prohibit them from claiming absolute certainty: selective and imperfect memories, selection of content deemed important to a particular historian, interpretation, fuzziness of genre, unreliable eyewitness reports, fragmented data surviving from a foreign culture, and the bias and horizon of both our sources and of historians analyzing them. Moreover, the disciplines of history and science share the fact that on numerous occasions a hypothesis is disproved by new data. The sinking of the *Titanic* is a good example. Many eyewitnesses claimed that the ship broke in two just prior to sinking, while other eyewitnesses claimed it went down intact. Investigations by both American and British governments immediately after the maritime disaster concluded that the ship went down intact.¹³⁸ However, when the *Titanic* was found and examined in 1985,

¹³⁴ Gilderhus (2007), 86, 113.

¹³⁵ Lorenz (1994), 326. See also Gilderhus (2007), 85, 86, 93, 113. Thus, I think Craffert (1989) is mistaken when he asserts that “no one has the right to use the tag historical unless it can win the respect of fellow historians” (341-43).

¹³⁶ Accordingly, O’Collins (2003) is mistaken when writing, “If the (historical) evidence were sufficient to establish or conclusively confirm resurrection belief, such belief should be utterly convincing to all those willing to weigh the evidence and draw the obvious conclusion from it. Yet this would be a return to Pannenberg’s position . . . and to its obvious rebuttal. If Pannenberg is correct, those best able to evaluate the evidence (i.e. historians) should be much more prominent among the ranks of those who agree with the conclusion that Jesus was raised from the dead” (49-50).

¹³⁷ Meyer (1994), 133-34.

¹³⁸ For the American report, see “‘Titanic’ Disaster: Report of the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate (Ship Sinking)”: “There have been many conflicting statements as to whether the ship broke in two, but the preponderance of evidence is to the effect that she assumed an almost end-on

the team concluded that the ship had indeed split apart and that this had occurred prior to it sinking.

How do historians handle this challenge of the uncertainty of knowledge? A strong majority is not dissuaded from historical inquiry. However, they hold that all conclusions must be held as provisional:

No historians really believe in the *absolute* truth of what they are writing, simply in its *probable* truth, which they have done their utmost to establish by following the usual rules of evidence.¹³⁹

[T]he best explanation historians can think of for their evidence is not always correct. There might be a better one they have not considered, and there might be more evidence that will cast a different complexion upon the historical events that interest them. But if the evidence in support of an explanatory hypothesis is strong, and there is no alternative hypothesis supported nearly as well, it is reasonable to believe it is probably true, at least for the time being.¹⁴⁰

Scholars do not say, ‘That’s what it was’, but, ‘It could have been like that on the basis of the sources.’ . . . Scholars never say, ‘That’s it’, but only, ‘It looks like this at the present stage of research’ . . . Scholars do not say, ‘That is our result’, but ‘That is our result on the basis of particular methods.’¹⁴¹

position and sank intact” (<http://www.titanicinquiry.com/USInq/USReport/AmInqRep07.php>, accessed June 4, 2008). For the British report, see “Wreck Commissioners’ Court. Proceedings on a Formal Investigation Ordered by the Board of Trade into the Loss of the S. S. ‘Titanic’ (Final Effect of the Damage)”: “The later stages of the sinking cannot be stated with any precision, owing to a confusion of the times which was natural under the circumstances. . . . (14078) The ship did not break in two” (<http://www.titanicinquiry.org/BOTInq/BOTReport/BOTRepFinEff.php>, accessed June 4, 2008).

¹³⁹ R. Evans (1999), 189. See also Johnson (1996): “What is most important, however, is that the serious historian knows and acknowledges that historical knowledge deals only in degrees of probability, and never with certainty. . . . serious practitioners of the craft are characterized by deep humility. They above all know how fragile their reconstructions are, how subject to revision, how susceptible to distortion when raised from the level of the probable to the certain” (85; cf. 123); Gilderhus (2007), 4.

¹⁴⁰ McCullagh (2005), 453; cf. McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 23, 307.

¹⁴¹ Theissen and Merz (1996), vii-viii. See also Anchor (2001): It is not a matter of the old modernist/naïve realist concept of “absolute certainty.” Today we now distinguish between “*better* and *worse* versions” (109); Dunn (2003): “any judgment will have to be provisional” (103); Ehrman (*The New Testament*, 2008): “All the historian can do is work to establish what probably happened on the basis of whatever supporting evidence happens to survive” (243); Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (1997), 6; Gilderhus (2007): “using the remnants of the past, historians reconstruct history, employing statements of probability, not certainty, and subject always to the limitations of a point of view.” (86-87); Haskell (2004) states that the consensus among historians is that historical descriptions are always provisional and subject to revision (347); McCullagh (“What Do Historians Argue About?” 2004), 26; McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004): “Historians cannot prove the absolute truth of their descriptions” (43); McKnight (2005): “all conclusions must be recognized as approximate, probabilistic, and contingent” (21); R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008): “there are no absolute certainties in history” (9); O’Collins (1998), “Historical studies team with such examples of top scholars making a solidly probable case and reaching firm conclusions that they believe do better justice to the evidence currently available. Although they cannot pretend to have reached the kind of utter certainty which means, in Carnley’s words, that ‘no further assessment’ need ever be done and that they ‘can discount [even!] the possibility that further evidence might come to light which would disprove’ their conclusions, they constantly refuse to throw up their hands and ‘responsibly’ declare the issue they are

Therefore, when historians say that “*x* occurred” in the past, they are actually claiming the following: *Given the available data, the best explanation indicates that we are warranted in having a reasonable degree of certainty that x occurred and that it appears more certain at the moment than competing hypotheses. Accordingly, we have a rational basis for believing it. However, our conclusion is subject to revision or abandonment, since new data may surface in the future showing things happened differently than presently proposed.*¹⁴² Therefore, preferred hypotheses are like temporary workers waiting to see whether they will one day be awarded a permanent position.

Accordingly, it is especially true that historians interested in antiquity are never epistemically justified in having absolute certainty that an event occurred. The premises of all historical inferences are fallible. This becomes especially relevant when the data is foggy, such as when textual evidence leaves a reading uncertain. The truth of generalizations about a culture used in historical inferences is unproven. Historical inferences are mostly inductive rather than deductive.¹⁴³ Available evidence is fragmented and could be misleading.¹⁴⁴ If more data had been preserved, perhaps a different conclusion would have been drawn.

Notwithstanding, the inability to obtain *absolute* certainty does not prohibit historians from having *adequate* certainty. Carefully examined inferences are generally reliable and it is reasonable to believe that they correctly describe what actually occurred when the historian’s horizon is mature, he has been deliberate in serious attempts to minimize the negative impact of his horizon, and he has followed proper methodology.¹⁴⁵ Only a few of the most radical postmodernist historians may find themselves in disagreement with the following statement by O’Collins:

Mathematical calculations cannot demonstrate the existence and career of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. But converging historical evidence would make it absurd to deny that he lived and changed the political and cultural face of the Middle East. We cannot run the film backwards to regain contact with the past by literally reconstructing the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC or the crucifixion of Jesus almost a hundred years later. Such historical events cannot be re-enacted in the way we can endlessly repeat scientific experiments in the laboratory. But only the lunatic fringe would cast doubt on these two violent deaths.¹⁴⁶

interested in to be ‘indeterminate’” (171-72); Schinkel (2004), 51, 56; Theissen and Winter (2002): “All our knowledge is hypothetical, even the greatest certainty available to us. Everything stands under the qualification: it could have been otherwise” (256; cf. 227, 258); Tucker (2001): Core theories of historiography limit the range of possible interpretations, but historical conclusions must be held as provisional or underdetermined. This does not result in radical postmodernism. “[T]here is a fact of the matter even if historians cannot agree on it” (54); Waterman (2006): “a degree of ‘could be’ and never the degree of ‘was’” (8); Wright’s comments in Borg and Wright (1998) asserts that historical research is “always provisional” (26); Zammito (2005): “A robust historicism does not require *a priori* guarantees. It can tolerate uncertainty and indeterminacy” (179).

¹⁴² Wedderburn (1999): “if they [historians] assert that something is certainly true, what they mean in practice is that something has been established ‘beyond all reasonable doubt’, that is, the level of probability has become so high that the falsehood of the assertion is highly improbable” (4).

¹⁴³ McCullagh (1984), 4.

¹⁴⁴ Waterman (2006), 53-54. See also Wedderburn (1999), 11.

¹⁴⁵ McCullagh (1984), ix, 4; McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 44.

¹⁴⁶ O’Collins (2003), 34.

Moreover, it must be remembered that nothing in life is absolutely certain. We fly across the Atlantic with full confidence we will arrive at our destination safely. On rare occasions, an aircraft malfunctions or is hijacked by terrorists, resulting in a change of course from what normally occurs. But this does not prevent us from having general and consistent confidence in the safety of flight across the Atlantic. “[L]ittle or nothing in real life is a matter of certainty, including the risks of eating beef, or of crossing a road, or of committing oneself to another in marriage.”¹⁴⁷ Even scientists must admit that their theories, though probably true, may be discarded tomorrow as a result of new data. Yet this does not prohibit them from stating that their theory probably describes the state of reality even though it must be held as provisional.

1.2.6. Postmodernist History

Thus far I have been discussing how to conduct a historical investigation or to “do history” as though there were no debate over whether history can be done. The postmodern linguistic turn and its application to the discipline of history pose just this question.¹⁴⁸ To various degrees, *postmodern historians* question whether it is even possible to know and describe the past. This is in contrast to *realist historians* who maintain that reality exists independently of our knowledge of it and our scientific statements and theories refer to this independent reality.¹⁴⁹ I will briefly examine the reasoning and conclusions of the three foremost postmodern historians: Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, and Keith Jenkins.¹⁵⁰

Hayden White is regarded as the father of postmodern historians.¹⁵¹ He does not deny that the past can be known to an extent. A rather simple singular description of an event or events in their chronological order may be correct.¹⁵² It is when we speak of

¹⁴⁷ Dunn (2003), 105. See Allison (“Explaining,” 2005): “We should be modest about our abilities. Robust confidence in our historical-critical conclusions is out of place” (133). See also Gorman (2000): “if knowledge requires the complete absence of any logical possibility of doubt, then knowledge itself is not possible. Yet the skeptic’s [i.e., postmodernist’s] advice that one doubt all that it is logically possible to doubt is not advice that one needs to take” (256).

¹⁴⁸ In the *premodern* period, when someone desired to know what occurred in the past he appealed to authority, namely the authority of the church. The Ages of Reason and Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries questioned and abandoned all forms of authority. *Modernity* became the dominant paradigm in Western culture and is characterized by the use of logic and scientifically controlled method for gaining knowledge. Modernity is also known for the rise of capitalism, the information explosion in the fields of science and technology, and widespread literacy. It asserts that given enough time, scientists and scholars will be able to know everything about the workings of the universe, life itself, and, through psychology, know precisely why people respond the way they do under every conceivable circumstance. Although the dates are debated, modernity may roughly be said to be the period of 1910-present, although some claim that it began in 1870 and/or ended in the 1960s with the ushering in of *postmodernity*.

¹⁴⁹ Postmodernists are also referred to as relativists, skeptics, idealists, anti-realists, anti-foundationalists, new historicists, and poststructuralists, whereas modernist historians are also referred to as realists, naïve-realists, objectivists, representationalists, and foundationalists. Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to historians as being *postmodern* or *realist*.

¹⁵⁰ Three female historians have produced a frequently cited volume that presents a more moderate version of postmodernist historiography. See Appleby, Hunt, Jacob (1994).

¹⁵¹ Zammito (1998), 333. McKnight (2005) refers to White as “America’s leading postmodernist” (6).

¹⁵² Postmodernist Crowell (1998) agrees (229). Answering a radical postmodernism, Rex Martin (2005) comments that when we speak of artifacts, be they potsherds, inscriptions, or texts, they are remnants that survive from a past. If a past did not exist, neither would there be artifacts (140-41).

an “era” or similar construct such as the “Cold War,” the “Holocaust,” and “Apartheid” that historians must create narratives. These narratives will explain how the events are connected to some extent and provide meaning or interpretation.¹⁵³ This narrative is a construct of the historian who has built a frame on which the events may be understood.¹⁵⁴ Since other frames may result in varying arrangements, meanings, and interpretations that often conflict with one another, historians are simply telling stories they have invented that can never be verified. Nor can these narratives be said to be correct or incorrect, because the past does not have a frame.¹⁵⁵ Accordingly, there is no identifiable line between fact and fiction and, in a sense, we have reached the death of history, since there is no means for historians to reconstruct the past as it actually was. Even if we possessed an exhaustive chronology of events, there is no history apart from narrative. The nature of historical reconstructions is much more complex than appears on the surface.

White contends that “no historical event is *intrinsically tragic* . . . For in history what is tragic from one perspective is comic from another. . . . The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings.”¹⁵⁶ In support of White we may note the polarity of responses to the events of 9/11. While the West grieved at the tragic loss of more than three thousand lives, many Muslims in Arab and Persian countries were ecstatic over the events and cheered as though a game-winning goal had been scored at the World Cup. Narrative then occurs when historians place events within a context and provide interpretation. For example, historians can report that on September 11, 2001, a number of Muslim men took control of four airplanes, three of which were flown into buildings, causing great damage to those buildings and the loss of human life, while a few passengers on the fourth plane eventually fought back to regain control, resulting in the plane crashing in Pennsylvania. Historians may even report these events in chronological order. However, narrative presents the facts within a larger context. A historian writing within a Western context might report the following: “On 9.11.2001, a number of Muslim terrorists hijacked four airplanes and three of those planes were

¹⁵³ Appleby, Hunt, Jacob (1994) state, “The human intellect demands accuracy while the soul craves meaning” (262).

¹⁵⁴ White (1987) (5): “But by common consent, it is not enough that an historical account deal in real, rather than merely imaginary, events; and it is not enough that the account represents events in its order of discourse according to the chronological sequence in which they originally occurred. The events must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence.” Theissen and Winter (2002) note that this “embedding of events in their context and the explanation of sources on the basis of the history of their effects are part of the task of every writing of history” (226). Topoloski (1999) states that inspiration from aesthetics and logical argumentation are of equal importance in historiography (199-200). Zammito (1998) asserts that historians are more interested in concrete aspects (or colligatory concepts) of the past such as the Cold War or the Renaissance than they are with singular statements (339).

¹⁵⁵ This contrasts with most historians who believe that their account gets it “more right” than alternatives (Haskell [2004], 347). See also Lorenz (1998): “The complexity of the notion of truth in the case of narratives (or scientific theories) cannot be used as an argument against it, for as long as we presuppose that historical narratives refer to a real past and thus represent knowledge of the past, historical narratives constitute truth-claims that must be elucidated and not annihilated by philosophy of history. . . . So if history is characterized by its narrative form *alone* one disregards the fuel of its motor: historians don’t claim to present just a story but a *true* story, and this truth-claim is its distinguishing hallmark” (326-27).

¹⁵⁶ White (1978), 84-85.

flown into buildings while another crashed in Pennsylvania, resulting in the tragic loss of more than three thousand lives. These events were planned by the Al-Qaeda terrorist group as a response to American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia beginning with the first Gulf War in 1990. Since then, Muslim fanatics have continued to terrorize the free and modern world as leaders from the U. S., Great Britain, France, Germany, and other countries attempt to find a solution for dealing with the Muslim problem.” In particular, the terms “terrorist,” “tragic loss,” “Muslim fanatics,” and “the Muslim problem” are interpretive constructs within a Western framework. The narrative begins with the Gulf War in 1990 and could be viewed as the beginning of a period of terrorism. However, a Jewish historian living in Israel who has witnessed consistent terrorist attacks up close for decades probably would not begin the narrative in 1990 but view the events of 9/11 as Muslim terrorism that had begun decades earlier in Israel and that is now initiating acts of terror in specific Western countries as a punishment for allying themselves with Israel. A Muslim historian may paint a different picture, describing the events as a successful response by holy men to the war against Islam started by Allah’s enemies and has been going on since the seventh century. Therefore, the events are placed and understood within a different frame of reference.

Another example plainly lies in historical Jesus research. McKnight defines the historical Jesus as “a narrative representation of the existential facts about Jesus that survive critical scrutiny.”¹⁵⁷ These “narrative representations” of Jesus offer widely differing portraits, from Allison’s millenarian prophet to Sanders’ eschatological prophet to Wright’s eschatological prophet/Messiah to Crossan’s cynic philosopher to Meier’s Marginal Jew. There is also a present demand on the street for narrative representations extending beyond Jesus to early Christianity. Consider the success of books such as Ehrman’s *Lost Christianities* (2003), Pagels’s *Beyond Belief* (2003), Tabor’s *The Jesus Dynasty* (2006), and non-academic treatments such as Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and Baigent’s *The Jesus Papers* (2006). Of course, some narratives are much more imaginative than others. Thus, when fueled by popular Western interest in a historical Jesus and an early Christianity that differs radically from New Testament portraits, the new and emerging portraits are sometimes striking. Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer refer to this practice as “modern mythologizing”¹⁵⁸ in which “everything seems possible.”¹⁵⁹

As mentioned earlier, Crossan refers to this “stunning diversity” as “an academic embarrassment.”¹⁶⁰ Via suggests that the freedom to create narratives without any boundaries on the imagination has resulted in products that keep postmodernism going strong:

Aesthetic innovation is simply an aspect of the frantic economic urgency to produce ever fresh waves of more novel-seeming goods. . . . If there are those who do not believe that the almost complete commodification of cultural products—including scholarly knowledge—is a present reality, all they need

¹⁵⁷ McKnight (2005), 29.

¹⁵⁸ Hengel and Schwemer (1997), 147.

¹⁵⁹ Hengel and Schwemer (1997), 119. See also Braaten (1999), 149.

¹⁶⁰ Crossan (1991), xxviii.

to do to be disabused of their illusion is to attend an annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion.¹⁶¹

I am uncertain what Via means precisely by this statement. However, he is certainly correct if his intent is to note the publishing success of a number of prominent members of SBL such as John Dominic Crossan, Elaine Pagels, and Bart Ehrman whose approaches tend to be postmodern.

Narratives also create problems for historians when attempting to select the best explanation. White does not claim that singular events cannot be verified. However, what is often difficult to determine is the best interpretation assigned to those events.¹⁶² White's point is that the frame or structure created or adopted by historians when writing narratives did not exist in the past in a concrete manner. Therefore it shares a lot in common with fiction: "The fact that narrative is the mode of discourse common to both 'historical' and 'nonhistorical' cultures and that it predominates in both mythic and fictional discourse makes it suspect as a manner speaking about 'real' events."¹⁶³ It is an extended metaphor.¹⁶⁴ White argues that it is easy to identify the fictive element of narrative when it appears in a historical description that is in conflict with our own. Yet, he adds, we rarely see this element in our own descriptions.¹⁶⁵ For White, while singular descriptions and chronology have the possibility of provisional verification, broader descriptions involving narrative cannot and are not far from fiction.

Frank Ankersmit is another leading light among postmodernist historians. In agreement with White, Ankersmit asserts that singular descriptions of the past often can be verified¹⁶⁶ and that the narratives constructed by historians have a metaphorical quality.¹⁶⁷ He likewise contends that narrative does not refer to a reality outside of itself and cannot be said to be true or false. The idea that historical narratives correspond in a truthful manner to what they describe "is nothing but an illusion."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶¹ Via (2002), 121.

¹⁶² White (1978), 97. See also White (1978): "[I]t is wrong to think of a history as a model similar to a scale model of an airplane or ship, a map, or a photograph. For we can check the adequacy of this latter kind of model by going and looking at the original and, by applying the necessary rules of translation, seeing in what respect the model has actually succeeded in reproducing aspects of the original. But historical structures and processes are not like these original; we cannot go and look at them in order to see if the historian has adequately reproduced them in his narrative. Nor should we want to, even if we could" (88).

¹⁶³ White (1987), 57. He likewise comments, "The historical narrative, as against the chronicle, reveals to us a world that is putatively 'finished,' done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience" (21). See also White (1978), 83; Rex Martin (1998), 29-30.

¹⁶⁴ Lorenz (1998), 311, uses this term to describe White's approach.

¹⁶⁵ White (1978), 99.

¹⁶⁶ Ankersmit (1994), 87; F. R. Ankersmit, "Historiography and postmodernism" in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 295. See also Crowell (1998) who contends that one can establish the reality of certain events by way of evidence. But "the canons of cognition do not reach far enough to establish the 'validity' of the historian's story" (226).

¹⁶⁷ Ankersmit in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 294; Ankersmit (2001), 12.

¹⁶⁸ See Barrera (2001), 200. Barrera speaks of the reference, sense, and symbolic connotation of a historical statement. Consider, for example, the statement "The Wehrmacht was defeated in Stalingrad." The concrete result of the particular battle is the reference. Its place within a narrative of WWII is its sense. And its connotation may be said to be its relationship to a particular value system and its "national ethnic, religious, cultural, or genre communities" (199).

The historical text that is a remnant of the past is a “substitute” for or “representation” of that past; but it is not reality, since no one-to-one correspondence with the past exists.¹⁶⁹ Accordingly, he writes, “Does not both the language of the novelist and of the historian give us the illusion of a reality, either fictitious or genuine?”¹⁷⁰

Ankersmit describes history by providing the analogy of a painting. A painting is distinct from what it represents and is a substitute. Realist historian Zammito agrees with the portrait analogy. The “object of portrait painting is to offer a penetrating insight into the character or personality of the sitter.” However, he contends that the real issue is the debate over what is interpretative and what is literal.¹⁷¹ This is a perplexing question that must be asked when we approach the canonical Gospels, especially the Gospel of John. Critics of the Gospels frequently note stories reported only by John and charge him with invention, concluding that there is a lack of trustworthiness in what he reports. However, no one would charge a portrait as being errant because it portrayed something in the background which was not there during the sitting but was created in order to communicate character or personality. Literary devices such as invented speeches and encomium are common traits of ancient *bioi*. Thus, in some instances, those who complain of contradictions and inventions in the Gospels are guilty of judging them for their photographic accuracy, when this may not have been the intent of the author. Still, this earmark of ancient *bioi* makes hermeneutical considerations of the Gospels all the more challenging.

But Ankersmit is a postmodernist and his interest lies neither in singular historical descriptions nor in the past itself: “In the postmodernist view, the focus is no longer on the past itself, but on the incongruity between present and past, between the language we presently use for speaking about the past and the past itself.”¹⁷² “The postmodernist’s aim, therefore, is to pull the carpet out from under the feet of science and modernism.”¹⁷³ However, Ankersmit is not a radical postmodernist. He admits that postmodernism has yet to be demonstrated as being more successful than conventional history in practice.¹⁷⁴

Although White and Ankersmit are bright lights among postmodernist historians, the leading light of the movement and most radical of the three is Keith Jenkins. With White and Ankersmit, Jenkins notes that since the past does not exist in the present, the histories written by historians cannot be verified. Few historians today hold that historical narratives fall “into shape under the weight of the sheer accumulation of ‘the facts.’” Imagination is required. Thus, adjudicating on the accuracy between conflicting narratives is motivated by aesthetic preference.¹⁷⁵ Jenkins, therefore, proclaims the “end of history.”¹⁷⁶ By this he means that realist history conceived as narratives describing the past with varying degrees of accuracy can no longer be sustained. He is not denying that the actual past occurred. Instead, he contends that narratives constructed by modern historians are based on extant remnants of the past

¹⁶⁹ Ankersmit (1994), 295-96.

¹⁷⁰ Ankersmit in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 284.

¹⁷¹ Zammito (2005), 174.

¹⁷² Ankersmit in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 294-95.

¹⁷³ Ankersmit in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 283.

¹⁷⁴ Ankersmit (1994), 238.

¹⁷⁵ Jenkins in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 10.

¹⁷⁶ Jenkins in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 8, 20.

that have been critically analyzed and placed within these “synthetic” narratives. But a strict analysis of the facts alone could never result in the narratives constructed.¹⁷⁷ “In fact history now appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions.”¹⁷⁸

Theory can be confusing. Perhaps it would be helpful to see how postmodern history is applied. One of the best attested historical narratives is the Holocaust. Enormous quantities of documents, photographs, videos, audio recordings, and testimonies from all parties involved attest to numerous decisions and events that comprise what has come to be called the Holocaust. The Holocaust is a narrative because it is a story with a beginning and an end and because it consists of numerous events that have been interpreted through their relation to one another.

What would a postmodernist say about the Holocaust? Kellner asserts that it is an imaginative construct comprised of numerous historical events.¹⁷⁹ Braun notes that in 1990, Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész commented that only with the assistance of imagination can we form a realistic view of the Holocaust and that some historians of the Holocaust have noted that their research did not assist them in understanding the event.¹⁸⁰ In agreement with Lyotard, Knasteiner adds that survivors of Auschwitz “cannot attest to the crime committed because they did not experience the gas chambers themselves, while the victims cannot testify because they have been killed.” Therefore, they conclude that the events that occurred at Auschwitz must remain indescribable.¹⁸¹

Summarizing, postmodernism asserts that far too much confidence has been placed in the ability of science and its methods to do what modernity had hoped for. In historical research, the obstacles to knowing the past discussed in the previous section are only the tip of the iceberg. Further complications arise because modern historians must explain the past by analogies created by points of perceived connection, which may be false. This is especially applicable to language. Words, phrases, and sentences can change meaning in varying shades from person to person. Moreover, because historians cannot capture the full essence of the past event or state, much is omitted so that the resulting description can lead to all sorts of misunderstandings that cannot be corrected. The postmodernist says, “There are no facts, only interpretations.” There is also a denial that there is a concrete referent outside of a description that can be described. Instead it is language itself that constitutes the past, charged by the horizon of the reader and creating meaning in the reader’s image of the past. Lyotard provides a pithy definition of postmodernist history: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹⁸² Put

¹⁷⁷ Jenkins in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 19.

¹⁷⁸ Jenkins in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 6.

¹⁷⁹ Hans Kellner, “‘Never again’ is now” in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 406.

¹⁸⁰ R. Braun, “The Holocaust and problems of representation” in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 419-20.

¹⁸¹ W. Knasteiner, “From exception to exemplum: the new approaches to Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’” in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 415.

¹⁸² J-F Lyotard, “The postmodern condition” in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 36. Of interest is the comment by Jenkins in Jenkins, ed. (1997): “postmodernity is not an ideology or position we can choose to subscribe to or not, postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our historical fate to be living now” (3). Also see Zagorin (1999), 5, 7.

another way, evidence and critical methods do not lead us to correct descriptions of the past.¹⁸³

The advent of postmodernism has challenged modernist thought to the extent that it has been generally labeled as the crisis in conventional history.¹⁸⁴ Evans writes, “The question is now not so much ‘What Is History?’ as ‘Is It Possible to Do History at All?’”¹⁸⁵ The major challenges offered by postmodernity have influenced the conventional practice of history. Abandoned is the idea of strictly objective knowledge and of facts independent of interpretation. The solution of postmodern thought to these challenges is the death of history.

1.2.7. Problems with Postmodernist History

Most historians are *realists* and hold that despite the claims of postmodernist historians, reality exists independently of our knowledge of it and our scientific statements and theories refer to this independent reality. Therefore, the truth of narratives can be judged for accuracy.¹⁸⁶ Realists have been quick to respond to the postmodern approaches to history. They commonly note the self-refuting nature of postmodernism.¹⁸⁷ Two realists have been so clear and decisive in their reply that I quote them at length rather than provide a summary and miss the force.

Like historians, postmodernist authors tell stories about the past that they seem to hope and believe are true and consistent with the facts. Elizabeth Ermarth, a contributor to *The Postmodern History Reader* who wishes to regard everything as a text and who aims to subvert the conception of time she associates with modernism and traditional historiography, makes many factual statements ostensibly about the past; for example, that modernity began with the Renaissance and Reformation, that the ancient Greeks had no conception of the subject, that the period of Einstein’s papers on relativity was also that of

¹⁸³ Tucker (2004), 51.

¹⁸⁴ Kofoed (2005), 11.

¹⁸⁵ R. Evans (1999), 3.

¹⁸⁶ Lorenz (1994), 308.

¹⁸⁷ R. Evans (1999), 190. Fay (1998) says that there is “something deeply wrong with the current dominant metatheory . . . Postmetaphysical metatheory often seems to speak out of both sides of its mouth—to undermine disciplinary history while approving what it has accomplished and following its dictates. . . . Most postmetaphysical metatheories implode because they utilize what they deny is legitimate” (84). Postmodernism claims “to depict the way the world is (in this case that truth, rationality, and reality are related to historical epochs in a certain way). But this means that [postmodernism] implicitly rests on the idea that there is some way the world is,” which is the very thing it denies (87). Moreover, while postmodernists claim that “reason” is what a particular group decides is the correct way to think and that no objectivity can exist, this assertion cannot be proved by a “reason” that transcends the group of postmodernists. Accordingly, by their own account, there can be no reason for preferring postmodern approaches over realism. “This is why postmetaphysicalism is ultimately incoherent: it presupposes or invokes precisely what it denies” (88). Haskell (2004) notes how Rorty claims we should not care who wins the realist/anti-realist debate because of its irrelevance. He then works hard to convince his readers that realism is incorrect (347). McKnight (2005): “the claim that there is no objectivity is ultimately a claim for an alternative objectivity rather than an alternative to objectivity” (12); Meyer (1994) draws our attention to the self-refuting nature of postmodernism, noting Rorty’s “four-hundred-page philosophic argument purporting to show the non-cognitive character of philosophy and hence the futility of philosophic argument” (43). He notes, “It may be maddening, but you are not allowed to escape the consequences of cutting off the branch you are sitting on” (41).

Kafka's stories and of the cubism of Picasso and Braque, that the German Higher Criticism of the Bible historicized Christianity, and so on. She also frankly confesses that her own text about postmodernism is 'written in the language of representation [that is, realism], assumes a consensus community, and engages in historical generalization and footnotes,' a position she justifies with the ingenuous argument that 'one need not give up history to challenge its hegemony. . . .'¹⁸⁸

Haskell shows how one of the more radical postmodernists could not live consistently with his theory:

Having warned his readers of the inescapable futility of all efforts to represent the past 'as it was,' Lyotard then embarks upon the very course he has just declared to be impossibly naïve. Having shown that the historian's pious, death-defying claim to know 'how things really were' does not deceive him in the least, Lyotard proceeds to tell us . . . well, how it really was with his friend Souyri. In spite of himself, Lyotard commits an historical representation. He makes Souyri speak. And, by all appearances, he puts his representational pants on pretty much the same way the rest of us do. He informs us that he sent his friend a letter announcing his resignation from the *Pouvoir Ouvrier* group in 1966, Souyri answered him in October. 'He affirmed that our divergences dated from long before . . . he considered it pointless to try to resolve them.' 'He attributed to me the project of. . . . He added. . . . He knew himself to be bound to Marxist thought. . . . He prepared himself. . . . We saw each other again. . . . I felt myself scorned . . . He knew that I felt this. . . . He liked to provoke his interlocutor. . . . [He was] a sensitive and absent-minded man in daily life.' And so on . . . [T]here is nothing to distinguish [Lyotard's representation of Souyri] from the representations each of us hear, read, and produce dozens of times every day, not just in writing history but in the conduct of the most mundane affairs of life. . . . Does Lyotard believe in the 'postulate of realism'? Certainly not, if we judge from what he says on the subject. But if we take into account what he does as well as what he says, he seems in the end, in practice, unable to escape it. Notwithstanding all his skeptical rhetoric, in telling us about his deceased friend he acts as if the past is real, as if some representations of it are preferable to others, and as if the criteria of preference are far from idiosyncratic.¹⁸⁹

Additional replies are found in abundance. Western minds long for firm and absolute certainty resulting from the methods of science. Upon discovering that these methods

¹⁸⁸ Zagorin (1999), 14; cf. 7. Appleby, Hunt, Jacob (1994): "Since the Greeks, a certain amount of skepticism about truth claims has been essential to the search for truth; skepticism can encourage people to learn more and remain open to the possibility of their own errors. Complete skepticism, on the other hand, is debilitating because it casts doubt on the ability to make judgments or draw conclusions. It has only paradoxes to offer" (7). Denton (2005) notes a contradiction between the early Crossan's hermeneutics and historiography. As a post-structuralist, Crossan "denies the historical referent and [maintains] an ontology that denies extra-linguistic reality while at the same time embracing a historiography that assumes both the historical referent and an extra-linguistic reality." The later Crossan seems to have become aware of this contradiction and fades his hermeneutic from the discussion (40-41).

¹⁸⁹ Haskell (1990), 155-56. His citation is from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York, 1988), 47-48, 51.

rarely yield this degree of certainty, Cartesian anxiety results.¹⁹⁰ However, Lorenz notes that this is the product of an “all-or-nothing” fallacy, which states that if knowledge is not absolute and complete, it is relative.¹⁹¹ Failure on the part of historians to know the whole truth and nothing but the truth does not prohibit them from having an idea of the past that is adequate relevant to a limited or more focused inquiry.¹⁹² McCullagh contends that although uncertainty always exists, the meaning of a text “is often not so vague as to make it impossible to define their truth conditions. If it were, we could not communicate as effectively as we do. Historical descriptions, especially descriptions of basic facts about places, dates and events, are often precise enough to test against available evidence.”¹⁹³ Although they express concepts about the world, historical descriptions depict things that would have produced similar perceptions in historians had they been there. Thus, historical descriptions attempt to tell us something about a real world.¹⁹⁴

Realists concede that postmodernists are correct in noting our inability to confirm the soundness of methods employed for knowing the past. This has been a truism among historians.¹⁹⁵ We know present events and people in our lives directly through perception. Knowledge of the past, however, is indirect. Therefore, we must employ logic and horizons to arrive at historical knowledge. Historians cannot prove that inference regularly leads them to a correct description of what occurred in the past. Notwithstanding, an inference of historicity when provided with a robust inventory of data seems coherent and reinforcing.¹⁹⁶ We prefer inference to other methods based on tarot cards and magic eight balls which have proven much less reliable. “It is a convention we all accept that sound inductive inferences regularly lead us to truths about the world, and it is a convention we take seriously, on faith.”¹⁹⁷

Despite their critiques of postmodernism, realists find it difficult to present a positive case for realism.¹⁹⁸ It is doubtful that one is forthcoming, since meta-arguments are required. Neither historians nor philosophers can *prove* that the world is older than ten minutes at which time everything was created with the appearance of age and that we were created with memories of events that never took place and with food in our stomachs from meals we never ate. In a similar manner, historians cannot prove that their methods and hermeneutics lead them to conclusions that are true. Thus, at the end of the day, realism cannot be proved¹⁹⁹ and anti-realism cannot be disproved.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁰ “Cartesian” means that an idea is related to the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes. The term “Cartesian anxiety” refers to the anxiety suffered since Descartes when it is realized that absolute certainty is unattainable.

¹⁹¹ Lorenz (1998), 314.

¹⁹² Bachner (2003): “Few of us believe that language manages to communicate every aspect of the material world or of everyday sensation, yet we rarely contemplate their unspeakability” (411); Zammito (2004): “In short, robust historicism need not be crippled by a hyperbolic skepticism: total incommensurability is preposterous, and local incommensurability is surmountable” (135).

¹⁹³ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 35.

¹⁹⁴ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 39.

¹⁹⁵ Denton (2005), 106.

¹⁹⁶ Meyer (1979), 73.

¹⁹⁷ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 33. See also Sherwin-White (1963): “From time to time external contemporary evidence of a sort less warped by the bias of personalities—e.g. the texts of laws and public accounts—confirms the conclusions drawn from the critical study of literary sources. Hence we are bold to trust our results in the larger fields where there is no such confirmation” (187).

¹⁹⁸ Gorman (2000), 256; cf. McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 33.

¹⁹⁹ McCullagh (“What Do Historians Argue About?” 2004), 25.

However, this does not leave the majority of historians despairing. Despite all of the postmodernist critiques, realism seems to work for the most part. Haskell's parable of the travelers provides a nice illustration of this point.²⁰¹ In this parable, some travelers are lost in the French countryside and are trying to get to Paris. They have two maps which do not agree. So, they ask a local named Jean how to decide which map is correct. Jean looks at both maps and states that neither will work, since they are mere pieces of paper which fail to convey the sensation of movement, of what the scenery is like, the aromas and sounds. Moreover, cities containing numerous and complex cultures, economies, and philosophies are compressed into a mere black dot on a map. These maps can never describe the way to Paris! Haskell's travelers move on hoping to find someone else. Maps cannot supply what Jean wants. However, the travelers know from experience that maps can get them to Paris and that some maps are better than others (as anyone using Mapquest and Yahoo knows!). Why that is so is the interesting question. We live our lives in a manner that is based on the laws of logic. We cannot prove that logic leads us to truth. However, following sound logic based on accurate information provides results that can serve as strong empirical support for realism.²⁰²

Realists have provided additional replies to the more radical views of postmodernist historians.²⁰³ While it is true that facts are interpreted and given meaning within a narrative constructed by historians, facts can often be determined irrespective of the context in which they appear, given genre considerations and the employment of criteria in arguments to the best explanation. Postmodernists assert that facts do not speak for themselves but "are context-dependent and thus speak only in the voice of their interpreters."²⁰⁴ Thus, narratives differ little if any from fiction; the past presented by narratives did not exist. Haskell replies that people are not easily persuaded that their own past is unreal and that nothing is there for a biographer to get right.²⁰⁵ Fay asserts that once the historian draws a bifurcation of mind and the eternal world, "one inevitably will end up claiming that reality is unknowable in itself and that the mind is essentially distortive." This leads to a dead-end and solipsism in which the only thing the mind can know is itself.²⁰⁶ Lang offers an example and argues against the notion that every component of narratives is utterly fictitious: "On January 20, 1942, Nazi officials at Wannsee formulated a protocol for the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question.'" Granting that certain matters would need to be bracketed, such as "the status of the officials" and "whether the formulation of the 'Final Solution' originated then or before," Lang asks if this statement is a matter of interpretation; that is, can historians adjudicate on the truth of the statement if it is considered outside of a larger narrative? Could the statement set within a different narrative force an *equally legitimate* conclusion that denied that the conference

²⁰⁰ Tucker (2004), 257. See also Anchor (1999), 119.

²⁰¹ Haskell (1990), 156-57.

²⁰² Theissen and Winter (2002) argue that there are "axiomatically convictions (or ideas)" that are "those statements that one sees no obligation to ground but that rather serve as the basis for other statements—because, in our eyes, they are never false" (230). Philosophers refer to these beliefs as "properly basic."

²⁰³ For some of the best presentations of these, see Fay (1998) and McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998). R. Evans (1999) opines that of all "book-length defenses of history against extreme postmodernist critiques," McCullagh's treatment is "the most cogent and comprehensive" (263).

²⁰⁴ B. Lang, "Is it possible to misrepresent the Holocaust?" in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 426.

²⁰⁵ Haskell (2004), 347.

²⁰⁶ Fay (1998), 90.

actually took place and, thus, the truth of the statement? Lang concludes that we either have “facts” at the ground of historical inquiry or else narratives themselves actually determine what is and is not true.²⁰⁷ Lang’s point is solid that singular historical descriptions can be confirmed outside of narratives in which they appear. Of course, leading postmodernists like White and Ankersmit agree with him. Only the most radical postmodernist historians would question whether the Conference at Wannsee actually occurred and they keep company with very few within the community of historians.

Reader-Response Theory predates and leads to postmodernism. If a text states, “A man was walking down a road,” various pictures come to mind depending on the reader’s focus. One reader pictures an old man dressed in work clothing walking on a dirt road while another sees a young man dressed in a business suit walking in the suburbs. *Reader-Response Theory* provides a clean break with naïve realism’s boast of the ability of historians to cut through their own biases and those shared by their sources in order to view the past as it actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). Instead, meaning is only brought to the text by the reader.²⁰⁸ The meaning of the text is liberated from its original context and the author’s intent is of minor-to-no importance. We cannot think historically without some kind of grid or metastory that provides coherence to past events. Since it is claimed that the intentions of the author are difficult if not impossible to determine, the grid provided by the reader is the only one available. Thus, the reading process brings about an experience of “meaning” that does not exist outside of the text. This shift in theory in the philosophy of history is often referred to as the *linguistic turn*. Anchor identifies a major problem with this approach. *Reader-response* theorists want to be understood. If we accept *reader-response theory* because language can only be understood within our own particular framework, then how do others often understand what we are talking about?²⁰⁹ Moreover, *reader-response* theorists could never complain that a reader had misinterpreted their writings or, at least, it would make no difference if they had. The cost of *reader-response* theories is too high and unjustified. Thus, we need not feel an obligation to buy-into it.

Replies by realist historians have convinced the majority of practicing historians and philosophers of history that realism, rather than postmodernism, is both correct and practical. As a result, postmodernism has lost the battle of ideologies among

²⁰⁷ Lang in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 431-32. Fay (1998) argues that meaning is found in the causal effect of an event. For example, the bombing of Pearl Harbor had an effect: The U.S. entered the war. He adds that events are not inherently significant. Significance is assigned by the interested parties (agents). Finally, Fay asserts that the significance of events is independent of what the historian argues (92). Later he contends that it is “not the world but *the way the world is for someone* [that] cannot be made sense of without invoking the concepts, percepts, judgments, and intentions of active beings working in the world” (93).

²⁰⁸ Meyer (1994) identifies a number of benefits yielded by reader-response theory: “Among the achievements and virtues of reader-response theory are three clean breaks: the break with naïve realism and the supposition that texts, of themselves and ‘already,’ in other words, in advance of the reader, yield fully constituted meaning; the break with ‘the personal heresy,’ the approach to literature through the life and times of the writer; and the break with the so called ‘affective fallacy,’ for the theory of reader-response (or of reader-reception—though the latter term can refer to study of the responses of successive historical readerships) unambiguously favored taking account of rhetorical devices designed to elicit responses” (129-30).

²⁰⁹ Anchor (1999), 113.

professional historians and realism remains on the throne, although chastened.²¹⁰ According to Fay, the linguistic turn is over. “Except for some interesting exceptions at the margins of the discipline, historical practice is pretty much the same in 1997 as it was in 1967: historians seek to describe accurately and to explain cogently how and why a certain event or situation occurred . . . For all the talk of narrativism, presentism, postmodernism, and deconstruction, historians write pretty much the same way as they always have (even though what they write about may be quite new).”²¹¹ Even some postmodern historians agree. Roberts admits that Ernst Breisach may be right that postmodernism has come and gone among historians.²¹² Even Jenkins confesses that “most historians—and certainly most of those who might be termed ‘academic’ or professional ‘proper’ historians—have been resistant to that postmodernism which has affected so many of their colleagues in adjacent discourses.”²¹³ In his response to the postmodern challenge, McCullagh writes, “I know of no practicing historians who admit that they cannot discover anything true about the past. They may admit to being fallible, but they do not deny that a lot of the basic facts they present are very probably true.”²¹⁴ Relative to historical Jesus studies, Denton writes, “the world of historical Jesus studies would have little sympathy with any form of anti-realism in historiography.”²¹⁵ Therefore, the prediction that postmodernism would mean the end of history was a failed prophecy.²¹⁶

Notwithstanding, the postmodern debate among philosophers of history has been valuable to the discipline. Evans concedes that it “has forced historians to interrogate their own methods and procedures as never before, and in the process has made them more self-critical and self-reflexive, which is all to the good. It has led to a greater emphasis on open acknowledgment of the historian’s own subjectivity, which can only help the reader engaged in a critical assessment of historical work.”²¹⁷ Iggers notes that postmodern philosophers of history have rightly made us more aware of numerous challenges.²¹⁸ This does not mean that historians were oblivious to these challenges before the debate. Postmodernist White acknowledges that postmodernism *reiterated* the contingency of knowledge, rather than *announce* it:

²¹⁰ McKnight (2005) writes that unbeknownst to them, historical Jesus scholars are postmodernists in practice. They are “simply asserting their power and ideology through an aesthetic presentation about Jesus. Since postmodernism is the only game in town, it is the game historical Jesus scholars are playing” (11). McKnight is unclear to me at this point. He later writes “it seems to me, most historical Jesus scholars are fundamentally Eltonian” (16), after G. R. Elton who “represents pure modernism” (14). However, consider his comment just a few pages later: “Let this be said before we go further: what the modernist wants to do cannot be achieved in its pure form. . . . In our field, it is maddeningly clear that what one group see as progress (e.g., the Crossan approach) is unacceptable to another group (e.g., the Allison approach)” (19). I doubt that McKnight is a closet postmodernist. Instead, I think he is here venting his frustration *a la* Allison over the challenges that prohibit absolute certainty. In any case, McKnight is certainly mistaken when he claims postmodernism is “the only game in town.”

²¹¹ Fay (1998), 83. See also Gilderhus (2007), 124.

²¹² Roberts (2005), 252.

²¹³ Jenkins in Jenkins, ed. (1997), 1; cf. 9. See also R. Evans (2002), 81; Iggers (2005), 133, 145, 150; N. F. Partner, “History in an age of Reality-Fictions” in Ankersmit and Kellner, eds. (1995), 21-39; Tosh (2002), 194-200; Zagorin (1999), 1, 3, 9; Zammito (2005), 161, 163.

²¹⁴ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 15.

²¹⁵ Denton (2003), 170.

²¹⁶ Kofoed (2005), 16.

²¹⁷ R. Evans (1999), 216.

²¹⁸ Iggers (2005), 132. Gilderhus (2007): “In all likelihood, few historians in the present day would accept notions of absolute scientific objectivity or embrace as a goal the rendering of the past exactly as it was. Moreover, many would concede valid points to the postmodernist position” (124).

This is not to say that historians and philosophers of history have failed to take notice of the essentially provisional and contingent nature of historical representations and of their susceptibility to infinite revision in the light of new evidence or more sophisticated conceptualization of problems. One of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record.²¹⁹

Sometimes realists are guilty of attacking a straw man when criticizing postmodernism. Roberts warns historians that they should not ignore the insights gained by postmodernism when rejecting extremist positions. Instead, the historian should seek middle ground.²²⁰ McKnight admits that postmodernists are often “inaccurately caricatured. . . . For postmodernist historiographers like Jenkins, there is indeed a past, a present, and a future. That past can be characterized as containing ‘facts,’ that is existential facts or better yet discrete facts.”²²¹

Despite the weaknesses in the postmodernist position, we should commend these historians for making us attentive to the pitfalls that can and often do result from modernist abuses.²²² The highly imaginative reconstructions of the past and, in particular, of the historical Jesus certainly add to both academic discussion and our entertainment. However, they can hurt the reputation of the historical enterprise when stated confidently as fact without confessing to the limitations and subjectivity of narrative or without being supported by the application of responsible historical method. Historical descriptions are limited and historians must now speak with a degree of diffidence.²²³ “[H]istory will never be as it was, since important new knowledge has been gained from the postmodern theorists and new criteria for truth and objectivity have to be established.”²²⁴

In what is perhaps an overly simplified overview, we may assert that there are three approaches to understanding history. The first is a naïve realism which holds that accurate historical judgments always result when correct method, theory, and evidence are employed consistently. This view can no longer be maintained and there are few who embrace it, at least publicly, in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The second is a postmodernist view which holds that responsible method cannot lead us to accurate historical knowledge. This view has attracted few followers. The third

²¹⁹ White (1978), 82.

²²⁰ Roberts is correct. However, what he suggests as middle ground seems to me closer to radical postmodernism than centrism.

²²¹ McKnight (2005), 9.

²²² McKnight (2005) comments, “St. Paul had his thorn in the flesh and we, I’m prone to say, have the postmodernists. They keep us on our knees. Or, on our heels” (9).

²²³ See also Allison (“Explaining,” 2005), 133; McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004): “responsible historians will be careful not to exaggerate the certainty of their conclusions, but will point out how tentative they are when there is not strong evidence to support them” (43); White (1978): “One of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record” (82). Admittedly, historical Jesus scholars rarely state their conclusions with reservation. However, Mettinger (2001) is a refreshing example of a scholar unafraid to do so. See the following pages in his 2001 book: 68, 71, 81, 136, 137, 140, 142, 144, 152. Also see Crossley (2005), 182.

²²⁴ Kofoed (2005), 18.

view is a realism which maintains that the accuracy of historical descriptions may be held with varying degrees of certainty. This is by far how the overwhelming majority of historians view their practice.

1.2.8. What is Truth?

In light of the postmodern challenge, realist historians must revisit the foundation of their views, including the nature of truth itself. The view enjoying the greatest acceptance is the *correspondence theory of truth*. We perceive the world directly through our senses. For our descriptions of the world around us to be true, they must correspond to its conditions. Insofar as our descriptions achieve this, they reflect truth. The correspondence theory of truth is challenged by a number of factors. Our perceptions and interpretations of our world are influenced by our culture and interests; in short, our horizon.²²⁵ These interpretations are separate from the uninterpreted data and, to some extent, cannot be said to reflect the past. Moreover, our perceptions do not mirror reality precisely. They are the result of our mechanical senses, which can malfunction or misinterpret. For example, a young child riding in a car on a sunny day may see what appears to be water on the road ahead. His limited knowledge leads him to believe that the road ahead is wet. An older child has a basic understanding of a mirage and interprets what she sees differently than the younger child. Perceptions involve interpretations based on the horizon of the subject and/or author. When a witness says that such-and-such happened, her conclusion is founded upon horizon-laden perceptions. A historian has her own horizon in which reports are marinated then interpreted. Moreover, there is no way of proving that our senses accurately depict reality to us. While true, we all assume that our senses provide at least a relatively accurate picture of data. For example, the pain experienced when we touch a hot stove and the odor of burning flesh that results probably provides an accurate perception that it is harmful for a part of my body to make contact with a hot stove. The older child in the car has a horizon that enables her to have more accurate perceptions than the younger child who thinks he sees water on the road before him. Our experience is that a person with reasonable intelligence, a mature horizon, and properly functioning senses will have accurate perceptions.

Another challenge to a *correspondence* theory of truth is that historians are incapable of returning to the past in order to examine them in light of their theories and, thus, can never verify in the strictest sense that their theories correspond to events in a truthful manner. However, this only prohibits an absolute confidence from being warranted. Historians do not seek absolute confidence. Instead, they seek *adequate* descriptions of the past for which they may have *reasonable* certainty. Moreover, as with the challenges affiliated with perceptions, the inability of historians to verify their hypotheses most of the time only affects their *ability to know* truth. It does not affect the *nature* of truth itself.²²⁶

²²⁵ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 17.

²²⁶ Contra Anchor (1999): “any correspondence theory, no matter how sophisticated, may be ultimately unsustainable” (121); Rex Martin (1998): Arguing for realism will probably end by begging the question. “It is not difficult to see that while skeptics [i.e., postmodernists] may not win this game, they are not likely to lose it either. . . . that truth that we more closely approximate, *whether or not* it is also objective truth, is at least what I shall call *methodological truth*” (36); McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998) proposes a *Correlation Theory of Truth* (17-20, 50), which he renames “a critical theory of truth” in McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004), 5-17. In agreement with Charles Peirce, McCullagh suggests that “a description of the world is true if it is part of an ideal theory which explains

A third challenge to *correspondence theory* states that truth is relative to the individual. If you had been in a room with René Descartes, you may have felt very warm while he felt cold. His statement that the room was cold would have been true for him but not for you. “Feeling” is a relative term. However, if we were to qualify the relative term, the problem would be solved: It is true for everyone that René Descartes felt cold while in the room and that you felt warm while you were with him during this particular occasion. Moreover, as Fay contends: “Either Caesar did cross the Rubicon on 10 January 49 BCE or he did not; either Oswald was a lone assassin or he was not; either Heidegger joined the Nazi Party or he did not. . . . What makes these sentences true is how the world is or was, not whether we believe them to be true or even whether we have justifiable warrant to believe them to be true.”²²⁷

Another theory of truth is *coherence theory*, which states that a proposition is true when all of its components cohere with other propositions believed to be true. This theory of truth may be especially attractive to those historians who excel in forming creative narrative. Their narrative is true because it coheres better with other widely held propositions. *Coherence theory* likewise faces a number of challenges. What are historians to do when a number of equally coherent hypotheses contradict one another? In this case, one would have to claim these hypotheses are equally true or that underdetermination prohibits warranting a specific hypothesis as the best explanation. Moreover, two hypotheses can be equally coherent yet one is known to be false. Are historians willing to claim that a carefully constructed narrative known to be false is truer than an event known to have occurred but is less coherent given external circumstances? It would seem that a *correspondence* view of truth prevails in the end. Otherwise, one is left with no means of distinguishing fact from fiction, a point made by postmodernists. Moreover, how is one to know whether the propositions are true with which the main proposition is coherent? At minimum, *coherence theory* requires a metanarrative. This is not a defeater of *coherence theory*. However, it reveals the breadth of work that must be completed in a *coherence* approach.

Testing the coherence of a hypothesis with other accepted propositions may serve to negate the truth of that hypothesis. But a hypothesis cannot be judged as true because it is coherent. What if we modified the *coherence theory* to state that the hypothesis that coheres better with the facts than competing hypotheses is true? Such a modification would only create a condition for determining the correct hypothesis under the umbrella of *correspondence theory*, since this would simply be another way of saying that the hypothesis that coheres best with the facts is probably closer to what

all possible observations of the world, and I would add that for an ideal theory of the world to be true there must exist in reality something which could cause all those perceptions, were people in a position to make them” (9-10). This seems to me an unnecessary pragmatic move that brackets epistemological challenges in order to proceed rather than providing a new definition of truth. One can hold to a *correspondence theory of truth* while acknowledging that historians are incapable of producing historical descriptions which capture a complete and/or entirely accurate correspondence to the events or states they describe. McCullagh himself appears to recognize this. Speaking of his *critical theory of truth* he writes, “This is not what people normally mean when they call a description true, but it states the conditions under which it is reasonable to believe a description true” (*The Logic of History* [2004], 10). Briggs (2001) suggests Speech Act Theory for assistance in overcoming the problem of the foundations for knowledge (17), contra Fish (1980), chapter 9. Lorenz (1994) suggests “internal realism.”

²²⁷ Fay (1998), 91.

actually occurred than competing hypotheses that are less coherent with the facts. In other words, a modified coherence theory becomes a coherence criterion for identifying truth as defined in correspondence theory.

Correspondence theory is most widely accepted and this is the way in which we live. McCullagh comments that “the practice of taking the world to correspond to our descriptions of it is convenient and generally harmless . . . In everyday contexts naïve realism produces few false expectations.”²²⁸ In addition to defining truth in a correspondence sense, realist historians attempt to establish criteria for identifying what is true in a correspondence sense. Historians should not change their theory related to the nature of truth in order to accommodate the uncertainty of historical descriptions. Instead, they should strive to formulate a description that corresponds to what occurred but be willing to settle for a conclusion that is more modest, one that speaks of plausibility or probability based on the available data. Our knowledge of the past may not mirror reality, that is, it may not be a one-to-one correspondence with the details of what occurred.²²⁹ Instead, historical descriptions usually present a blurred picture of what occurred with only portions of the image being quite sharp.

Thus, I contend that history is often knowable and that some hypotheses are truer than others in a correspondence sense. We cannot be certain that a particular description of the past corresponds precisely with the past. It is certainly incomplete. However, a hypothesis may be said to be “true” insofar as its description corresponds to what occurred and does not contradict it. I hasten to add, however, that this definition of truth is an entirely different matter than the confidence warranted the historian that his preferred hypothesis is “true.” Moreover, historians are not only after descriptions that are true in a correspondence sense; they desire fair and adequate descriptions.

1.2.9. What is a Historical Fact?

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that an *essentially contested concept* is a term for which no consensus definition exists. “Fact” is an essentially contested concept among historians. Evans defines a historical fact as something that happened and that historians attempt to “discover” historical facts through verification procedures.²³⁰ This is the definition I hold and will use throughout this dissertation. Others contend that facts are data that have been interpreted by the historian so that they become “evidence” for his hypothesis.²³¹ As discussed earlier, since all

²²⁸ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 27. See also Lorenz (1994): “the fact that the relationship of correspondence between a true statement and the world it refers to is a conventional relationship within a conceptual framework does *not* invalidate the notions of reference and of truth as correspondence. Without these notions it is, as a matter of fact, impossible to understand *what we are talking about* when we talk” (310).

²²⁹ I use the word *may* since it is possible for the historian to get lucky on occasion without knowing it and present a historical description that is completely accurate, even though exhaustive is out of the question and not the objective of historians.

²³⁰ R. Evans (1999), 66.

²³¹ Dunn (2003), 102-03. Also see Appleby, Hunt, Jacob (1994): “evidence is only evidence in relation to a particular account” (261). Disagreement exists even in the level of interpretation involved with facts. Fredriksen (1999): “Though the word is unfashionable in academic history right now, I shall breathe it anyway, here: We have facts. Facts about Jesus, and facts about the movement that formed after his crucifixion. Facts are always subject to interpretation—that’s part of the fun—but they also exist as fixed points in our investigation. Any explanation, any reconstruction of Jesus’ mission and message must speak adequately to what we *know* to have been the case. If it cannot, then no matter

historians are heavily influenced by their horizons, the interpretative factor becomes the cause of much disagreement related to what occurred in the past. Tucker asserts, “There are no given scientific or historiographical ready-to-eat facts that scientists or historians just need to select and put together in their disciplinary basket. If we take facts to be units of knowledge of which we are almost entirely certain, then knowledge of facts follows research and is theory laden because what scientists and historians take to be facts depends on their theories, research programs, and the constraints of the evidence.”²³² The end result is that historians disagree not only over the definition of a historical “fact” but also over what is granted membership as a fact.²³³

This causes a dilemma for historians. As stated earlier, facts are data that have been interpreted after being marinated in the horizon of the historian. If the historian’s horizon interprets facts, these can in turn serve as confirmation of his horizon. We seem to be working in a circle. Although there may be no way of breaking that circle, the historian can make it a little more difficult to travel the circle easily with the above six suggestions for transcending one’s horizon: method, peer pressure, submitting ideas to hostile experts, making one’s horizon and method public, detachment from bias, and accounting for the historical bedrock.²³⁴ Thus, our circle has six points at which the historian should pause before proceeding. This does not guarantee total objectivity. Historical descriptions will still vary. But applying these six suggestions should, I hope, help manage one’s horizon and minimize subjectivity.

1.2.10. Burden of Proof

Since most of our information about the past comes to us in the form of texts, we must ask how these should be approached. Bracketing genre considerations, methodical

how elegant an application of interesting methods or how rousing and appealing its moral message, that reconstruction fails as history” (7); Haskell (1990): “facts are just low-level interpretative entities unlikely for the moment to be contested” (141); McCullagh (“What Do Historians Argue About?” 2004): Historical facts are arrived at through the interpretation of the modern historian and are in that sense subjective. However, once a fact has been established, any account of the past must account to it (24); McKnight (2005): “‘Facts’ exist independently of the mind, whether they are discovered or not; that is, things were said and things occurred. ‘Evidence’ is what survives of those ‘existential facts’” (20n71); Topoloski (1999): Information requires varying degrees of interpretation from basic level to high level facts. Certain facts under scrutiny have no direct evidence and lead to an epistemological quagmire. In order for a fact to be considered basic, a relatively high level of consensus is required (200-01). See also Barrera (2001), 199-200. Postmodernists maintain that there are no facts, only interpretations.

²³² Tucker (2004), 14. Lorenz (1994) notes the “fact that historians frequently *keep* disagreeing on facts and relationships between facts” (305). See also Craffert (1989): “without *interpretation of the data* no *construction* can be made by any scholar. As a matter of fact, there are no facts without interpretation” (333); Dunn (2003): “Even the data themselves are never ‘raw’: they have already been ‘selected’ by the historical process; they are ‘selected’ again by the way they have been discovered and brought to present notice; they have come with a context, or various contacts already predisposing interpretations; the interpreter’s framework of understanding or particular thesis causes certain data to appear more significant than others; and so on” (111).

²³³ Lorenz (1994) cites the *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute), an intellectual and political controversy between left-wing and right-wing intellectuals in West Germany (1986-89) about the way the Holocaust should be treated in history. He notes that “factual statements of one party in this debate [were] not recognized as such by the other and often [were] denounced as political ‘value judgments’” (302).

²³⁴ See section 1.2.3.

credulity views texts as being reliable unless they possess indicators that they should be regarded as otherwise.²³⁵ Indicators could be internal contradictions, states of affairs described that contradict what we know to be true of reality today, and an author known to distort existing data and manufacture new and misleading data in order to promote his cause. Methodical skepticism views texts as unreliable unless they possess indicators that they should be regarded as reliable.²³⁶ These indicators include internal consistency, coherence with states of affairs known to be true, and the author is someone known to be fair and cautious in his reporting of data. Is a text presumed innocent until proven guilty or guilty until proven innocent? Should credulity or skepticism reign?

Employing methodical credulity in historical investigation lays some unwanted landmines. Regardless of the motives involved, ancient historians, like any modern, could lie, spin, and embellish. Moreover, questions pertaining to genre are not always easily answered. Thus, to take texts at their face value may lead historians into all sorts of quagmires and mistakes. In the United States, courts presume innocence on the part of the defendant in order to protect her from false accusations. This is methodical credulity. There are two similarities shared in the approaches of courts and historians. First, both historian and jurist seek proof beyond reasonable doubt, and second, both assume that the past can be known although it cannot be absolutely reconstructed. More radical postmodern historians should take note of this latter parallel. For to claim it is a useless effort to know the past is not only the death of history but of the legal system, too. If the past cannot be known, then no credible evidence can exist for a conviction to be warranted. Why believe the witnesses, since they report fragmented and selective data that have been interpreted according to their horizon? Burden of proof becomes a moot point. But, despite its weaknesses evidenced by the guilty who are freed and the innocent who are incarcerated, this legal system is generally quite reliable. Accordingly, credulity would appear to be the best method when the intention, method, and integrity of the author are understood. Unfortunately, on many occasions, sure knowledge in these matters eludes us.²³⁷

How are we to approach the primary sources for the life of Jesus? The common view up until only a decade ago is clearly expressed by The Jesus Seminar: “[T]he gospels are now assumed to be narratives in which the memory of Jesus is embellished by mythic elements that express the church’s faith in him, and by plausible fictions that enhance the telling of the gospel story for first-century listeners who knew about divine men and miracle workers firsthand. Supposedly historical elements in these narratives must therefore be demonstrated to be so.”²³⁸ But a new consensus view of the Gospels has emerged since the early 1990s. As mentioned earlier, in 1992, Richard Burridge published *What Are the Gospels*, a book that questioned the then-dominant view of the Gospels by arguing that they belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bios*), which is historical in nature. A classical historian at the time, Burridge set out to disprove treatments by a few American scholars who were arguing that the genre of the Gospels is Greco-Roman biography. During his research

²³⁵ The following contend for the practice of methodical credulity: Blomberg (2007, 304), Byrskog (2002, 280), Davis (2006, 60, 62), Waterman (2006, 13), Wenham (1992, 24), and Swinburne (2003), 4.

²³⁶ Methodical skepticism appears to be practiced by Meeks (2006), 110, 113.

²³⁷ Meyer (1979), 85.

²³⁸ Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (1993), 4-5.

he became convinced that their conclusions were correct. Burridge's thesis has been so influential that Graham Stanton has praised the book for playing "a key role in establishing that the Gospels were read in the early centuries primarily as biographies. . . . To have turned the tide of scholarly opinion in this way is a remarkable achievement."²³⁹ In addition, Wright notes that the closeness of the Gospels to the events they purport to describe is much closer than we have with many other works of antiquity.²⁴⁰ Similarly, Yamauchi writes,

Roman historians use Livy to reconstruct the history of the Roman Republic several centuries before his lifetime. Classical historians use Plutarch (second century C.E.) for the history of Themistocles (5th century B.C.E.), and all historians of Alexander the Great (4th century B.C.E.) acknowledge as their most accurate source Arrian's *Anabasis* (second century A.D.).²⁴¹

While this new consensus regarding Gospel genre and the closeness of the reports to the events they purport to describe are cards in the hand of the historian employing methodical credulity, they are not enough to win the round, since other factors such as redaction and authorship are likewise players. Moreover, as Burridge notes, *bioi* had a number of components they usually featured: history, political beliefs and polemic, moral philosophy, religious and philosophical teaching, encomium, and story and novel for entertainment.²⁴² Biographies did not need to employ every component and some biographers utilized certain components more frequently than others. Accordingly, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish history from encomium.

Methodical skepticism has the attractive feature of weeding out poorly supported reports and providing evidence that is strong. However, historians, like everyone else, have their own strongly held beliefs which heavily influence how much weight they assign to specific texts. These beliefs are especially influential when a miracle claim is under consideration, since it involves answers to metaphysical questions pertaining to whether God exists and, if so, whether he acts in our world. Therefore, in our investigation of the resurrection of Jesus, methodical skepticism can be a vice as much as it is a virtue and could actually keep one from knowing the past.²⁴³ Blomberg comments that "[s]cholars who would consistently implement such a method when studying other ancient historical writing would find the corroborative data so insufficient that the vast majority of accepted history would have to be jettisoned."²⁴⁴ Of course, there will be various shades of methodical skepticism and methodical credulity marked by the burden of proof required. In other words, one historian employing methodical credulity may dismiss data as unreliable more easily than another also employing methodical credulity, while one historian employing methodical skepticism may grant evidence more readily than another employing methodical skepticism.

²³⁹ Burridge (2004), ix.

²⁴⁰ Wright (1992), 106. As examples he provides Livy's Punic Wars and Josephus' Maccabean rebellion.

²⁴¹ E. Yamauchi, "The Current State of Old Testament Historiography," in Millard, Hoffmeier, Baker, eds. (1994), 26.

²⁴² Burridge (2004), 62-67.

²⁴³ Meyer (1979), 108.

²⁴⁴ Blomberg (2007), 304.

We may speak of a third view, methodical neutrality, where the one making the claim bears the burden of proof.²⁴⁵ This view applies not only to texts but includes the statement of a hypothesis and seems to be the fairest approach at first look.²⁴⁶ Upon a second look we discover that it bears the marks of methodical skepticism. The historian promoting a particular historical hypothesis bears the full burden of proof for supporting that hypothesis, which he assumes to be false until finding sufficient evidence to the contrary. The difference between this position and methodical skepticism arises the moment the historian moves beyond criticizing the data or conclusions and presents an alternative theory of his own. For at that moment, he bears the burden of proof for his theory. For instance, in arguing the question of Jesus' resurrection, a historian might propose that the disciples hallucinated the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. With the approach of methodic neutrality, this new hypothesis is presumed to be false until sufficient evidence is provided to the contrary. It would not be enough for him simply to toss out "hallucination" as an objection. Instead, this alternate theory would be treated as a hypothesis. And any hypothesis, whether affirming or skeptical, is subject to criticism and must be defended. This coincides with the historian's practice of weighing hypotheses.

The main difference, then, between methodical neutrality and methodical skepticism concerns burden of proof. All historians bear the responsibility of defending their hypotheses. The one claiming Jesus was resurrected must bear the burden of showing that Jesus resurrected. The texts cannot be regarded as being truthful until proven otherwise, at least not when they are part of an historical investigation. In methodical neutrality, scholars claiming that something other than Jesus' resurrection occurred likewise bear the burden to support the occurrence of that something else. It will not do to assert that X could instead have occurred without providing a reason that is both coherent and compelling that X is more probable than resurrection. For example, let us suppose that Volker claims that purple geese from Pluto are responsible for much of the unexplained phenomena on earth. We may ignore this claim until Volker provides some type of evidence, such as a report from a team of astrophysicists who detected a stream of purple residue coming from Pluto to Earth, the lead of the stream has an inverted "V" shape, and whenever the tip of this stream arrives at the Earth, a pattern of unexplainable phenomena begins to occur. Volker's theory may still sound absurd. But with methodical neutrality, the burden now shifts to the skeptic to provide an alternate theory of at least equal strength. The stronger the evidence for Volker's theory, the stronger the alternate theory must be to negate it. For example, Katja may reply that a galactic wind from a distant quasar refracted against particles left behind by a comet producing the appearance of a purple streak coming toward Earth. Moreover, the number of unexplained phenomena did not increase over what is normal. People were only in a heightened state of awareness to observe them. However, if Volker were to point out that purple featherlike artifacts were found on site at many locations of the phenomena, Katja's theory will not be as compelling, especially if she is unable to show that the galactic wind and comet particles were actually present at the specific time of the phenomena. Thus, the stronger the data

²⁴⁵ Eddy and Boyd (2007), 379; Fischer (1970) adopts methodical neutrality while referring to methodical credulity as the "*fallacy of the presumptive proof*" and methodical skepticism as the "*fallacy of the negative proof*" (47-49); Grant (1977): "Careful scrutiny does not presuppose either credulity or hostility" (200); R. J. Miller (1992), 23; cf. R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008), 9. See Sanders (1985) who applies this approach to the sayings of Jesus (13).

²⁴⁶ Grant (1977), 201; Marxen (1968), 8; McKnight (2005), 38; Twelftree (1999), 248.

behind a historical interpretation, the greater burden is placed upon the historian holding a different position.

Let us consider another example, this time related to the resurrection of Jesus, and suppose that a skeptical historian questions it by suggesting that the forty-nine day waiting period that elapsed between Jesus' resurrection and the first public proclamation of the event by his disciples indicates that the disciples utilized that time to invent the elaborate story. The historian defending the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus may note that Luke, who reports that delay, likewise informs us that "after his suffering, [Jesus] presented himself to them alive by many proofs, for forty days appearing to them and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God. And assembling them, he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'which you heard from Me'" (Acts 1:3-4).²⁴⁷ According to the timeframe presented by Luke, the disciples started preaching on the day of Pentecost, which was forty-nine days after the crucifixion. Jesus was crucified on the eve of the Passover. He rose the day after Passover and appeared to his disciples and others for forty days. What did they do during that time? We are only told that he taught them concerning the kingdom of God and ate and drank with them (Acts 10:41). Then he told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. What if Jesus wanted to have a long retreat with his disciples during which time he prepared them for the tough road he knew they had ahead? Was there significance in a forty-day period of solitude with them? He had started his ministry after a forty-day period of solitude in the wilderness with God. Was he starting his church after a forty-day period of solitude with his disciples? Or were his disciples starting their major ministry after a forty-day period with God as Jesus had started his? One can only speculate here. What we know is that according to Luke, after Jesus ascended there was only a nine-day period of waiting before they began to preach his resurrection, not forty-nine. The reason for the wait, according to Luke, was because Jesus had commanded them to wait for the Holy Spirit, whose presence was necessary to do what they did. Thus, the delay is certainly explainable. Contrary to the "invention hypothesis," it was not very long and there was a plausible reason for waiting. The reason for preferring a natural explanation is linked to horizon, rather than self-evident historical reasoning. Skeptical historians may accuse historians favorable to the resurrection hypothesis of speculating where the New Testament does not provide much detail—and they would be correct. However, they speculate no less when they suggest that the resurrection story was invented during that time, since no hard evidence exists in support of the skeptical view. In this example, the skeptical historian wins if one embraces methodical skepticism, since he shoulders no burden of proof for his view. In methodical neutrality, he ties at best but does not win, unless his view is *more plausible* in terms of fulfilling the criteria for weighing hypotheses.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Irenaeus (1.28.7) reported that the Gnostics believed that Jesus "tarried on earth eighteen months" (or 548 days). In *The Apocryphon of James* it is 550 days (NH I:2, 19-20). Given the similarity of these two suggestions, these figures may have been based on some tradition. Perhaps the 18-month period was in reference to the timeframe of all of Jesus' resurrection appearances, including the one to Paul, which may have occurred within two years of Jesus' resurrection. *Pistis Sophia* 1-6 reports that he stayed for 11 years! See Robinson (1982).

²⁴⁸ See section 1.3.2.

The ideal manner of coming to a historical conclusion is through critical and rigorous tests of truth, a style of intellectual life that insists on rational inference, and a determination to withhold assent until it is compelled by evidence. In the end this may often result in the historian concluding, “As a historian, I believe X occurred. But there is not enough evidence to be certain.” I will adopt methodical neutrality in my historical method.

1.2.11. Theory and Historians

Thus far, we have been entrenched in a discussion over the philosophy of history: What is history and how is it done? Surprisingly, few historians give attention to these matters. Consider the following comments:

Barrera: “Although those who would talk about history have an object in common—historiographical texts—they do not have a single clear method to approach them.”²⁴⁹

Fischer: “Specific canons of historical proof are neither widely observed nor generally agreed upon.”²⁵⁰

Haskell: “the inherently dispersive character of a discipline that, unlike English and Philosophy, lacks even the possibility of defining a single canon familiar to all practitioners.”²⁵¹

Grant: “It is true that every critic is inclined to make his own rules.”²⁵²

Novick: “As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist [as of the 1980s]. Convergence on anything, let alone a subject as highly charged as ‘the objectivity question,’ was out of the question. The profession was as described in the last verse of the Book of Judges. ‘In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.’”²⁵³

Tucker: “The absence of a consensus in some areas of historiography indicates no single determinate interpretation of history exists.”²⁵⁴

These statements represent only a sampling.²⁵⁵ It is startling when we consider that all of the above comments were made by historians outside of the community of

²⁴⁹ Barrera (2001), 204.

²⁵⁰ Fischer (1970), 62.

²⁵¹ Haskell (1990), 153, cf. 168-69.

²⁵² Grant (1977), 201.

²⁵³ Novick (1998), 628.

²⁵⁴ Tucker (2001), 54.

²⁵⁵ Crowell (1998): “Very little theory—in the strict sense of systems of sentences deductively governed by laws—seems to be important in the work of historians” (221); R. Evans (1999) comments that most historians avoid the challenges of postmodernists and theory (8-9); Fay (1998): “The disjunction between history as practiced and historical metatheory has led many to claim that metatheory is more or less irrelevant. . . . [Metatheory] doesn’t touch what ‘working historians’ do. The windmills of history continue to spin despite the tilting and jousting of philosophers of history . . .”

religious scholars.²⁵⁶ Martin thinks Novick goes too far in his now infamous “no king in Israel” statement: “It’s hard to look carefully at the ways in which interpretational controversy in historical studies is actually adjudicated evidentially, to the extent that it is, and come away with the view that in historical studies anything goes.”²⁵⁷ I agree with Martin. Much discussion has taken place over the years pertaining to various criteria for authenticity, such as the criterion of multiple independent reports and the role of the criterion of dissimilarity.²⁵⁸ Most biblical scholars regard these as being helpful in assisting them in identifying reliable traditions to varying degrees, even if they dispute the extent of their assistance and their limitations. Notwithstanding, it is still true that there are no methods for understanding, approaching, and conducting historical research that are broadly accepted and employed in the same manner by professional historians. As shown earlier, a strong majority are realists who maintain that the past can be recovered, although incompletely and lacking precision. Most likewise agree that arguments to the best explanation provide the path to get us there. Most would also give a nod to the bulk of the criteria discussed below for determining the best explanation, although they disagree on which criteria are the most important and state them with different emphases.²⁵⁹ But historians remain polarized on epistemological considerations and horizons go unchecked more often than not. This results in the selective employment of agreed-upon principles and criteria by historians who in turn apply only those that are convenient for their preferred hypothesis while the others are either ignored or poorly employed.

However, interest in the philosophy of history appears to be growing. Indeed, today the discussion is more alive than discussions pertaining to the philosophy of science, if the number of articles produced on these subjects during the same period is an accurate indicator.²⁶⁰ The value of theory behind historical knowledge and method is now being appreciated by more than philosophers of history. Historians doing actual

(83); Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001): In an exchange of articles in *History and Theory*, realist Zagorin and postmodernist Jenkins only found one point of agreement between them: “most historians generally ignore theoretical matters” (62); Iggers (2005): “[Gordon Graham] is right in noting that theory plays only a limited role in the works of practicing historians, who would like to dispense with it, although they always operate with theoretical assumptions that they generally do not state explicitly” (474); Shaw (2001) asserts that theory intimidates the typical historian so much that most spend very little time and effort on it (5); White (1987) notes the “all but universal disdain with which modern historians regard the ‘philosophy of history’” (21); Zagorin (1999): “the majority of professional historians who, as usual, appear to ignore theoretical issues and would prefer to be left undisturbed to get on with their work while no doubt hoping the postmodernist challenge will eventually go away (2).

²⁵⁶ For religious scholars who make similar comments, see Pannenberg in D’Costa, ed. (1996): “the criteria and tools of historical judgement are not beyond dispute. Modern historical method has been in the process of development since the origins of modernity” (63); Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005): “Certainly the current search [for the historical Jesus] is not a thing easily fenced off from its predecessors; it has no characteristic method; and it has no body of shared conclusions—differences in opinion being now almost as common and ineradicable as differences in tastes. Contemporary work also has no common set of historiographical or theological presuppositions” (15). Allison then cites supporting statements from Wright (“no final agreement about method”) and R. Brown (“no common methodology”) (16). McKnight (2005) writes, “Historical Jesus scholars appropriate a historiography [i.e., philosophy of history], though very few of them spell their historiography out” (4); “historical Jesus scholarship seems largely unconscious of its historiography, or at least unwilling to trot out its essential features” (16).

²⁵⁷ Rex Martin (2006), 260.

²⁵⁸ Gowler (2007) refers to “the traditional canons of historical-critical approaches” (119).

²⁵⁹ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 23. Also see section 1.3.2 below.

²⁶⁰ Tucker (2001), 38-39.

historical investigations are giving more attention to theory and method and proceeding with caution.²⁶¹

1.2.12. Is History A Science?

It has often been asked whether history is a science. A number have drawn comparisons between the sciences and the practice of history or rejected this comparison.²⁶² Perhaps the leading objection to regarding the practice of history as a science is that, unlike scientists who have entities they can work with in the laboratory, the past is inaccessible to historians. Moreover, firm agreements and strong confirmation are seldom available in the study of history.²⁶³ However, many of the sciences are faced with the same challenge. Although a historian does not have direct access to the past, a scientist does not have direct access to the experiments he performed last year in the lab, but can only refer to his notes. On the other hand, both historians and scientists have access to entities from the past. Every manuscript is an artifact from the past. What a scientist sees when he looks through a telescope at a distant galaxy she observes it as it existed thousands of years ago if not longer, and after it has been distorted by gravitational tugs from other galaxies and trillions of miles of interstellar dust. The work of geologists involves a significant amount of guessing. Evolutionary biologists have no means of verifying if a particular life-form evolved from another.²⁶⁴ Physics is usually regarded as the most secure of all the sciences, since mathematics is intricately bound up in the work of physicists and their database is comparatively large to what other scientists have. Nevertheless, physicists posit numerous entities to which they have no direct access such as quarks and strings. Zammito comments that “an electron is no more immediately accessible to perception than the Spanish Inquisition. Each must be inferred from actual evidence. Yet neither is utterly indeterminable.”²⁶⁵ Evans maintains that history is a weak science:

History, in the end, may for the most part be seen as a science in the weak sense of the German term *Wissenschaft*, an organized body of knowledge

²⁶¹ Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001) suggest that “historians must begin seriously to embrace theoretical argument as a matter of ordinary practice rather than as an occasional gesture if they wish to have any critical relevance at all” (62). Shaw (2001) comments that historians do not have all of the answers related to theory and method. Nevertheless, they are making progress and should proceed, albeit with caution (9). Within the arena of historical Jesus research, the leading lights are devoting considerable space to describe their approaches. See Allison (1998), 1-77; Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), 111-48; Crossan (1991), xxvii-xxxiv; Dunn (2003), 25-136; Meier (1991), 1-40; Sanders (1985), 1-58; Wright (1992), 3-120; (2003), 3-31.

²⁶² See Berry (1999); Christian (2004); Crowell (1998); Førlund (2004); Peña (1999); Stuart-Fox (1999); Tucker (2004), chapter 3.

²⁶³ Gilderhus (2007), 85.

²⁶⁴ One might think that the fossil record is abundant with clear examples of species evolving. While one can *interpret* certain life-forms as transitions, this does not *demonstrate* that they are transitional forms. Moreover, the fossil record is lacking the needed transitional forms for verification as numerous prominent evolutionists admit. See the comments by prominent evolutionists Colin Patterson and Richard Lewontin in T. Bethell (1985), 49.

²⁶⁵ Zammito (2005), 178, cf. 177. See also Lorenz (1994), 312; Tucker (2004), 4. At least some scientists agree that scientific hypotheses, like their historical cousins, include an interpretive component: “The thesis of theory underdetermination by a given body of empirical evidence roots in the claim that any scientific theory unavoidably contains more than only pure observational terms. It therefore features in its explanatory apparatus theoretical terms which, since they refer to non-observable structures, are open to metatheoretic dispute” (Lyre and Eynck [2001], 2).

acquired through research carried out according to generally agreed methods, presented in published reports, and subject to peer review. It is not a science in the strong sense that it can frame general laws or predict the future. But there are sciences, such as geology, which cannot predict the future either. The fact seems to be that the differences between what in English are known as the sciences are at least as great as the differences between these disciplines taken together and a humane discipline such as history. . . . To search for a truly “scientific” history is to pursue a mirage.²⁶⁶

Others view history as both science and art.²⁶⁷ On March 29, 2006, I had the opportunity to engage in friendly dialogue with a few scientists and a philosopher on these matters over dinner. Two are physicists at MIT (one specialized in genetics, the other in geology) and the third is a philosopher of science at Harvard. We discussed epistemological considerations in judging hypotheses within their discipline. I asked how often they work with a hypothesis that seems to explain all or most of the data and then experimentation later proves the hypothesis incorrect. The physicists answered that the data with which they work is often so fragmented that they rarely have a hypothesis that explains a lot. The philosopher and one of the physicists commented that criteria pertaining to when a hypothesis may be regarded as true are rarely if ever considered. Instead, the instincts of the scientist act as umpire.²⁶⁸ The most valuable aspect of this discussion for me was that it revealed that the conclusions of science are not as firm as believed by those outside of the traditional disciplines of science and that, similar to many historians, the theory of method (i.e., philosophy of science) plays little part in the practices of scientists.

1.2.13. What Historians Do

We have covered much ground and it is time to pull together some of the topics we have discussed and ask just what it is that historians do. The past is forever gone. We cannot go back in time. Nevertheless, remnants from the past exist in the form of manuscripts, artifacts, and effects.²⁶⁹ Historians study these and attempt to reassemble them so that the resulting historical hypothesis serves as a window through which we can peer back into the past.²⁷⁰ The window is often blurry and contains some spots through which we may see more clearly. As a result, historians, especially those who study antiquity, speak of the probable truth of a theory rather than absolute certainty. Historical conclusions are provisional. Richard Evans writes,

We rake over the ashes of the past, and only with difficulty can we make out what they once were; only now and then can we stir them into a flicker of life. Yet we should not despair at the difficulty of the goals we have set ourselves

²⁶⁶ R. Evans (1999), 62. His second chapter is devoted to addressing this issue. Contra Evans’s statement that historians cannot predict the future, Staley (2002) argues that since history involves a thought process and is a discipline of how to think, if historians can know the past, they should be able to predict the future (72-73).

²⁶⁷ Droysen (1893), 110; R. Evans (1999), 62-63.

²⁶⁸ While we should not denigrate such instincts especially when coming from a mature scientist, the challenge with this approach is that the instincts are not public and, thus, it may be very difficult for others to judge whether the conclusions made are accurate.

²⁶⁹ R. Evans (1999), 217; McKnight (2005), 20n71; Schinkel (2004), 52; Tucker (2004), 93.

²⁷⁰ Zammito (1998): Historians occasionally enjoy nostalgic episodes when, for a moment, the past is retrieved and they can peer through a window and, in a sense, observe it (345).

. . . . History is an empirical discipline, and it is concerned with the content of knowledge rather than its nature. Through the sources we use, and the methods with which we handle them, we can, if we are very careful and thorough, approach to a reconstruction of past reality that may be partial and provisional, and certainly will not be totally neutral, but is nevertheless true. We know of course that we will be guided in selecting materials for the stories we tell, and in the way we put these materials together and interpret them, by literary methods, by social science theories, by moral and political beliefs, by an aesthetic sense, even by our own unconscious assumptions and desires. It is an illusion to believe otherwise.²⁷¹

Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob agree:

In reality, the past as a series of events is utterly gone. Its consequences, which are very real, remain to impinge on the present, but only a retrospective analysis can make their influence apparent. What stays on visibly in the present are the physical traces from past living—the materials are objects that historians turn into evidence and they begin asking questions. These traces, alas, never speak for themselves (even oral histories occur after the event).²⁷²

Tucker similarly comments,

Historiography does not reconstruct events; it cannot bring Caesar back to life or reenact the battle of Actium. Historiography does attempt to provide a hypothetical description and analysis of some past events as the best explanation of present evidence. This knowledge is probably true, but it is not true in an absolute sense. The most that historiography can aspire for is increasing plausibility, never absolute truth. . . . Most of history has left no lasting information-carrying effects after it. Therefore, most of history is and always will be unknown and unknowable.²⁷³

While singular descriptions may on occasion be stated simply, most historical descriptions are told within narratives which differ in their completeness. For example, the resurrection of Jesus is a singular description, while the canonical Gospels (*bioi*) are narratives. Portraits of the historical Jesus offered by modern scholars are likewise narratives. Since data mostly comes to us fragmented, an exhaustive or even complete narrative is unattainable. Thus, historians do not expect full accounts of the past but narratives that are partial and intelligible. Historians seek an adequate accounting of the data where they get it right, even if not in an exhaustive sense.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ R. Evans (1999), 217. Gilderhus (2007) comments that historians “resemble paleontologists who try to construct historical images of life forms in the natural world through the use of fossils and imagination” (122). Wright (1992) likewise uses the analogy of a paleontologist (101). R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008) writes that the life of the historical Jesus must be “pieced together from the evidence left behind, much as an archaeologist reconstructs ancient buildings from the few pieces left on the ground” (14).

²⁷² Appleby, Hunt, Jacob (1994), 254-55.

²⁷³ Tucker (2004), 258. See also Anchor (1999) who asserts that the role of historians is to discover what is most likely true (114).

²⁷⁴ Rex Martin (2005), 143. See also Fay (1998), 91.

Part of the historian's investigation is to understand not only *what* occurred in the past, but also *why* it occurred. What was the cause of the event in question?²⁷⁵ The historian's questions often reach further than the identification of evidence. Many times, there is such a paucity of data that confidence eludes historians pertaining to a specific proposed cause. For example, we do not know why Hitler hated the Jews to the extent he did. We are unaware of any Jews who hurt him in some manner during his childhood. Therefore, any proposed cause for Hitler's hatred for Jews is purely conjectural, highly speculative and has a good possibility of being incorrect.²⁷⁶ On the other hand, historians often have a sufficient amount of data with which to work. In this case, they may ask whether a proposed cause significantly increases the probability of the extant data.²⁷⁷ Optimally, historians would like to identify a cause that is logically *necessary* in order for the extant evidence to be as it is. Would the effect have occurred as it did without the proposed cause?²⁷⁸ As a relevant example, Wright argues that the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus are necessary conditions for the rise of early Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus.²⁷⁹ It is infrequent that historians are able to identify a necessary cause.

Do historians, like detectives, study the evidence and then form a hypothesis or do they form a hypothesis and then look for supporting evidence, adjusting the hypothesis to fit the facts? Since the horizons of historians are ever present, the latter is probably more common. However, some historians who genuinely attempt to distance themselves from their biases and hopes during their investigations may actually have a sort of combination of the two. These start with facts and an underlying hypothesis that they hold in provision and they adjust them all (hypothesis and facts—remembering that facts involve interpretation) as they progress through their investigation.²⁸⁰ This is a form of *critical realism*, which recognizes that there is a past that can be known to some extent (realism) and that it is known through an honest questioning of the data in an interdependent relationship, like a spiral, between historian and data, and hypothesis and data. Relying heavily on the work of Bernard Lonergan, Ben Meyer brought critical realism to the forefront of New Testament studies and others have since adopted its use.²⁸¹

1.3. Method

1.3.1. From Theory to Method

We have asked whether it is possible to know the past and have answered with a qualified affirmative. With varying degrees, our knowledge of the past is incomplete and uncertain. Notwithstanding, there are occasions when our knowledge is adequate and when we may have reasonable certainty that our hypotheses present an accurate, though imperfect and incomplete, description of the past. I made six suggestions for minimizing the negative impact of horizons upon the work of historians. It is hoped

²⁷⁵ Dunn (2003), 101; Fay (1998), 91.

²⁷⁶ Anchor (1990), 116.

²⁷⁷ McCullagh ("What Do Historians Argue About?" 2004), 35.

²⁷⁸ McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004), 165, 168, 172. See also McCullagh (2000), 49.

²⁷⁹ Wright (2003), 686-96.

²⁸⁰ I say this with the understanding that there are numerous levels of facts and hypotheses.

²⁸¹ Meyer (1979) and (1989). See also Wright (1992), Dunn (2003), Denton (2005).

that these will improve our competency as historians when we analyze a number of hypotheses posited to answer the question “Did Jesus rise from the dead?”

We will now move from theory to method. Whereas theoretical considerations equip us to be better judges, methodological considerations equip us to be better detectives. What methods are employed by historians for determining what actually occurred in the past? Iggers contends that the “historian must work with the scholarly methods that were established in the nineteenth century. . . . [They may not be universally valid.] But as scholars we are still committed to these methods and we need to work with them if we do not want to erase the border between reality and fiction.”²⁸² Notwithstanding, clear methods for weighing hypotheses are often not stated by historians who, like many scientists, are guided more often by their instinct and bias. McCullagh comments that “[i]n practice, historians sometimes have a rather hazy idea of what an adequate explanation requires, so that their explanations are somewhat haphazard, often reflecting their personal interests.”²⁸³ We will look at two general methods employed by historians for weighing hypotheses: arguments to the best explanation and arguments from statistical inference. We will then consider degrees of historical confidence. Finally, we will discuss when historians are justified in awarding “historicity.”

1.3.2. Arguments to the Best Explanation

Arguments to the best explanation make inferences and weigh hypotheses according to specific criteria. The hypothesis that best meets the criteria is to be preferred.²⁸⁴ The following is a list of criteria used by historians for weighing hypotheses. Not all state their use openly and some use them in a slightly different manner, while others employ only some of them.²⁸⁵

²⁸² Iggers (2004), 153. Theissen and Winter (2002) assert that in order to know the past, historians must “weigh the merits of different possibilities and prefer those that seem more probable” (258).

²⁸³ McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 308. See also Barrera (2001) who asserts that methods employed among historians are fuzzy (202). This deficiency appears to be present with Allison’s historical method pertaining to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. He concludes that Jesus’ tomb was probably empty and is certain that the disciples had some experiences of the risen Jesus, at least one of which was in a group setting. However, he does not seem to have any criteria for determining when an explanation is adequate enough for awarding historicity. Not only is such criteria absent from his book *Resurrecting Jesus* (2005), his lack of criteria for an adequate explanation was reinforced during an 11/17/2007 EPS/AAR panel discussion pertaining to his book in San Diego in which he participated. When Jan van der Watt of the University of Pretoria asked what criteria one may use for determining when a hypothesis is adequate enough for awarding historicity, Allison said he did not have any. This seems to be the sort of haphazardness reflecting personal interests of which McCullagh warns. (At the same event, I asked Allison what actions he takes to minimize his bias during his investigations. He replied that none could be taken to his knowledge. For a few steps suggested by others, see section 1.2.3 above.) Allison sees no theological reason for why a transformed corpse would need to be involved in a post-mortem state. Because of this he does not believe that Jesus was raised bodily. Thus, he allows his theological conviction to drive his historical method and influence his conclusion.

²⁸⁴ An argument to the best explanation may be adequate for justifying singular descriptions about a past person, group, event, or custom. But confidence in its accuracy decreases when broad generalizations are the subjects being investigated (McCullagh [1984], 37-38).

²⁸⁵ McCullagh (1984), 19; Wright (1992), 99ff. McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004) provides a modified list that re-groups his seven criteria from 1984 into five with an additional comment (51-52).

a) *Explanatory Scope*. This criterion looks at the quantity of facts accounted for by a hypothesis. The hypothesis that includes the most relevant data has the greatest explanatory scope.

b) *Explanatory Power*. This criterion looks at the quality of the explanation of the facts. The hypothesis that explains the data with the least amount of effort, vagueness, and ambiguity has greater explanatory power.²⁸⁶ Said another way, the historian does not want to have to push the facts in order make them fit his theory as though he were trying to push a round peg through a square hole. In our study of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus we will notice that some historians use exegesis as a torture chamber where biblical texts and Greek words are stretched until they tell the historian what he wants to hear.²⁸⁷ Moreover, while a degree of vagueness or ambiguity is to be expected given the fragmented data that have come down to us from the past, a strong presence of these traits in a hypothesis will cause it to lack explanatory power, since it fails to *explain*. Historians may use their imaginative powers to reduce the amount of vagueness within a hypothesis, but in doing so there may be a trade-off as will be noted in criterion *d* below.

These first two criteria may be understood using the analogy of completing a jigsaw puzzle. We may imagine two contestants with the same puzzle but who have presented different solutions (hypotheses). In the first puzzle, a number of pieces (historical facts) remain stranded and one or more of the puzzle pieces appears forced. In the second puzzle all of the pieces have been used and fit perfectly. The first puzzle lacks the scope and power enjoyed by the second and, therefore, the second solution would be preferred. Most good historical hypotheses look like a puzzle with some missing pieces. As the number of missing pieces increases, so do the chances that puzzle pieces discovered in the future will change the current puzzle solution (or preferred hypothesis).

c) *Plausibility*. The hypothesis must be implied to a greater degree and by a greater variety of accepted truths (or background knowledge) than other hypotheses.²⁸⁸ A hypothesis that is *implausible* is inferior to one that is neutral in its plausibility (i.e., neither plausible nor implausible) and a hypothesis that scores above neutral in plausibility is inferior to one that scores even higher.²⁸⁹ We may think of a scale where negative ten through negative one represent degrees of implausibility, zero represents neutral, and one through ten represent increasing degrees of plausibility.

d) *Less Ad Hoc*. A hypothesis possesses an *ad hoc* component when it enlists non-evidenced assumptions, that is, it goes beyond what is already known.²⁹⁰ When two or more hypotheses seem equal, usually due to a paucity of data, historians often

²⁸⁶ Wright combines criteria two and three. Listing the requirements of a good hypothesis he writes, "First, it must include the data. The bits and pieces of evidence must be incorporated, without being squeezed out of shape any more than is inevitable" (Wright 1992, 99).

²⁸⁷ See Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), 343.

²⁸⁸ McCullagh (1984), 19; McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004), 51-52; Tucker (2004), 148-49. This appears to be what Wright (1992) has in mind with his third criterion while hinting that illumination—our fifth criterion—is also involved (100-01).

²⁸⁹ See McCullagh (1984) where he distinguishes between a hypothesis that lacks plausibility from one that is implausible (27).

²⁹⁰ R. J. Miller (1992), 11: "a superior hypothesis explains the data with fewer presuppositions which beg relevant questions" (11).

employ a greater amount of imagination in order to account for the available data.²⁹¹ A hypothesis possessing an *ad hoc* component has the opposite problem of one lacking explanatory power. The former goes beyond what the data warrants whereas the latter may not go far enough.

The purpose of this criterion is to flag hypotheses in which the historian appears to be involved in a salvage operation by enlisting assumptions that include data that would otherwise serve to disconfirm it.²⁹² One may sense this occurring when a hypothesis enlists a number of non-evidenced assumptions while another hypothesis can explain the same data without appealing to additional non-evidenced assumptions.

This criterion has also been referred to as *simplicity*.²⁹³ It is important to note that the simplicity refers to fewer presuppositions rather than combined factors, since historical events often result from multiple causes.²⁹⁴

e) *Illumination*. Sometime a hypothesis provides a possible solution to other problems while not confusing other areas held with confidence.²⁹⁵ In historical Jesus research, a hypothesis meeting this criterion will solve questions about Jesus in other areas while not creating confusion in still other areas of Jesus research held with confidence. For example, if a naturalistic explanation employing the social sciences turns out being the best explanation of the known facts pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus, it may shed light on other areas of interest to historians of that period as well as those of others, such as the extent to which psychological conditions may factor into the rapid recovery of a religious movement after the death of its leader. On the other hand, if the data point to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection hypothesis may strengthen the likelihood of the historicity of Jesus' claims to divinity while creating no confusion in areas about Jesus already held with confidence, such as, that he preached about the kingdom of God and frequently spoke in parables, and that he performed deeds others interpreted as miracles, magic, and sorcery. Indeed, as in a number of the sciences, conclusions in one area may have wide-reaching impact on others.

Not all criteria have equal weight. Wright provides an illustration of a paleontologist who attempts to reconstruct a dinosaur from its bones. If she creates a simple reconstruction while omitting a few large bones, she is satisfying the criterion of simplicity at the expense of explanatory scope. However, if another paleontologist attempts a different reconstruction and, while including all the bones, ends up with a dinosaur with seven toes on one foot and eighteen on the other, this is likewise inadequate. Wright says in such a case he would prefer simplicity over greater explanatory scope.²⁹⁶

²⁹¹ Tucker (2004), 142-45, 240.

²⁹² McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004), 52.

²⁹³ Wright (1992), 100-01.

²⁹⁴ McCullagh (1984), 19-20. R. J. Miller (1992) notes that hypotheses proposing multiple causes may often possess greater explanatory scope and explanatory power than hypotheses with a single cause (10-11). I note here that the qualified value I am assigning to simplicity above is a softening or correction from what I previously held in Habermas and Licona (2004), 120-21.

²⁹⁵ Perkins (2007), 60; Wright (1992), 100-01.

²⁹⁶ Wright (1992), 105. Lüdemann (2004) asserts that the best hypotheses are "those that resolve the most (and most important) open questions or existing problems, and provoke the fewest (and weakest) counterarguments" (22). Focusing on the larger narrative of the historical Jesus, Sanders (1985) writes,

McCullagh lists plausibility as the most important criteria followed by explanatory scope and power, followed by less *ad hoc*. We may suppose two hypotheses: A & B. If neither A nor B are implausible (i.e., it is in tension with solid conclusions in other areas), if A has greater scope and power than B, then even if A is more *ad hoc* than B, A is to be preferred. Put another way, if A is more *ad hoc* than B but excels over B in its explanatory scope and explanatory power, it should be preferred over B. However, if A seems incompatible with known facts in other areas (i.e., it fails the criterion of plausibility), even if it has greater explanatory scope and power, it is to be abandoned.²⁹⁷

I will adopt McCullagh's order when later weighing hypotheses with the simple addition that the criterion of illumination carries the least weight. Although a bonus when met, this criterion is unnecessary for confirming the overall probability of a hypothesis.

Historians using arguments to the best explanation should weigh each hypothesis according to how well it meets these five criteria. The hypothesis fulfilling the most criteria, especially the more weighty ones, is to be preferred. The more a hypothesis distances itself ahead of competing hypotheses in fulfilling the criteria, the greater likelihood it has of representing what actually occurred. Hypotheses must likewise be judged by how well they answer disconfirming arguments.

Arguments to the best explanation are guided by inference and can sometimes be superior to being an eyewitness to an event. Testimony to the court does not provide truth but data. The court prefers the way of investigation to the way of belief. Thus, what may be absolutely certain to the witness may become only more or less probable to the court, depending on how well the particulars intended by the witness's testimony correlates with actual knowns. If the court cannot directly appropriate the witness's knowledge, it can nevertheless have the next best thing, which is not belief but inference. In its final state, the inferences of the court may actually be superior in scope, perspective, accuracy, and certainty to the knowledge of any and all witnesses.²⁹⁸

1.3.3. Arguments from Statistical Inference

Arguments from statistical inference are sometimes useful to historians and can be a more reliable tool in the hands of a historian than arguments to the best explanation.²⁹⁹ In order for statistical inferences to yield reliable conclusions, they must take into account all relevant data. I can claim that my twelve-year-old son cannot lift two hundred pounds above his head. But if I add that a bodybuilder would assist my son in lifting the two hundred pounds above his head, this datum changes the outcome completely. In a similar manner, if we *a priori* rule God out of the equation, then we can conclude statistically that the odds of a person returning from the dead are so miniscule that a reasonable person cannot believe that Jesus rose.

"One is looking for a hypothesis which explains more (not everything), which gives a good account (not the only one) of what happened, which fits Jesus realistically into his environment, and which has in view cause and effect" (58).

²⁹⁷ McCullagh (1984), 28.

²⁹⁸ Meyer (1979), 88-92.

²⁹⁹ McCullagh (1984), 45.

However, if we take into consideration the existence of a God who may have reasons for raising Jesus from the dead, the probability that Jesus rose is increased significantly. The prominent then-atheist philosopher Antony Flew agreed: “Certainly given some beliefs about God, the occurrence of the resurrection does become enormously more likely.”³⁰⁰

Philosophers and scientists often employ Bayes’ Theorem for estimating the probability that a condition exists or existed given the extant data. In fact, philosopher Richard Swinburne made a recent attempt to employ Bayes’ Theorem in order to estimate the probability that Jesus rose from the dead.³⁰¹ However, many are doubtful that Bayes’ Theorem can be employed effectively with most historical hypotheses. Statistician David Bartholomew writes that “[t]he great difficulty about applying the theory is that it is often not at all clear what value should be given to the prior probability.”³⁰² McCullagh writes that “virtually no historian has used it and even if any wished to do so, he would probably find it difficult as it requires information which is often hard to obtain” and is often unavailable.³⁰³ Although we will discuss how miracles impact historical investigation in the next chapter, I will note here that it is doubtful that Bayes’ Theorem may be employed for miracle claims. Tucker asserts that “it is unclear if and how [Bayes’ Theorem] can be worked out in practice. In particular historical contexts, when there is sufficient evidence, it is possible to evaluate the prior probability of some particular hypotheses of deception or distortion. But the aggregation of all probabilities requires more evidence than is usually available about particular historical contexts of alleged miracles.”³⁰⁴ Christian philosopher William Lane Craig likewise argues that Bayes’ Theorem cannot be applied to miracle claims such as the resurrection of Jesus, since the background information required is “inscrutable, given that we’re dealing with a free agent.”³⁰⁵ Philosopher Stephen Davis argues that Bayes’ Theorem is “a useful tool in some epistemic situations, but it is a blunt instrument when used in discussions of the resurrection of Jesus. . . . [since] people are obviously going to differ in the values they attach to the priors and likelihoods. There seems to be no objective way of adjudicating such disputes.”³⁰⁶ This limitation is not unique to questions involving a deity. For as McIntyre notes, the free will of the historical agent is one way in which the historical discipline differs from natural science in which natural laws are constant.³⁰⁷

Applied to the resurrection of Jesus, Bayes Theorem can be stated as follows:

³⁰⁰ See Flew’s comments in Miethe, ed. (1987), 39.

³⁰¹ Swinburne (2003). He concluded that the hypothesis that Jesus was resurrected can be held with a confidence of ninety-seven percent (214). This claim has been criticized by atheist philosopher Michael Martin (1998). Christian philosopher Stephen Davis (1999) replied with a critique of Martin’s arguments and concluded that “the probability [that Jesus rose from the dead] is not only greater [than the hypothesis that he did not] but very much greater” (9). The Davis article is available to view online for free at philoonline.org/library/davis_2_1.htm.

³⁰² Bartholomew (2000), 34.

³⁰³ McCullagh (1984), 46-47; 57-58.

³⁰⁴ Tucker (2005), 381.

³⁰⁵ See Craig’s comments in Craig and Ehrman (2006), 32. Also see Davis (*Philo* 2:1), 8 of 11, accessed online (September 7, 2007) at http://www.philoonline.org/library/davis_2_1.htm.

³⁰⁶ Davis (*Philo* 2:1), 8-9 of 11.

³⁰⁷ McIntyre, (2001), 5.

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

R = Resurrection Hypothesis

$\neg R$ = No R Hypothesis (or one might substitute H1 = Natural Hypothesis [e.g., hallucination])

E = Specific Evidence Related to R

B = General Background Knowledge

The above equation reads as follows: The relative probability of the truth of the resurrection hypothesis given the background knowledge and evidence is equal to the numerator divided by the denominator. The numerator is the relative probability that the resurrection occurred given the background knowledge times the relative probability that the evidence we have would exist given the background knowledge and the occurrence of the resurrection. The denominator is the same as the numerator placed in brackets then adding the following equation in brackets: the relative probability that Jesus did not rise from the dead (or the relative probability than an alternate hypothesis is true, such as grief hallucinations) given the background knowledge times the relative probability that the evidence we have would exist given the background knowledge and the non-occurrence of the resurrection (or the occurrence of grief hallucinations). Compressed, Bayes' Theorem may be stated as follows:

$$\frac{X}{X+Y}$$

In order to apply this equation to the probability that Jesus rose from the dead, we would have to know the background knowledge, which includes the probability that God exists combined with the probability that such a God would desire to raise Jesus from the dead. As Craig states, this background knowledge is inscrutable. However, for fun, let us say that it is “as likely as not” that God exists and would want to raise Jesus. This will assign our background knowledge a probability of 50 percent or .5. Many atheists will believe the probability to be much lower and many Christian theists will believe it to be much higher.

$$\Pr (R/.5\&E) = \frac{.5 \times \Pr (E/.5\&R)}{[.5 \times \Pr (E/.5\&R)] + [.5 \times \Pr (E/.5\&\neg R)]}^{308}$$

When our equation is played out, Bayes' Theorem actually shows that the resurrection hypothesis (R) has a greater probability than the position that Jesus did not rise from the dead. (R) wins because the probability of having the specific evidence to be discussed in chapter four is much greater than fifty percent, if Jesus rose from the dead. In the parallel equation, the probability of having the specific evidence discussed in chapter four is less than fifty percent given that Jesus did not rise from the dead, or more specifically the hypothesis that hallucinations account for the post-resurrection appearances. In short, since it is likely that we would have the extant

³⁰⁸ I am indebted to William Lane Craig for his clarification pertaining to plugging in the figures in a personal telephone conversation on September 6, 2007.

data if Jesus rose and unlikely that we would have it if he did not, the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead is more probably true.

But as stated earlier, the background knowledge is difficult to agree upon when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus, since it involves the probability that God exists and that he would want to raise Jesus. In other words, we would have to provide the relative probability that the Judeo-Christian God exists and that he would want to raise Jesus. This becomes very difficult, since a Muslim may change the background knowledge to the relative probability that the Islamic God would want to raise Jesus, which is zero, given the statements in the *Qur'an*.³⁰⁹ Of course if the probability of God's existence were lowered to below .5, this would create an entirely different outcome. Bartholomew notes that two difficulties exist for Bayes' Theorem. First, we can never be certain that our inventory of hypotheses is complete. The second reason provides an advantage to the theist. He illustrates this using the example of a well-attested miracle claim.

Let us now consider this alleged happening in relation to the two following hypotheses: (A) that God exists and has power to act in the world, and (B) that there is no such god. On A the occurrence may be judged to be very probable, even certain, because a god of this kind can presumably do what he pleases. On B it would seem to be very unlikely. In circumstances like this the atheist can never fare better than the theist and will usually do much worse. This makes it all the more necessary for the atheist to insist that the prior is essential for reaching a conclusion since A is so improbable a priori that the higher likelihood is completely swamped. This example shows both the important role of the prior probability and the severe limitations of judgements based only on likelihoods.³¹⁰

Bartholomew follows by acknowledging that for the same reasons "there is no calculus by which we can accumulate evidence and so arrive at a final answer."³¹¹ He then concludes, "The lesson of all this is that though the use of formal probability arguments cannot deliver all that the theory promises that is no reason for ignoring what it can tell us."³¹² So, mathematicians, like historians, find themselves in a quagmire when probability equations are employed: mathematical certainty eludes both. While this may prohibit mathematicians from obtaining absolute knowledge, it does not prohibit them from calculating the likelihood that an event occurred. I would also note that the horizon of the mathematician is equally involved when the issue of background knowledge arises. We may never be able to provide a final and absolute adjudication on the matter, given our present data. However, this does not mean neither has the truth. Both may be confident but at least one is certainly mistaken. Moreover, the inability of the correct historian to convince those whose horizons prevent them from arriving at a correct judgment does not warrant the conclusion that the correct historian cannot know what occurred.

³⁰⁹ Q 4:157-58 states that Jesus did not die on the cross. If he did not die, we cannot speak of a resurrection.

³¹⁰ Bartholomew (1996), 252-53.

³¹¹ Bartholomew (1996), 253.

³¹² Bartholomew (1996), 253.

In most cases where statistical inference arguments are employed, the historian has extensive data whereby he can conclude that X occurs a certain percentage of the time or when A is present, X occurs a certain percentage of the time but when A is absent, X occurs a certain percentage of the time. McCullagh lists the following grades but admits a subjective element:³¹³

extremely probable: in 100-95% of cases
very probable: in 95-80% of cases
quite or fairly probable: in 80-65% of cases
more probable than not: in 65-50% of cases
hardly or scarcely probable: in 50-35% of cases
fairly improbable: in 35-20% of cases
very improbable: in 20-5% of cases
extremely improbable: in 5-0% of cases

As historians, we cannot employ a statistical inference argument in our examination of the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead, since if it occurred, it would be a unique event. However, this cannot be turned against the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus by claiming that the probability of the resurrection of Jesus is “extremely improbable” on the grounds that it is incontrovertibly true that less than (say) five percent of the dead return to life. The advent of the resurrection of Jesus would not only be rare but unique since it could be the resurrection of the Son of God. One could perhaps use statistical inference arguments for Jesus’ death by crucifixion, but not his resurrection. Accordingly, a similarly flawed argument for a positive judgment would be to claim the probability of the resurrection of Jesus is “extremely probable” since it is true that every time an omnipotent God would want to raise someone from the dead, he does. The reason such an argument is flawed is that there is simply not enough background evidence to draw such a conclusion based on mathematical probability. Historians, at least, do not possess this sort of knowledge.

If the historian knows all possible hypotheses that could account for all of the extant data, she may employ a statistical argument that has a reciprocal relationship between the competing hypotheses. For example, let us suppose three hypotheses: A, B, C. Let us further suppose that these exhaust all possible hypotheses. Finally, let us suppose the *a priori* probabilities for A and B are .2 and .2. This leaves a probability of .6 for C. If B were reassessed at .5, then C would have to be recalculated at .3. If C were reassessed at .8, then A and B would have to be recalculated accordingly.³¹⁴ Unfortunately, *all* possible hypotheses are seldom known in historical inquiry and assigning mathematical probabilities to a hypothesis usually involves a great amount of subjectivity in historical inquiry.

To summarize, historians commonly employ arguments to the best explanation and arguments from statistical inference.³¹⁵ Historians cannot prove that a best explanation or a statistically most probable explanation is what actually occurred. However, these approaches have been shown to work well in instances when a degree of verification is possible. Historians are free to adjudicate on a matter and judge that an event or condition occurred. However, the judgment must always be held as

³¹³ McCullagh (1984), 52.

³¹⁴ McCullagh (1984), 68.

³¹⁵ McCullagh (1984), 74.

provisional. It is not possible to employ a statistical inference argument pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus, since the event of God raising someone from the dead would be unique and, thus, our pool of data is insufficient for calculating probabilities. Moreover, the background evidence required for completing an estimation of the probabilities is at best almost inscrutable, since even if God exists there is no way for historians to know whether he would want to raise Jesus. Since historians largely shy away from statistical inference in general, I will employ an argument to the best explanation when analyzing what happened to Jesus.

1.3.4. Spectrum of Historical Certainty

Not all historical descriptions can be held with the same degree of historical certainty. Some hypotheses are supported by stronger evidence than others. For example, we can hold that the American Civil War occurred with far greater certainty than what we may have for the Trojan War. Pertaining to Jesus, that he believed he was God's eschatological agent may be held with greater confidence than that he believed he was divine. Many historians have recognized degrees of historical confidence that may be viewed along a 'spectrum of historical certainty.'³¹⁶

a) N. T. Wright: "I use the word 'probable' in the common-sense historians' way, not in the highly problematic philosophers' way . . . ; that is to say, as a way of indicating that the historical evidence, while comparatively rarely permitting a conclusion of 'certain', can acknowledge a scale from, say, 'extremely likely', through 'possible', 'plausible' and 'probable', to 'highly probable'."³¹⁷

b) John P. Meier: "I will content myself with such general judgments as 'very probable,' 'more probable,' 'less probable,' 'unlikely,' etc."³¹⁸

c) James D. G. Dunn: "almost certain (never simply 'certain'), very probable, probable, likely, possible, and so on. In historical scholarship the judgment 'probable' is a very positive verdict."³¹⁹

d) Ben F. Meyer: "there should be three columns for judgments on historicity (historical, non-historical, and question-mark)."³²⁰

e) Robert J. Miller: "'very probable' to 'somewhat probable' to 'somewhat improbable' to 'very improbable' to 'extremely doubtful.' And beyond even 'extremely doubtful' there is [sic.] huge number of statements, limited only by the imagination, that are certainly false."³²¹

f) Gerald O'Collins: utterly certain, highly probable, solidly probable, probable, various shades of possibilities, genuinely indeterminate. O'Collins contends that the historian is warranted in awarding historicity when a hypothesis is solidly probable.³²²

³¹⁶ In McCullagh (*The Logic of History*, 2004), he states that there are degrees of credibility (12).

³¹⁷ Wright (2003), 687.

³¹⁸ Meier (1991), 33.

³¹⁹ Dunn (2003), 103.

³²⁰ Meyer (1989), 135.

³²¹ R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008), 11.

³²² O'Collins (2003), 36.

g) Graham H. Twelftree: “A position is demonstrated, when the reasons for accepting it ‘significantly’ outweigh the reasons for not accepting it. . . . This leaves a large gray area where positions are held to be ‘likely’ or ‘probable.’”³²³ For Twelftree, a position on the positive side of the spectrum of historical certainty is “likely,” “probable” (with shades of each), or “historical.” Elsewhere, he seems to include “uncertain” and possibly “historicity denied,” although he does not use these terms.³²⁴

h) A. J. M. Wedderburn: “[C]ertainly true” means beyond all reasonable doubt or that “the level of probability has become so high that the falsehood of the assertion is highly improbable. . . . More often . . . we will be left with a choice between verdicts of ‘more probable’, ‘less probable’ and ‘improbable.’”³²⁵

i) Paula Fredriksen: Acknowledges “historical bedrock, facts known past doubting,”³²⁶ then forms her reconstruction using those facts as anchors, implying that the other facts are not so strong.³²⁷

j) Jesus Seminar: *The Five Gospels* color codes the sayings of Jesus: black (0-25% or he did not say this), gray (26-50% or the ideas rather than the words are close to his own), pink (51-75% or he probably said something like this), red (76-100% or he undoubtedly said this or something like it).³²⁸

k) Rex Martin: Speaks of increasing confidence of a “factual statement” being supported-to-well-supported by the available evidence, to being sound or true, to being sound or true and its denial or contradiction must necessarily be false.³²⁹

l) Dale Allison: Speaks of a scale of may have happened, “plausible but uncertain,” “unlikely but still possible,” “We just do not know.”³³⁰

m) Luke Timothy Johnson: Lists “very high level of probability,” “slightly less probability,” “fairly high degree of historical probability,” “some substantial level of probability.”³³¹

³²³ Twelftree (1999), 248, who admits to being influenced by R. J. Miller (1992), 5-30.

³²⁴ Twelftree (1999) lists twenty-two miracles of Jesus that he claims “can be judged with high confidence to reflect an event or events most likely in the life of the historical Jesus” and seven additional miracles and writes “the nature of historical research is such that these stories cannot, based on available data, be said with the same degree of certainty to reflect (or, indeed, not to reflect) an event in the life of the historical Jesus. Intellectual humility is required here.” Regarding the latter seven, Twelftree may either deny historicity or maintain a position of agnosticism (328-29), which shows a neutral and possibly a negative side to his spectrum.

³²⁵ Wedderburn (1999), 4-5.

³²⁶ Fredriksen (1999), 264.

³²⁷ Fredriksen (1999), 7: “We have facts . . . Facts are always subject to interpretation—that’s part of the fun—but they also exist as fixed points in our investigation. Any explanation, any reconstruction of Jesus’ mission and message must speak adequately to what we *know* to have been the case. If it cannot, then no matter how elegant an application of interesting methods or of how rousing and appealing its moral message, that reconstruction fails as history.”

³²⁸ Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (1997), 36-37.

³²⁹ Rex Martin (2005), 142.

³³⁰ Allison (*Resurrecting Jesus*, 2005), 338.

³³¹ L. T. Johnson (1996), 123.

n) C. Behan McCullagh: “extremely improbable,” “very improbable,” “fairly improbable,” “hardly or scarcely probable,” “more probable than not,” “quite or fairly probable,” “very probable,” “extremely probable.”³³²

For purposes of our inquiry, I will use a spectrum of historical certainty with the following: certainly not historical, very doubtful, quite doubtful, somewhat doubtful, indeterminate (neither improbable nor probable, possible, plausible), somewhat certain (more probable than not), quite certain, very certain (very probably true), certainly historical.

Because of the uncertainty of knowledge in general and historical knowledge in particular, a requirement of “incontrovertible” proof is both unattainable and an unreasonable expectation. We regularly make decisions based on probabilities in most areas of our lives. If we cannot obtain absolute certainty in reference to any type of knowledge, we should not expect a burden of proof that requires absolute certainty before awarding historicity. This raises the question concerning when historians are justified in concluding that their preferred hypotheses are what actually occurred. Is there a point along our spectrum of historical certainty that may be regarded as a synonym for “historical”?

Many times in historical research, the data is so fragmented that historians are only warranted in judging that their hypotheses are “plausible,” in other words, one can imagine without too much of a stretch that it could have happened this way.³³³ McCullagh, Miller, and Twelftree believe that a historical description is very probably true when it is strongly supported and much superior to competing hypotheses or when the reasons for accepting it significantly outweigh the reasons for rejecting it.³³⁴ In other words, it outdistances competing hypotheses by a significant margin and does a good job at explaining counter-arguments. We will place this around the “quite certain” to “very certain” points on our spectrum. This also provides us criteria for something to be regarded as “historical”: (1) The hypothesis must be strongly supported and much superior to competing hypotheses and/or (2) The reasons for accepting a hypothesis must significantly outweigh the reasons for rejecting it.³³⁵ O’Collins holds that “[t]here is a range of historical conclusions which responsible scholars can firmly hold, even when they do not reach the status of utter certainty. They can make solidly probable cases and reach firm conclusions, without pretending

³³² McCullagh (1984), 52.

³³³ McCullagh (“What Do Historians Argue About?” 2004): Interpretations lacking “overwhelming support” should be judged plausible, not necessarily credible, and fair only relative to the evidence (38).

³³⁴ McCullagh (1984), 63, 103; McCullagh (*The Truth of History*, 1998), 23; R. J. Miller (1992), 24; Twelftree (1999), 248.

³³⁵ This is very similar to reaching verdicts in the field of law. Annette Gordon-Reed (1997), a law professor at New York Law School explains: “Demanding that individual items of evidence amount to proof sets a standard that can only be met in the rarest of circumstances, either in history or in the law. . . . The evidence must be considered as a whole before a realistic and fair assessment of the possible truth of this story can be made. . . . To deal with the concern that accusations are easily made (whether in a legal or nonlegal context), the burden of proof is normally allocated to the accuser. The accuser can meet the burden by offering a certain quantum of evidence, which varies depending upon the nature of the accusation, for example—in the context of legal disputes—*proof beyond a reasonable doubt for criminal charges or, for civil charges, proof that makes the truth of an accusation more probable than not*” (xix-xx, ital. mine). Of course, it may be noted that “beyond a reasonable doubt” is subjective and fuzzy. See Carmy (2008), 46.

to enjoy the complete certainty which would discount even the possibility that further evidence might come to light and disprove their conclusions.”³³⁶ O’Collins’s “solidly probable” is the equivalent of my “quite certain.” Dunn asserts that historians are attempting to construct a hypothesis that is a reasonably close approximation of the actual event.

Where the data are abundant and consistent, the responsible historian may be confident of achieving a reasonably close approximation. . . . the critical scholar learns to make carefully graded judgments which reflect the quality of the data—almost certain (never simply ‘certain’), very probable, probable, likely, possible, and so on. In historical scholarship the judgment ‘probable’ is a very positive verdict. And given that more data may always emerge . . . any judgment will have to be provisional, always subject to the revision necessitated by new evidence or by new ways of evaluating the old evidence.³³⁷

On Dunn’s spectrum, “probable” seems to hold an equivalent on my spectrum somewhere between “somewhat certain” and “quite certain.” He holds that historians are justified in awarding “historical” to their preferred hypotheses if they are “probable” with the qualification that it is provisional.³³⁸ Miller likewise asserts that “‘probably true’ is an acceptable outcome.”³³⁹ Meyer notes that historians must know the strengths and weaknesses of their hypotheses. Weaknesses may include a paucity of data, that secondary but relevant questions remain, or a failure of the hypothesis to fulfill the five criteria in arguments to the best explanation. When no unknown relevant conditions exist the hypothesis is verified.³⁴⁰

I propose that historians may claim to know the past, at least the particular question under their investigation, when their preferred hypothesis may be placed on the spectrum of historical certainty at or above a half-step under “quite certain.” In proposing this, I am not attempting to find a compromise between what some historians think is a warrant. Rather, I believe the answer can lie somewhere between the two points and can vary depending on the relationship between the strength of the arguments for a particular hypothesis and the degree of its superiority over competing hypotheses. It is doubtful that historians would disagree with Dunn’s statement that “probable” is a very positive verdict, given the paucity of data that is often available. Historians would like to have more data, but they work with what is available. If a hypothesis deemed “probable” distances itself by a respectable margin from competing hypotheses, this may serve as a compensating factor so that historians need not pause at concluding that their preferred hypothesis is historical, so long as it is held as provisional.

Although seldom possible for historical descriptions of antiquity, historians dream of having a hypothesis that may be judged “very certain.” A hypothesis may be regarded as “very certain” if it fulfills all five criteria for an argument to the best explanation and has a respectable distance between it and competing hypotheses. A

³³⁶ O’Collins (2003), 36.

³³⁷ Dunn (2003), 103.

³³⁸ Dunn kindly confirmed my interpretation of his statements in an email dated May 27, 2005.

³³⁹ R. J. Miller in Scott, ed. (2008), 9.

³⁴⁰ Meyer (1979), 88-92.

judgment of “certain” should be reserved for descriptions of more contemporary events, such as “Hitler led the Holocaust.” The evidence for this hypothesis is so strong and the distance between this hypothesis and competing ones is so great that the hypothesis is virtually incontrovertible. It is noteworthy, however, that Holocaust deniers exist. Thus, historians should never wait for absolute consensus. Indeed, as we observed, consensus in historical judgments is rare.

How do historians determine where to place various hypotheses on the spectrum of historical certainty? We are again at the mercy of the subjectivity of the individual historian. Therefore, the historian should provide reasons open to public examination why he has placed his preferred hypothesis in the particular spot. Moreover, two prominent factors should be taken into account: (1) how well the hypothesis meets the five criteria for an argument to the best explanation and (2) how much distance exists between the preferred hypothesis and competing hypotheses that trail it in probability.

1.3.5. Summary

We have seen that historians have not reached a consensus pertaining to how historians come to know the past. Indeed, the postmodernist debate concerning whether anything of the past can be known, while not widely embraced, has benefited realist historians by noting a number of factors that render all historical descriptions as provisional. These factors include the constraints of language, that we have access to the past only indirectly through inference (i.e., there is no direct interaction with the past), that all data and descriptions are incomplete, and that they have been interpreted by the historian’s horizon. As a result, the idea that historians can relate to the “raw” and “uninterpreted” data with complete objectivity has been abandoned. While postmodern historians have referred to “the death of history,” realist historians, which are by far the majority, feel justified in proceeding, though with caution. If history is truly dead, there are no means by which historians can distinguish fact from fiction and no way of weighing the plausibility of numerous hypotheses. Indeed, there are other consequences that are difficult for postmodernists to live with if their view of knowing the past is correct, such as a collapse of the legal system. Moreover, the arguments of postmodern historians are often self-refuting since they involve reasons for why we can *know* that we cannot know. Problems may still lie in a number of factors that may reduce historical confidence, such as a paucity of data. But there are no epistemic reasons that prohibit historians from proceeding with their inquiries. Accordingly, postmodern historians have provided valuable insights into the nature of knowing, even if in the judgment of the majority they have gone too far in their conclusions.

We next discussed the nature of truth. The two major theories of truth are *correspondence* and *coherence*. The former is more attractive than the latter, since there may be a number of hypotheses explaining the data that are coherent. Yet, all cannot be true. Thus, a hypothesis may be negated for not passing a criterion of coherence. But coherence does not provide the best measurement for truth. The problem with Correspondence Theory is that there is no way of verifying that our senses provide us with an accurate depiction of reality. Nevertheless, all of us assume that the depiction they provide is adequate. Otherwise, we would not bother looking both ways before crossing the street, since our perceptions of whether a large truck is approaching could just as easily be mistaken. Another challenge is that data and facts

are laden with interpretation that is a result of the horizons of historians. But this does not impact the nature of truth itself; only our ability to know it. Thus, my contention is that truth should be viewed in a correspondence sense. Our historical descriptions are incomplete, imperfect, and may not be a clear and precise picture of what actually occurred. However, they may be adequate and can be held with reasonable certainty.

The problem of horizon is huge and is responsible more than any other factor for the variety of historical descriptions attempting to answer the same question. The historian's horizon results from the sum of his knowledge, education, experience, cultural conditioning, beliefs, preferences, presuppositions, and worldview. Horizons are like eyeglasses and the historian sees everything through them. All of the factors just mentioned color the lenses of the eyeglasses. This may allow certain historians to see things more clearly, like certain shades allow the viewer to eliminate reflections on water and see fish in a lake. On the other hand, it may prevent other historians from seeing things clearly, as though there is a dark shade on everything and prevents them from seeing certain objects. The problem of horizon will be ever present when examining the data related to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.

Who bears the burden of proof? We observed there are three possibilities: credulity, skepticism, and neutrality. Methodical credulity is the preferred method when the intention and method of the author is clear. Unfortunately, most of the time clarity in these areas is absent. In the case of the Gospels, recent arguments have established that they are of the genre of Greco-Roman biography. Although *bioi* most often took historical matters seriously, biographers varied greatly in the amount of liberty they took, thereby limiting the benefit of knowing the genre of the Gospels. The problem with methodical skepticism is that, when applied across the board to ancient texts, our knowledge of history is reduced to an amount the majority of historians would find unacceptable. Methodical neutrality places the burden on the historian providing the hypothesis. The skeptic is free to criticize the hypothesis, but the moment he provides a competing hypothesis, he is responsible for defending it and the most plausible explanation prevails. In the next chapter we will discuss how the introduction of miracle into the equation impacts the burden of proof. In my investigation of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, I will adopt methodical neutrality.

The question concerning whether it is possible for historians to transcend their horizons enough to obtain adequate objectivity may be answered in the affirmative. Certainly all historians do not achieve this degree of objectivity all of the time but noteworthy examples demonstrate that adequate objectivity is possible. We looked at six criteria that may serve to assist historians in transcending their horizons: method, peer pressure, submitting ideas to unsympathetic experts, making one's horizon and method public, detachment from bias as much as possible, and accounting for the relevant historical bedrock. These provide speed bumps at which the historian should pause for reflection and, thereby, make it more difficult to travel the road of subjectivity unhindered.

We then examined the problem of certainty. Historians cannot obtain absolute certainty for many of the same reasons that absolute certainty always eludes us in most areas. The wise person is rarely hindered by her inability to possess absolute certainty. Instead, she acts upon probabilities. This is the way we live our lives and we have found that this principle appears to work rather well in leading us to correct

assessments. Thus, when historians claim that something occurred, they are saying, “Given the available data, the best explanation indicates that we are warranted in having a reasonable degree of certainty that x occurred and that it appears more certain at the moment than competing hypotheses. Accordingly, we have a rational basis for believing it. However, our conclusion is subject to revision or abandonment, since new data may surface in the future showing that things may have happened differently than presently proposed.”

We then moved on to method. We started by looking at two methods commonly employed by historians for adjudicating between competing hypotheses. The first is an argument to the best explanation. We noted five criteria commonly employed for determining the strength of a hypothesis: explanatory scope, explanatory power, plausibility, less *ad hoc*, and illumination. The preferred hypothesis should fulfill the criteria better than competing hypotheses. A second method involves arguments from statistical inference. We looked at two ways of doing this. Bayes’ Theorem calculates the relative probability of the truth of a hypothesis given the background knowledge and the existence of the relevant evidence. We observed that we will not be able to use Bayes’ Theorem for weighing hypotheses pertaining to Jesus’ fate, since the background knowledge required is unavailable. For this reason few historians use Bayes’ Theorem. Arguments from statistical inference may be used when sufficient data is available to demonstrate that something occurs with a certain frequency. That frequency, if qualified properly, may represent the statistical probability that a particular event occurred. Since the resurrection of Jesus would be a unique event, we cannot use this form of statistical inference either. There is an extremely low probability of someone rising from the dead by natural causes. However, if Jesus rose from the dead, it is doubtful that it was the result of natural causes and there is no way of calculating the probability that God would want to raise Jesus from the dead. In light of this, we will use an argument to the best explanation when considering various hypotheses related to Jesus’ fate.

When is the historian warranted in awarding a judgment of “historical” to a hypothesis? Many historians have a spectrum of historical certainty that awards degrees of historical confidence to hypotheses. The spectrum I will use in chapter five where I weigh hypotheses is as follows: certainly not historical, very doubtful, quite doubtful, somewhat doubtful, indeterminate, somewhat certain, quite certain, very certain, certainly historical. Historians award historicity when a hypothesis is placed on the spectrum somewhere above “somewhat certain.” The place of a hypothesis on the spectrum is determined by how well it meets the five criteria for the best explanation, how much distance it enjoys in its superiority to competing hypotheses, and how effectively it addresses counterarguments.

1.3.6. Conclusions

My research began with the objective of making a contribution toward solving the problem concerning the numerous and conflicting conclusions pertaining to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. I set out to explore the possibility that biblical scholars and philosophers are ill-equipped to complete an adequate investigation on the matter. The proper approach, I thought, is to learn how professional historians outside of the community of religious scholars conduct historical inquiries and then apply such an approach to answering the question, “Did Jesus rise from the dead?”

To my surprise, I discovered that most historians are barely better equipped to answer this question than are biblical scholars and philosophers. Historians outside of the community of biblical scholars are struggling with the same epistemological and methodological questions asked by biblical scholars and philosophers of history, although I hasten to add that it is far more common for historians to give serious attention to these matters than biblical scholars. But the ongoing debates are nowhere near resolution.³⁴¹

Most scholars do not acknowledge the problem of horizon, much less take precautions for minimizing the negative impact it may have on their investigations. This is dangerous and it thwarts a proper practice of history. For when bias is left unchecked and method is followed haphazardly, the results are a practice of history that is a sort of fantasy world where undisciplined imagination reigns, responsible method is consigned to lower-class housing and largely ignored, and exegesis serves as a torture chamber where the historian stretches biblical texts and the meaning of words until they tell him what he wants to hear.

This journey has been of immense assistance for an investigation pertaining to the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. I am aware of the limitations intrinsic to any historical inquiry. I have established criteria which I will employ in weighing hypotheses. I understand that the horizons of historians play a huge part in every historical inquiry and have suggested procedures for assisting historians in the minimizing of the negative impact of horizon.

1.3.7. Confessions

One of the procedures I suggested for managing one's horizon is to be public with one's method and personal biases. I have already discussed the former and I think this is an appropriate place to address the latter. I was brought up in a conservative Christian home and made a profession of Christian faith at the age of ten. I have never experienced any inclinations toward atheism or deism. While I believe that the occasional feelings I have experienced of closeness with God may be authentic, I am aware that they may also be the result of long-term conditioning and expectations. However, there are also external circumstances that have led me to maintain a theistic worldview.

When I was a teenager—I am forty-six as I write—my father had a part-time ministry of writing and speaking that focused on the fraternal order of Freemasonry. His basic message was that Christians should not be involved in the Masonic Lodge because many of its teachings are incompatible with biblical teachings and its founders relied heavily on occultic practices. At that time I had no interest in theological matters or in the ministry activities of my father. Nevertheless, some events occurred that convinced me of the truth behind at least some of what my father was claiming. On many occasions prior to his seminars or radio interviews, paranormal phenomena would occur in our home. These experiences could be quite frightening. While alone one evening, my sister witnessed a bath towel twirling in the air with no one holding it. It frightened her so much that she called the police and ran out of the house. My mother was once awakened in the middle of the night and turned to see a large and

³⁴¹ Gilderhus (2007), 74.

very dark figure standing close by, looking at her. She prayed quickly that it would depart and it did. My father usually awoke at five o'clock in the morning and went to the living room of our home where he would spend an hour in Bible study and prayer. On numerous occasions he reported that when he would pray, he would hear systematic footsteps walking toward him that would stop when in front of him. Sometimes the footsteps would be accompanied by the additional sound of a chain dragging.

For myself, there were countless times that I thought that I sensed the presence of something evil in the room. It was not concrete like those experiences of my parents and oldest sister and I was always aware that my being on the alert may have created an expectation and the feeling itself. However, I had two experiences that were of a more concrete nature. The first occurred while I was in high school. I usually went to bed around 10:30pm. Mine was the smallest bedroom and the door did not fit properly. In order to close it completely, I had to press down on the door handle and make a deliberate effort to push it shut. There could be no quiet entry or exit. One evening I excused myself from my parents and two sisters who were watching television and went to bed at the normal time. I closed my door completely and proceeded with my ritual of reading a chapter in the Bible, turning the light off, and praying for approximately five minutes before falling asleep. Shortly into my prayer, I had the clear perception that something of adult size and weight sat down on the bed next to me. I felt that portion of the mattress compress. Too frightened to open my eyes for fear of what I might see, I uttered "In the name of Jesus I order you to leave," after which the mattress returned to its original shape. Skeptics will no doubt think that I was probably dreaming or experiencing a sort of waking hallucination. While I cannot rule out either of those options, to my knowledge I have never experienced a hallucination otherwise nor have I confused a dream with reality. And I am strongly convinced to this day that my experience was neither a dream nor a hallucination.

On the second occasion, I was a college student, at home on a semester break. It was my custom to go out at night to a nearby ball field where I would be alone and could pray in solitude. There was a large grocery store across the street and the lighted parking lot provided enough lighting for me to see where I was walking. One evening while on the field I felt particularly in the mood to worship. I lay on the ground and sang a few hymns of praise. At one point, I heard systematic footsteps in the distance walking in my direction. This did not alarm me, since people occasionally walked their dog in the adjacent field or would come out for a jog. However, when I sensed that the footsteps continued in my direction, I looked up. The sound ceased. Looking around I saw no one. Thinking the sound may have been caused by the wind, I returned to prayer and worship. As soon as I did, the sound of the footsteps resumed. After a few moments, I looked up only once again only for the sound to stop. I did this one or two more times. On the final time when I resumed praying the footsteps began running toward me and at that point I got up in fear and ran home. Both of these events occurred 25-30 years ago and I realize that my recollection of the details may not be completely accurate. However, they were unpleasant experiences that I will never forget. I have since discovered that numerous people, including a few close friends, have had similar and even much more frightening experiences. My family and I interpreted our experiences of the paranormal as demonic. While this interpretation may or may not be accurate, for me they provide a serious challenge to metaphysical naturalism.

Answered prayer has likewise contributed to my adherence to theism. I acknowledge that most of my answered prayers may be explained by coincidence. When I was offered the job I desired, was it an answer to prayer or because I was the most qualified applicant? I may never know. However, there are a few answered prayers that stand out to me. I have had friends and personal acquaintances who have more impressive examples. But here I will provide two first-hand reports.

During a summer break while in graduate school, I was with my girlfriend one evening when, around nine or ten o'clock, she asked me to pray for her mother who had been sick. We prayed for her that very moment. Then my girlfriend left for her ten-minute drive home. The next day when we spoke, she shared that when she arrived home, she asked her mother how she was feeling. It was more of a courtesy question than one of expectation. To her surprise, her mother answered that she had been feeling terrible until about ten minutes prior when, for no reason known to her, she began feeling as though her health had been restored.

On the other occasion, I was serving as a guest speaker for a regional denominational church retreat for high-school students. About ten minutes prior to speaking on a Saturday morning, a youth leader directed my attention to a student named Amber who appeared to be weeping in the hallway. Apparently, she had just been informed that her grandfather who had undergone heart surgery the previous day had now turned for the worse and was expected to die at any moment. A youth leader asked if I would be willing to speak with her. I agreed and immediately went to her. We spoke for a few moments and then I prayed for her grandfather. Later that afternoon I was taking a walk through the grounds and passed Amber and three or four of her male friends who were walking in the opposite direction. I asked if she had an update on her grandfather's condition. She did not and so I asked if she and her friends would be interested in praying for him once again. They all looked at one another with some trepidation, but they did agree. We sat down at that very spot and all of us prayed for Amber's grandfather. I believe that it was less than two hours later when an elated Amber ran up to me, saying that she had been looking for me. Her grandfather had just called her and asked if she had been praying for him. He explained that at a specific time he had felt something come over his body and heal him. The surprised physicians had then informed him shortly thereafter that it appeared that he was going to be fine. She ascertained that he had experienced this healing very close to the precise moment our group had prayed. Was this the combination of an anomaly and coincidental timing? Perhaps. But given a collection of what I regard as legitimate experiences of the paranormal, I believe I am justified in concluding that some sort of supernatural being answered our prayers and healed Amber's grandfather. Experiences of the paranormal and answered prayer may serve as evidence that reality is quite more complex than atheism and deism normally allow.³⁴²

My desire is for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus to be confirmed, since it would provide further confirmation of my Christian beliefs. For me, if the resurrection of Jesus were ever disproved, I would feel compelled to abandon my Christian faith and remain a theist with no commitments to a particular view. I confess that my previous research was conducted more in the interest of confirming

³⁴² See chapter 2, note 84.

my faith and for use in apologetic presentations than being an open investigation where I would follow the evidence. As a result of my discussion of horizon, I am aware of the frustrating influence horizon brings to any investigation and I am not naïve to think myself exempt.

During the past three years, I have attempted to divest myself of preconditioning and have worked toward experiencing empathy when reading the works of those with whom I do not agree. I have frequently asked God for his patience and guidance as I have wrestled through the issues. I have been able to experience what I believe was a neutral position for a number of brief periods. During these, I have been so uncertain of what I believe in terms of Jesus' resurrection that I prayed for God's guidance and continued patience if the Christianity I was now doubting is true. I was walking on a balance beam and could have tipped toward either side. However, I also confess that each of those occasions of neutrality did not continue for longer than two months and that it was not usually reasoning that brought me out of them—since I was saving the weighing of hypotheses for the final chapter—but instead it was a lack of conscious and sustained efforts on my part to be in as close to a neutral position as possible. Consequently, I experienced a return to my default position of belief. Still, although I am aware that I cannot overcome my personal bias, I maintain that I can be adequately objective and that my present research is, to the best of my knowledge, an honest investigation of the data.

I have written and published three books contending for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus and have defended that position in numerous public debates with opponents such as Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman. Given my familiarity with the arguments for and against the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, I am doubtful that I will conclude that the resurrection of Jesus did not occur. However, I believe myself very open to the possibility that the historical evidence for the event is not strong enough to place the resurrection hypothesis far enough along on my spectrum of historical certainty to warrant a conclusion of “historical.”

Because of the position I have taken in previous work, I would experience a bit of personal embarrassment if I were to arrive at the more modest conclusion of a historical question mark. I would also most likely disappoint two scholars who have not only been very influential in my life but have also become close friends: Gary Habermas and William Lane Craig. Even given all this, I am convinced that my interest in truth supersedes my fear of embarrassment and disappointment. If the resurrection of Jesus could not be confirmed historically, my specifically Christian faith could still survive. But a disconfirmation of the resurrection would lead me to abandon it.

I presently enjoy a position of national leadership within the largest protestant denomination in North America, a position for which I carry influence, am paid fairly, and through which I find much satisfaction. I am aware that should my research lead me to the conclusion that Jesus did not rise from the dead I would be dismissed from my position and my employment would be terminated. But, should that occur, there is a good chance I could then make a small fortune writing books that challenge the traditional view of Christianity. I would not even need my present job! More seriously, there are other factors that push me toward objectivity. I am wrestling with this topic because I am committed to seeking, finding, and following truth. At the

moment I am quite persuaded by the scientific and philosophical evidence that some sort of Supreme Being exists who is responsible for the creation of the universe and life itself. Thus, I would still hold to the existence of God if I concluded that Jesus did not rise from the dead. And I am much more interested in pleasing the true God than I am in hanging onto my job.

All historians of Jesus have something on the line in this discussion. Now that I have reported my experiences and laid bare my hopes, readers may assess the following discussion in terms of my approach and whether it was created, consciously or unconsciously, to achieve the results I desire rather than being a genuine attempt to conduct an objective historical investigation. This is important, since there is much dispute over the historical value of a number of the sources we are about to survey.