The Resurrection of the Messianic Prophet

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Abstract: This article aims to provide an *a posteriori* argument for the veracity of the Christian conception of the Abrahamic religion that centres on God's action of sending a divine and atoning prophet—the 'Messianic Prophet'—into the world, who we can identify as the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This specific argument will be presented through Richard Swinburne's (modified) explanatory framework, which focuses on assessing the prior and posterior evidence in support of this identification. This, however, will be done in light of the work of Historical Jesus and NT scholars John P. Meier, N.T. Wright, Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado—which, in combination, will provide a means to ward off two important objections against Swinburne's methodology, and ultimately allow one to establish the veracity of the 'Christian Position', on firm historical grounds.

Keywords: Historical Jesus; Incarnation; Atonement; Resurrection; A Posteriori

1. Introduction

1.1 The Nature of the Christian Position

According to the major Abrahamic religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God has intervened in our spatiotemporal reality in a particular manner that distinguishes this group of faiths from the other world religions. More specifically, the Abrahamic religions (hereafter, ARs)—understood to be the specific world religions that take the prophet Abraham (Hebrew: אַבְרָהָם and Arabic: ابراهيم) as the forefather of their religion—affirm a specific conception of God's spatiotemporal intervention, which can be stated as follows:

(1) (Abrahamic Religion)
- (i) *Intervention*: God has intervened in our spatiotemporal reality in a 'mediated' manner through the use of prophets.
- (ii) *Foundational*: Amongst these prophets, God has sent a foundational prophet with a specific propositional revelation that is to be communicated to others.

When examining global religious traditions, non-Abrahamic faiths, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism, offer different interpretations of the way in which ultimate reality interacts with the world. Traditional Buddhism, for instance, does not recognise the existence of a deity, while mainstream Hinduism conceives of God's intervention through Avatars. Sikhism believes this intervention is through Gurus, with their eternal scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, being the ultimate Guru. Contrastingly, the ARs emphasise God's intervention through 'prophets', considered as authoritative representatives of God. These prophets were entrusted with relaying divine revelation to specific communities and humanity at large, thus unveiling God's intentions. Within ARs, Islam posits that prophets were sent to every global community, Judaism and Christianity, conversely, suggest a more restrictive mission for the prophets of God, focusing mainly on the region of Israel. Additionally, these ARs affirm the fact of God having sent (what we can term) a foundational prophet—an individual that has

fulfilled the role of communicating God's propositional revelation and has played a foundational role in establishing a specific religious creed and community. Hence, first, for Judaism, this individual is identified as Moses (Hebrew: Moshe (מֹשֶׁה)), who fulfilled the role of communicating the Torah (i.e., the Mosaic Law), and played the foundational role of establishing the Judaic creed and Jewish community. Second, for Christianity, this individual is Jesus of Nazareth (known as Jesus Christ: the 'anointed one'), who fulfilled the role of communicating the Gospel (i.e., the message of the kingdom of God), and played the foundational role of establishing the Christian creed and community. Third, for Islam, this individual is Muhammad (ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim), who fulfilled the role of communicating the Qur'an (i.e., the literal word of Allāh), and played the foundational role of establishing the Islamic creed and community. Each of the foundational prophets of the ARs fulfils a unique role; however, Christianity, in particular, conceives of this uniqueness not only in that of Jesus of Nazareth (hereafter, Christ), having been tasked with the role by God of communicating his propositional revelation, but also in him *existing* and *acting* in a *unique way*. That is, Christians affirm the fact, as taught by the Christian Creed, of God having intervened in human history by sending his 'Son', the second person of the Trinity who, existing eternally and consubstantially with God, became a human (i.e. incarnate) being—referred to as the person of Christ—in order to provide an atonement (i.e. a means for humans and God to be reconciled). Christ is thus conceived of by Christians to not be a *mere prophet* (i.e. merely an authoritative representative of God who communicates his propositional revelation) but a *divine* and *atoning prophet*—where his divinity is that of him possessing the *same* divine nature as God (i.e. Christ is *homoousious* with God), and thus he is a single person (*hypostasis*) that has two *distinct* yet *united* natures (*physes*): a divine and human nature. Moreover, his atoning action is that of him providing a means of atonement by living a life that—when correctly appropriated by others—functions as the sole means of reconciliation between God and humans. In light of these two teachings—which have been termed the 'doctrine of the incarnation' and the 'doctrine of the atonement'—we can thus understand Christians to affirm a more specific version (or extension) of our previously adduced statement of (1), which we can now state succinctly as follows:

(2) (Abrahamic Religion*)
- (i) *Intervention*: God has intervened in our spatiotemporal reality in a 'mediated' manner through the use of prophets.
- (ii) *Foundational*: Amongst these prophets, God has sent the messianic prophet, Christ, with a specific propositional revelation that is to be communicated to others, and is tasked with providing a means of atonement that can reconcile humans with God.

This conception of the nature of the foundational prophet—which we can term the 'Christian Position'—posits the fact of Christ being the 'messiah' (Hebrew: māšīaḥ (מָשִׁיחַ) 'the anointed one') and 'prophet' sent by God, who is to be conceived of as a divine and human person, that has fulfilled the unique role of providing a means of atonement—we can refer to him as the 'messianic divine and atoning prophet'—'messianic prophet' for short.[1] This is (plausibly) the

[1] For ease of writing and reference we will refer to Jesus throughout as the 'messianic prophet'; however, this also includes that of his divinity and atoning work (and thus the full phrase, as noted in the text, for Jesus is 'the messianic divine and atoning prophet'). Furthermore, though Jesus is taken by Christians to be the messianic prophet, this does not mean that he must be *the final prophet*. That is, I leave it open here whether there can be further individuals who fulfil the role of a prophet subsequent to him, yet would not be classed as the messiah, be divine or provide an atonement.

primary distinguishing factor between the Christian position and the positions of the other ARs, with Islam, for example, affirming the messiahship of Jesus in Surah Al-Imran (3:45): 'When the angels said, 'O Mary, indeed Allah gives you good tidings of a word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary - distinguished in this world and the Hereafter and among those brought near [to Allah]'. And in Surah An-Nisa (4:171), where his messianic role and prophethood is clearly stated: 'O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul [created at a command] from Him. Finally, it also rejects the position of Christ having been able to provide a means of atonement for the sins of humanity, as it states in the Qur'an: 'And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. And if a heavily laden soul calls [another] to [carry some of] its load, nothing of it will be carried, even if he should be a close relative. You can only warn those who fear their Lord unseen and have established prayer. And whoever purifies himself only purifies himself for [the benefit of] his soul. And to Allah is the [final] destination.' (Al-Fatir 35:18).

For Judaism, we see in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 43a, certain disparaging comments about Jesus: 'On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!'. Christians thus make a claim—that God has sent a divine and atoning messianic prophet—which is not recognised by the other ARs.[2] More specifically, the Christian Position is indeed compatible with the Islamic Positions that posits Muhammad as a foundational prophet, with Jesus being the *messianic* foundational prophet—and thus the divinity and atoning life of Jesus is what is incompatible with that position. However, for Judaism, it is doubly incompatible, as it is not compatible with the Jewish Position that rejects the messiahship of Jesus, thus taking him, as noted before, to be a false messianic claimant and 'someone who practiced sorcery and led Israel to apostasy', and thus there is a denial of the legitimacy of his prophethood as well.

Moreover, as with the Islamic Position, it is also incompatible with the Jewish Position that rejects the divinity and atoning life of Jesus. Hence, one can ask the important question: what reasons are there to affirm the prophethood, divinity and atoning life of Jesus?

1.2 An A Posteriori Argument for the Christian Position

An avenue for obtaining such reasons may be provided through a priori philosophical reasoning—as was done in Sijuwade (2023)—however, for one who is not persuaded by this type of 'armchair reasoning' it will be helpful to assess whether there is good a posteriori reasons for this conclusion—which, in this context, refers to reasons that are dependent on experience. A particular type of argument, within a philosophical context, which has sought to fulfil this goal is that of Richard Swinburne's (2003) argument for the resurrection of Jesus, which is formulated within an epistemic probability framework. More specifically, the epistemic probability of a hypothesis is an interpretation of probability that is primarily centred on measuring the specific degree of support proposition q provides for proposition p, solely when it is assessed by an individual of a limited logical competence, but who nevertheless utilises the correct inductive criteria, in her investigation (Swinburne, 2001). This type of probability would thus provide results which are closer to the logical probability of the

[2] Going forward, for ease of writing I will now simply refer to the term 'messianic prophet' as that of 'prophet', which will also now include that of him being the messianic prophet sent by God to the world.

proposition conditioned on the evidence, as even though the person would lack certain *knowledge* of important logical truths related to the proposition under investigation, they would nevertheless be using the *correct criteria* and thus their probability estimate should be close to the logical truth of the matter. Now, in attempting to accurately estimate the epistemic probability of a proposition, Swinburne believes that one can use Bayes' Theorem (hereafter, BT), which is a theorem derived from the axioms of conditional probability,[3] and accurately state the numerical relationships that hold between a hypothesis *h*, observational evidence *e* and background knowledge *k* (Swinburne, 2004). This theorem can be stated as such (where h is the hypothesis, e is the evidence under analysis, and k is the background knowledge):

(3) (Bayes Theorem) $P(h/e\&k.) = \frac{P(e/h\&k.) \times P(h/k.)}{P(e/K)}$

By using BT, one can determine if a certain hypothesis is indeed confirmed or disconfirmed by a specific (or set) of data, that is, the hypothesis's posterior probability on the data. This posterior probability (i.e. P(h/e&k.): the probability of a specific hypothesis relative to a certain piece of evidence and the background knowledge, is determined by distinguishing and calculating three factors: first, the prior probability of the hypothesis (i.e. P(h/k.): the probability of the hypothesis prior to taking into account the observational evidence. This is dependent on the simplicity of *h*, the narrowness of the scope of *h* and its fit with background knowledge. Second, the predictive power of the hypothesis, (i.e. P(e/h&k.)): the likelihood of the evidence occurring given the truth of the hypothesis and the background knowledge, and third, the prior probability of the evidence, (i.e. P(e/k.)): the likelihood of the evidence occurring relative to the background knowledge, irrespective of the truth of the hypothesis. Within this framework, Swinburne (2003) thus formulates an argument that it is indeed significantly probable that God became incarnate in Jesus and his life culminated in a super miracle (i.e. the resurrection), given, first, that it is probable that there is a God (i.e., $P(t/k) \geq ½$); it is more probable than not or at least as probable as not, which according to the conditionalisation of BT is assumed into *k* for the assessment of the further proposition of the incarnation and resurrection. Secondly, that the prior probability of the incarnation and resurrection is high (i.e., P(r/k)), the prior probability of God becoming incarnate, given that God exists, is high. Third, that the predictive power probability of the incarnation is also high, and the prior probability of the evidence is low (i.e., P(e/r&k) > P(e/k))—that is, the historical evidence in support of Jesus fulfilling the requirements of being God incarnate *and* the historical evidence in support of the event resurrection (i.e. a 'super miracle') is to be expected given the incarnation and resurrection, and would not otherwise be expected if the incarnation and resurrection did not occur. More precisely, this can be stated as P(r/e&k) being very probable where *r* is the hypothesis that God became incarnate in Jesus and that he rose from the dead, *k* being firstly the evidence of natural theology (i.e. various phenomena in support of God's existence) and the evidence of the fact that people sin and suffer. Secondly, *k* also includes three kinds of a-priori reasons why, in virtue of God's perfect goodness, it is quite probable that he would become incarnate. These three reasons are as follows:

(4) (Reasons for Incarnation)
- (i) To identify with humanity's suffering
- (ii) To make available atonement for the sins of humanity.
- (iii) To reveal various theological and moral truths to people.

[3] This specific axiom: $P(A|B) = P(A \& B)/P(B)$

Swinburne (2003) believes that because of these three kinds of reasons (and due to the evidence of humans sinning and suffering being in *k*), it can be held that there would be a high prior probability that God would become incarnate. Now, once P(*r*|*k*) has been calculated, Swinburne believes that one can investigate the evidence *e* being which is a conjunction of the following detailed historical evidence:

(5) (Explanatory Power)
- (i) The evidence that Jesus satisfied the *prior* requirements for being God incarnate.
- (ii) The evidence that Jesus satisfied the *posterior* requirements for being God incarnate.
- (iii) The evidence that neither set of requirements for an individual being God incarnate was satisfied in any person in the same manner that is in Jesus.

Thus, the posterior probability of *r* (P(r/e&k)) would thus measure the probability that Jesus was God incarnate, who rose from the dead, conditioned on, first, the evidence of natural theology and the likelihood of God becoming incarnate and second, the detailed history of Jesus and of other potential prophets. And Swinburne (2003) believes that taking into account the total evidence available allows one to assert that the epistemic probability of the resurrection of God incarnate, Jesus, is significantly probable to a rough estimated value of P(r|*e*&*k*) = $\frac{10}{101}$ = 0.97. This argument is definitely innovative; however, two important issues can be raised: first, against the probabilistic analysis provided by Swinburne (2003), and, second, the historical evidence that he assesses within his argument. For the issue against the probabilistic analysis, Alvin Plantinga (2000) has identified a problem, which has been termed the *Problem of Dwindling Probabilities*. For Plantinga (2000), the conclusion reached in Swinburne's argument is seen by him to only be solely *prima facie* successful, primarily due to a detrimental flaw that Plantinga believes can be unearthed in this argument if one follows the correct probabilistic methodology that requires one to *multiply* probabilities, instead of *annexing* the probabilities which, he believes, is often mistakenly done (Plantinga, 2000). This is that, as Plantinga (2000, 278) notes, through the arithmetic of conditional probability:

(6) $P(X|Y) \geq P(X|Z\&Y) \times P(Z|Y)$

we know that (with T representing God exists, A representing God would become incarnate, B representing Jesus fulfilled the prior requirements, D representing that Jesus fulfilled the posterior requirements and K is that there is no evidence of any other individual having fulfilled these requirements):[4]

(7) P(E|K) = P(E|K&T&A&B&C&D) × P(T&A&B&C&D|K).

And thus

(8) P(E|K) ≥ P(T|K) × P(A|(K&T)) × P(B|(K&T&A)) × P(C|(K&T&A&B)) × P(D|(K&T&A&B&C)) × P(E|(K&T&A&B&C&D)).

So, in plugging in the (supposedly) 'generous' approximate values that Plantinga assigns to the probabilities of each of Swinburne's lines of evidence:

[4] These variables are different from Plantinga (2000) and are a more accurate representation of Swinburne's argument.

(9) $P(E|K) \geq (0.9) \times (0.9) \times (0.7) \times (0.6) \times (0.9) \times (0.7)$

the $P(G|K)$, which is entailed by $P(E|K)$, would be ≥0.21, if the lower point of each interval is taken. Or, if the midpoint of each interval is taken:

(10) $P(E|K) \geq (0.9) \times (0.95) \times (0.8) \times (0.7) \times (0.9) \times (0.8)$

the $P(G|K)$ would be ≥0.35. So even though the individual probabilities are significantly high, by a multiplication of them, there will ultimately be a *dwindling* of the resultant probability value of *G*: the resurrection of Jesus (i.e., God incarnate). And thus, because of this, Plantinga (2000), 280) reaches the conclusion that '…our background knowledge, historical and otherwise (excluding what we know by way of faith or revelation), isn't anywhere nearly sufficient to support serious belief in *G*'. Therefore, for Plantinga, as Swinburne's argument is subject to the Problem of Dwindling Probabilities, one should therefore reject this approach and look to adopt another in grounding his belief on the truth of this central Christian teaching.[5]
Now, for the second issue, which we can term the *Problem of the Historical Jesus*, the historical evidence assessed by Swinburne (2003) in his argument, can be brought into question first because of Swinburne's uncritical use of the sources that he derives this evidence from—namely, that of the four Gospels. That is, one of the more pronounced aspects of Swinburne's (2003) methodology concerning the historical sources is his reliance on the 'Principle of Testimony', which states that in the absence of counter-evidence, we should accept the testimony of others as veridical. Applying this to the Gospels, as Swinburne (2003) does, results in taking the Gospel accounts largely at face value unless there's significant evidence to the contrary. However, this contrasts sharply with the traditionally critical approaches of many Historical Jesus and New Testament scholars, who often begin with a stance of scepticism and require multiple forms of attestation or other criteria to validate Gospel claims. Beyond this, mainstream Historical Jesus and New Testament scholarship often adopts a meticulous approach to the Gospels by employing various criteria such as that of assessing multiple attestations, contextual credibility, and the utilisation of the criterion of embarrassment being standard practices. Swinburne (2003), while not dismissing these techniques, is not explicit in his usage of a criteria of authenticity, and thus, there are grounds for being sceptical of the portrait of Jesus that is provided by his argument. Moreover, in mainstream Historical Jesus studies, the backdrop of Second Temple Judaism is pivotal for a comprehensive understanding of Jesus—allowing scholars to understand how Jesus' teachings and actions were interpreted by his contemporaries. That is, prominent Historical Jesus and New Testament scholars, drawing from the work of figures like Albert Schweitzer (1906) and E.P. Sanders (1985, 1993), postulate that Jesus is best characterised as an 'eschatological prophet' that thus proclaimed the imminent arrival of God's Kingdom. Moreover, the Second Temple era was politically charged due to the Roman occupation and the internal strife among various Jewish factions. Additionally, an understanding of Jesus' messianic role—which is central to his identity—also requires a deep dive into the context of Second Temple Judaism. Hence, by Swinburne (2003) not placing his historical portrait of Jesus within his Second Temple Jewish context, and thus not interacting with these various themes, the specific picture of Jesus that features in Swinburne's argument is not one that will be affirmed by the majority of scholars working today—even if it does indeed support the hypothesis that he is assessing. That is, Swinburne's (2003) portrait of Jesus, being detached from the Second Temple Jewish context seems to provide grounds for the objection that this portrait of Jesus is 'made in Swinburne's image'

[5] For a response to Plantinga (2000) that seeks to contest this conclusion, see (McGrew, 2004).

such that there is a selective use of evidence that supports his conclusion—namely, that Jesus was the resurrected God incarnate—and dismissing or downplaying evidence that does not.

Based on the Problem of Dwindling Probabilities and the Problem of the Historical Jesus, one has good reason to focus on formulating a different argument for the Christian Position than that of the one provided by Swinburne (2003). This does not mean that one has to reject his argument as a whole, as we can indeed utilise various elements of it in formulating our argument. However, to ward off the Problem of Dwindling Probabilities, we can focus on, first, following him in assuming the existence of God, defined, at a minimum, as an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, and perfectly good entity. Swinburne (2003) showed in his work that this is a key assumption that needs to be made in this type of argument, and so we will follow suit in making this assumption here. However, we will not follow him in adopting his probabilistic formulation of this type of argument, but instead, adopt a simple hypothesis assessment against a set of evidence without any probability analysis of it. Specifically, we can focus on assessing whether, on the basis of 'general background philosophical, historical and theological evidence', we should expect God to send a messianic divine prophet to the world. Second, after this has been shown to be the case, we can then follow Swinburne (2003) again in dividing the evidence into 'prior evidence'—which focuses on the evidence from Jesus' life—and 'posterior evidence'—which focuses on the evidence available after Jesus' death. It will thus be assessed whether the historical evidence is such as to be expected if Jesus was the messianic divine prophet sent into the world.[6] After this, it will then be assessed whether the posterior historical evidence is also such as to be expected if Jesus was the messianic divine prophet sent into the world. Importantly, however, we will, again, not follow Swinburne (2003) in taking the resurrection, which is an important part of the posterior evidence, to be a 'supernatural event' ('super miracle') but, instead, it will be shown, in our analysis of the general background evidence, that this can indeed be construed as a 'natural event' that is, nevertheless, brought about by God's direct intervention. Now, once both of these assessments have been completed, it will then be concluded that Jesus is the divine and atoning prophet, given that both the prior and posterior historical evidence supports this being the case, and that God would not seek to deceive individuals by allowing the evidence to indicate this to be the case, when it is, in fact, not—which is an important point raised by Swinburne (2003) in his own argument. In formulating this argument, however, the position concerning the historical sources and the portrait of Jesus that will be utilised is grounded on the work of certain influential Historical Jesus and New Testament scholars, specifically, that of John P. Meier, N.T. Wright, Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado. Doing this will enable the argument to be situated within the contemporary discussion in the literature and Second Temple Jewish context, which will provide a means to ward off the Problem of the Historical Jesus. In all, we will thus have before us an a posteriori argument for the Christian Position—that is, an a posteriori argument for Jesus being the messianic divine prophet sent by God into the world. The conclusion reached here, however, will have to be tentative and conditional on further analysis, as we will not be able to assess whether the prior and posterior evidence of the prophets of the other ARs (or other non-ARs) also indicate that they are the messianic divine prophet sent to the world. Also, we will not be able to assess the alternative explanations for the posterior evidence (such as hallucination hypotheses, or societal contagion hypotheses, etc.), and the alternative portraits of Jesus (and Christology) in the literature (such as that provided by John Dominic Crossan (1994), Dale Allison (1998), Bart Ehrman (1999), James D.G. Dunn (1980, 2003) amongst others), which might paint a different picture of Jesus and

[6] However, the way that this will be assessed will be quite different from that of Swinburne (2003), as he takes this prior and posterior evidence to form certain requirements for God being incarnate. I will not take this to be the case here, but only that there is certain evidence from Jesus' life—the prior evidence—and after his death—the posterior evidence—that needs to be accounted for.

historical Christology than the one constructed here. Thus, the conclusion that will be reached here, will be that of a conditional conclusion: *if* the prior and posterior historical evidence is correct, and the claim of the other potential foundational prophets of the ARs is not supported by this evidence, then Jesus is the messianic divine prophet sent by God to the world—which is to say that the Christian position is true. The antecedent of this conditional will have to be assessed in future work, and thus, we can proceed forward as if it is, in fact, the case.

Thus, the plan is as follows: in section two ('General Background Evidence'), I provide an explication of the philosophical, historical and theological background for our analysis. In section three ('Prior Historical Evidence'), I provide an explication of the historical evidence concerning the life of Jesus, and then assess whether this evidence supports the fact of him being the messianic divine prophet sent by God. Then, in section four (Posteriori Historical Evidence'), I provide an explication of the historical evidence available after the death of Jesus, and assess whether, again, this also supports the fact of Jesus being the messianic divine prophet sent by God—with the conclusion being that, as with the evidence of the former section, it does, and as God would not allow this evidence to indicate this to be the case, *if* Jesus was not in fact this prophet, then we can take it to be the case that Jesus is indeed this prophet.. After this section, there will be a final section ('Conclusion') summarising the above results and concluding the article.

2. General Background Evidence

2.1 Philosophical Background

The first aspect of the general background evidence is that of philosophical background evidence, which focuses on certain a priori reasons that will be important in guiding our analysis. We can state this aspect more succinctly:[7]

(11) (Philosophical) The philosophical aspect of the general background evidence focuses on God's action of sending a messianic divine prophet to the world to fulfil his three-fold flourishment aim of, first, personal flourishment, by participating in the basic goods, second, creative flourishment, by participating as a ground of morality and sharer of goodness and, third, relational flourishment, by their participation in an everlasting relationship of love with him.

It will be important to now detail each of the central tenets of this aspect, which will provide further insight for our analysis.

2.1.1 A Priori Reasons for an Incarnate Prophet

This *a priori* reason—which, when further unpacked in an 'informal' manner, we can refer to as the 'Flourishment Argument'—can be understood more precisely as follows: God is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free and perfectly good entity, and thus is an entity that can actualise any state of affairs that is logically possible for him to actualise. Hence, as nothing external to God can impede his action, he will always achieve his actualisation goals so long as he has formed an intention to do so. That is, whether God does, in fact, actualise a given state of affairs that is logically possible for him to do will depend on whether he chooses to do so or not. Now, as noted earlier, God, as an omnipotent entity, would also know the nature of

[7] For a more in-depth unpacking of these reasons than will be provided here, see (Sijuwade, 2023).

the alternative actions that he can choose from, which would result in him being omniscient and perfectly free—that is, him being free from any non-rational influence determining the choices that he makes. Furthermore, being omniscient and perfectly free, God would also be perfectly good in the sense that he will always perform the best action (or kind of action), if there is one, many good actions and no bad actions (Swinburne, 2016). More specifically, given the exemplification of omniscience, God would know the nature of each available action that he can choose from and thus would possess knowledge of whether each action is good or bad, or is better than some incompatible action. Moreover, in recognising an action as good, God would have some motivation to perform that action, and in recognising an action as being better than another action, God would have an even greater motivation to perform it (Swinburne, 2016). Hence, given the exemplification of perfect freedom, if God is situated in a scenario in which there is a unique best action (or best kind of action) for him to perform, then God will inevitably perform that action (or kind of action)—that is, as noted previously, it is an act of essence (i.e. a necessary act of his nature). Now, how one can acquire knowledge concerning God's intentions is by assessing whether the purported intended act is a morally good act. That is, given our understanding of God's perfect goodness, we can ascertain knowledge concerning the type of aims and actions that God would fulfil and perform—with an action that seems to be an overriding action (i.e. a sensible, appropriate, reasonable/rational action) being one that we can judge that God would inevitably perform. Plausibly, on the basis of his perfect goodness, a central aim that God would seek to fulfil concerning human beings, is that of what we can term his 'flourishment aim'. Based on the inherent goodness of this aim for humans to flourish in three ways: creatively, personally and relationally, God would inevitably seek to bring them about—that is, it would be a unique best action for God to bring these types of human flourishment about and thus God would inevitably seek to provide the opportunity for humans to live personally flourishing lives, participate in the creative role that he exercises in spreading goodness in our world, and being in an everlasting loving relationship with him. So, what will be argued for here is that of the conditional: *if* these aims are to be realised, then there is a requirement for God to also inevitably perform the action of sending a divine and atoning prophet. We can now focus on seeing how God's action of sending this individual will achieve each of these aims.

First, for the personal flourishment aim, as God created humans with the capacity for self-determination as free creatures, the ideal is for humans to personally flourish by deeply engaging with basic goods—such as the basic good of 'life', 'aesthetic experience', 'practical reasonableness', and 'religion' etc.—which will lead to a rewarding afterlife in Heaven. However, with their inherent free will and tendencies towards wrongdoing, humans require guidance. Thus, to assist them in this, God would offer three types of revelatory information: first, moral information, which provides details on the nature of basic goods and how to align with them. Second, eschatological information, which offers insights into the afterlife, suggesting a good afterlife for those who flourish and an afterlife of suffering for those who stray. Lastly, theological information, which will provide knowledge about God's existence and nature, ultimately enhancing one's understanding and relationship with God. The provision of a revelation by God is thus to be expected, in line with God's aim for human personal flourishment, as it is essential for guiding individuals towards the fullest participation in the basic goods. Yet, given the limitations of human language as a consistent cross-cultural and transgenerational means of communication, God would seek to utilise an authoritative mechanism, a foundational 'prophet', to convey this revelation. As this revelation aims to enhance human understanding of the basic goods and the existence and/or nature of God—ultimately promoting maximum personal flourishing—the prophet, as an authoritative representative, will ensure accurate interpretation, transmission, and provide evidence for the revelation's truths—with this action of the prophet not only be for knowledge but also

motivation, guiding individuals toward fully personally flourishing lives. As a perfectly good being, God would thus aim to provide every human the opportunity for optimal personal growth. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that God would inevitably send a revelation through a prophet to help humans access and exemplify these basic goods fully.

Second, for the creative flourishment aim, God, does not only desire for humans to personally flourish but also participate creatively in his work in the world. At a general level, humans can do so both by creating other entities (such as through reproduction); however, humans can also do this by aiding God in the creation of a morally good world. Now, God could decide to enable humans to do this by providing a system of morality that is communicated by the prophet that he will send in order for humans to personally flourish on the basis of the revelation provided by him. Yet, grounding morality solely in a prophet-communicated moral law limits human responsibility in defining moral concepts. Instead, if morality is rooted in 'human exemplars', people would be given a more significant role. That is, the exemplary lives of moral examples, which others can emulate, become the foundation for morality. This method that God can impart into the world is termed the 'exemplarist methodology', which defines moral practices based on these exemplars, where humans are given the ability to make God's world into a 'good world' through free human contribution. However, this approach is risky, as humans might incorrectly define morality based on certain admired individuals of a time, who, in other generations, might be viewed negatively.[8] Additionally, various recognised exemplars could lead to moral disagreements among communities. And thus, this brings challenges in discerning the correct moral stance on issues like war, abortion, and euthanasia. And thus, humans can engage in God's creative work by spreading goodness and exemplifying morality. However, our potential to creatively flourish in this way is limited due to specific challenges. Hence, God, being perfectly good, would want to help humans overcome these obstacles and flourish creatively. Now, as an omniscient and supremely good being, God is the source of all goodness. God is thus a meta-exemplar and the ultimate standard for moral examples across cultures. One could thus take God to be the exemplar that could set the standard that other exemplars could follow—and thus, one would be able to determine the appropriateness of their admiration and the validity of moral judgments in various cultures, on the basis of him. In short, all exemplars would thus be able to reflect the divine standard set by God. However, a challenge arises: humans differ greatly from God, which thus makes emulation difficult. Thus, the solution to this challenge is the provision of a divine person who also shares human characteristics—this individual has a human nature. This type of individual, who we can now take to be the prophet that would be sent by God, would offer a concrete example of how to emulate God in a human context. And why one can indeed make this identification is due to the fact that, first, if this individual was not the prophet, but was existing at the same time as him, then there would be the possibility of the prophet being superseded in his authority by the divine person—which could potentially negate the authority of the revelation provided through him. Second, as God's aim is for humans to choose goodness freely, the inherited predispositions of humans can lead to wrongdoing. Thus, given that all humans would have these predispositions, there is a possibility for individuals to mistrust any human moral leader. Thus, a divine prophet—who would be immune to these human flaws—would provide a reliable moral standard, and thus, individuals can be assured of his trustworthiness. That is, such a prophet, by being divine, would be infallible, and thus would be immune to societal or genetic moral flaws, which would ensure that the prophet's teachings are beyond doubt. Hence, it is reasonable for one to hold to God inevitably seeking to provide a divine prophet, with a human nature, in order to ensure that there is a clear moral exemplar

[8] We can take Christopher Columbus as an example of this.

for others to emulate, and thus make God's world into a good world—ultimately leading to a maximisation of their creative flourishment.

Third, for the relational flourishment aim, as the condition of humanity is such that each individual human with libertarian free will has genetically and socially inherited a proneness to wrongdoing, humans can seek to enter a relationship of love with God; yet, due to their inherent proneness to wrongdoing this flourishing is minimal—as humans' mind and wills are focused on wrongdoing, whereas God's is not. Therefore, a perfectly good God would aid humans to optimise each human's relational flourishment by resolving this issue, and thus enabling them to enter an everlasting relationship with them. This solution is that of God providing the means of an 'atonement' which would address the human inclination towards wrongdoing. The specific means of atonement would centre on the life, death, and resurrection of the prophet. Firstly, for the prophet's life, as this individual lived a perfect life, and thus showcased the ideal human existence, this life was not only exemplary but also reparational for human wrongdoings. And, thus, despite living perfectly, the prophet might face societal execution, especially if he resists prevalent injustices and champions a moral system against a flawed one. Secondly, for the prophet's death, this provides a means for dealing with to humans' proneness to wrongdoing. As every human, through a psychological connection, is able to be present with the prophet during his death—which is made possible by the psychological phenomenon of 'mind-reading'. However, due to the prophet's divine nature, he can simultaneously connect with *all* human minds. And thus, in his death, the prophet becomes a vessel for all human sins, and, simultaneously, all humans partake in the prophet's death, breaking their bondage to sin. Thirdly, for the prophet's resurrection, this resurrection provides humans with a renewed mind and will. That is, by each human being connected with the prophet in his death, they are also able to maintain this connection with him in his resurrection, and thus be brought to life with the renewed mind and will that he himself will come to possess in this act. Hence, humans can now adopt the prophet's mind, leading to moral and spiritual regeneration. This all would thus enable one to be able to enter an everlasting loving relationship with God by them actively surrendering to God's love and partake in the life, death, and resurrection of the prophet. And thus, through the prophet's actions, humans gain access to an everlasting relationship with God, which will allow them to all relationally flourish to the maximal level. God would thus inevitably seek to send a prophet who would provide a means for atonement, leading to relational flourishment.

2.1.2 The Possibility of Resurrection

On the basis of God's perfect goodness and his desire for humans to flourish maximally at a personal, creative and relational level, we can expect that he would inevitably send, at some point in time, a divine and atoning prophet. However, in doing this, one can also ask the further question of if it is indeed possible for God to do this? As, the atoning action of the prophet requires God to perform a specific 'supernatural' intervention of bringing his body back to life—that is, to bring about a resurrection so that all humans who have (spiritually) died with Christ can be (spiritually) brought back to life with him, and given a renewed mind and will. However, according to Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti (2020), this specific type of intervention is not possible in a world in which the 'Standard Model of Particle Physics' is true—namely, our world. More fully, Cavin and Colombetti (2020) have presented an argument that identifies the logical incompatibility between the Standard Model of Particle Physics (SM) and the concept of Resurrection (R). In following tradition, R posits that the body of Jesus is dead immediately before the event took place. Thus, if one were to try and understand the R in the context of the SM, the starting point would be the natural state of a dead body at this particular time *t*. And then, on the basis of SM, if it were to explain what

happens next, it would describe the subsequent state of the prophet's body based on natural laws and processes, which will be that of it experiencing decomposition. That is, more specifically, SM would give a natural 'outcome' for the prophet's body at *t* based on the given input (a dead body at *t*). However, there is an incompatibility between this natural outcome and R, as R posits a supernatural intervention at t_1, wherein God miraculously raised the prophet's corpse as a 'soma pneumatikon'—a spiritual body. There is thus a supernatural outcome at t_1 from a natural input at t—which stands outside the purview of SM, due to it being grounded in natural laws. Hence, the natural progression of events predicted by the SM, based on a dead body at *t*, would not align with the supernatural event of R at t_1. As a result, the two concepts — the natural laws encapsulated by SM and the supernatural event of R — are indeed logically incompatible, and thus, as it is highly plausible that our world is one in which SM is true, the event of R is not possible in our world. It thus seems to be the case that God could not create our world in the manner that he has with SM being true, and send the prophet into the world in a manner that he would live an atoning life that includes him resurrecting from the dead. One can now ask the important question if there is a way to deal with this problem. I believe that there is, by re-construing the resurrection of the prophet as a *natural event*, rather than as a supernatural event—as it has normally been done. How we can do this is by adopting a particular model of the resurrection, termed the 'Falling Elevator Model', that was introduced by Dean Zimmerman (1999). Zimmerman (1999) introduced this model to demonstrate the cogency of a materialistic model of bodily resurrection. However, we can now employ certain elements of it—specifically, that of the notion of 'fission' (or 'budding') to also deal with the problem that we are now facing.

In following Zimmermann (1999), one can understand that when some matter constitutes a given organism, there is a special event—termed a 'Life'—that occurs so long as that organism exists. As Zimmerman (1999, 35) writes, 'As bits of the matter are replaced by new material, the things participating in this Life change; but so long as the Life goes on, the organism continues to exist, no matter how much material change there has been'. An important aspect of the Life of a particular organism is that of it performing an act of self-maintenance, where the earlier stage of a Life is able to 'immanently cause' later stages—with the latter stages thus being causally dependent upon the earlier stages. Now, within this framework, one can thus understand that, after the death of the prophet, this individual would come back to life in a particular manner. This particular manner is that of 'the Life' of the prophet going one way at t_1—namely, to another physical location (with the possibility of it being able to return back to its previous physical location)—whilst the present body of the prophet going another way at t_1—namely, that of it remaining in the location where it died. More specifically, there are immanent causal connections that 'jump' from the present material body of the prophet at t_1, connecting the Life of the prophet to some other location where the organic structure of that individual is preserved. Thus, at the moment of the prophet's death, God allows each atom of this individual's body to continue to immanently cause later stages in the Life of their present body, where it is located; however, God also confers upon each of the atoms that compose this individual's body the power to immanently cause a *perfect duplicate* of the prophet at another physical location. This state of affairs is such that the prophet's body that he had at the moment of their death is located at the place of his death. And, as Zimmerman (1999, 36) writes, the local, normal, immanent causal process linking each atom to an atom in the individual's body 'is sufficient to secure their identities; no atom ceases to exist merely because it exercised this…'budding' power to produce new matter in a distant location. Still, the arrangement of atoms that appears at a distance is directly immanent-causally connected to my body at the time of my death'. Hence, the prophet, in a certain sense, will forever be 'dead' by their material body decomposing (and then ceasing to exist) from the moment of his death. Yet, as God causes the atoms that make up the body of this individual to 'fission' (or 'bud') at the moment of their

death, there are at that particular moment two identically structured sets of atoms—two of that individual copies at disparate locations—one copy located at the place of the prophet's death r_1 and one copy located at another physical location r_2—with both sets of atoms inheriting the identity-preserving immanent causal relation—where, as Jonathan Loose (2012, 861) writes, 'the self-sustaining causal process that had previously passed down a single path would now continue down two separate and unrelated paths in two different worlds'. However, as *the Life* of the prophet individual goes with the body of this individual that is now located at r_2, it is the body of this individual located at r_2 that is now the successful candidate for the continuation of the pre-fission life of the prophet. Now, applying this all to the problem noted above, as stated previously, on the basis of SM, the subsequent state of the prophet's body after his death at t, which will be t_1, given the natural laws and processes, will that of it experiencing immediate decomposition—and thus there must be a natural 'outcome' for the prophet's body at t based on the given input (a dead body at t). Instead of one now positing a supernatural intervention at t_1, wherein God stopped the decomposition process of the body of the prophet and thus miraculously raised it as a soma pneumatikon, one can now take it to be the case that God makes a *natural* intervention at t_1. That is, at t_1, God does not stop the prophet's corpse from decomposing and raises it as a soma pneumatikon, but instead causes a fission of the prophet's body to take place. That is, as noted before, God causes the atoms that make up the body of the prophet's body to bud at t, and thus, at t_1, there is a structurally identical set of atoms at r_1 and is a structurally identical set of atoms at r_2. However, the Life of the prophet is now residing within the set of atoms at r_1, rather than that of r_2. The body that is thus located at r_1 is able to undergo its process of decomposition, and thus, there is a natural output at t_1 to the input that is provided to SM by the prophet's body at t. However, the prophet that now includes the Life of the prophet is able to be saved from this decomposing and be healed by God at r_1. After this has happened, God could send the prophet, who now has the body that was at r_2 back to the physical location he was—namely, the place of his death on earth—and take away the other body that was decomposing at r_1. The resurrection of the prophet can thus be taken to be a natural event, in the sense that no supernatural activity took place, as the 'intervention' of God is *solely* that of causing an event of fission to take place—and fission, if possible, is not usually taken to by philosophers to be a supernatural event that takes place! The atoning life of the prophet, which includes that of his resurrection, is thus compatible with the natural laws encapsulated by SM. God can indeed provide a messianic divine prophet in a world in which SM is true. We can thus assume within the background evidence of our analysis the fact of God inevitably seeking to send a messianic divine prophet to the world. However, the way in which the prophethood, divinity and atoning life of this individual—and the way in which individuals will be taken to personally, creationally and relationally flourish—will be expressed in a *context specific* manner—such that if the individual is sent in the 1st century the way in which his prophethood, divinity and atoning life (and personal, creational and relational human flourishment) will be expressed in a starkly different manner that if this individual was sent in the 21st century.[9] It will thus be important to now turn our attention from the philosophical evidence within our general background evidence to that of the historical and theological evidence, which will play an important role in our subsequent analysis.

[9] And thus one would not expect the philosophical concepts and terminology that are at the heart of the philosophical background evidence—such as 'basic goods' 'practical reasonableness', 'aesthetic experience' or 'exemplarism' etc. to be stated within the revelation that is provided in and through the life of this individual—given these are terms that are relative to a 21st century context. However, despite the philosophical terminology not being present in this revelation the central aspects of these terms and concepts will be found within that revelation, expressed relative to the context that the revelation is provided in.

2.2 Historical Background

The second aspect of the general background evidence is that of historical background evidence, which focuses on the sources, methodology and interpretation that are at the centre of our analysis. We can state this aspect more succinctly:

(12) (Historical) The historical aspect of the general background evidence centres on the historical sources: first, the four Christian Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, second, historical methodology: the Criteria of Authenticity, which includes the Criterion of Embarrassment, the Criterion of Multiple Attestation, the Criterion of Discontinuity, the Criterion of Coherence and the Criterion of Rejection or Execution. And, third, a specific historical interpretation of the data that is provided by the application of the Criteria of Authenticity.

It will be important to now detail each of the central tenets of this aspect, which will, again, provide further insight for our analysis.

2.2.1 The Historical Sources

According to Meier (1991), the major sources for performing a historical analysis of the person of Jesus of Nazareth are that of the four Gospels found in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Though each of the Gospels contains a substantial amount of historical information, they are also plausibly taken to contain information expressing the Easter faith of the early Church. And thus, to distinguish an original saying or action of Jesus from that of a creation of the early church is difficult and, at times, impossible (Meier, 1991). And thus, because all four Gospel are indeed faith documents that reflect later theology, means that one does not have good grounds for rejecting the Gospel of John over that of the other Synoptic Gospels—with some elements in John actually being more reliable than that of the parallel material in the synoptics (for example, the chronology of events in the last days of Jesus' life) (Meier, 1991). When one then looks beyond the Gospels, at non-Christian sources outside of the New Testament, the primary source is that of the *Jewish Antiquities* (20.9.1 §200; 18.3.3 §63-64) written by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. In this work, Josephus mentions Jesus twice, with the longer, and more important passage, once stripped of later Christian interpolation,[10] provides a brief summary of Jesus' ministry. More specifically, it states that Jesus appeared during the time of Pontius Pilate (26-36 A.D.), where he is said to be a wise man, a miracle worker, and a teacher who attracted a number of followers. However, on the accusation of some Jewish leaders, Pilate condemned him to the cross. Yet, those who had been devoted to him continued their adherence to him, with Josephus remarking with a certain level of bemusement that 'the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out' (Meier, 1991). This brief outline of the life of Jesus provides independent confirmation of the basic picture of the life of Jesus provided by the four Gospels—without, however, providing any new details. Outside of Josephus, Tacitus, writing in 110 A.D., makes a brief mention of Jesus' execution. And then, there are further scattered references from later rabbinic literature that reflect certain polemics between Jews and Christians in subsequent centuries, and thus, they do not contain any independent early tradition about Jesus (Meier, 1991). This thus exhausts the specific early independent witnesses to the life of Jesus from Jewish and non-Jewish writers, and so the most

[10] For an influential statement of this, see, Meier (1991, 61)

substantial information, and thus the specific range of sources for our analysis will be that of the four Gospels. One can now ask, however, what the specific nature of these sources is?

2.2.2 Historical Methodology

As a methodology for one to answer this question sufficiently, Meier (1997) takes five criteria to be especially useful: first, the 'Criterion of Embarrassment', considers material that would have posed challenges for the early church—such material tended to be softened or suppressed in later Gospels (such as a story from Mark which finds parallel in John) for example, Jesus submitting to John the Baptist's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, or Jesus' ignorance of the exact time of the last judgment. Second, the 'Criterion of Multiple Attestation of Sources and Forms' examines material found in various independent *texts*—such as Mark, a hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings used by Matthew and Luke termed 'Q', special information found only in Matthew or Luke, John and Paul—and material in different *literary forms*, such as, for example, Jesus' words at the Last Supper are witnessed in Mark and in liturgical instructions by Paul in 1 Corinthians. And Jesus' prohibition of divorce is found in a short saying in the Q document (Luke 16:18), in a longer story in Mark and again in 1 Corinthians (Meier, 1991). Third, the 'Criterion of Discontinuity or Dissimilarity' focuses on the words or actions of Jesus that aren't seen in the Judaism before him or the Christianity after him, such as his stance on fasting. Fourth, the 'Criterion of Coherence' looks at sayings and actions consistent with previously established historical material. This criterion, however, only comes into play when a certain amount of historical material has been verified by using the previous criteria (Meier, 1991). That is, certain other sayings and actions of Jesus that fit with the preliminary data established by the previous criteria, have a high probability of also being historical—such as, for example, sayings concerning the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Finally, the 'Criterion of the Rejection or Execution of Jesus' focuses on elements explaining his execution by the authorities, and thus it does demonstrate what material is historical, but it can direct one's attention to those words and actions that would explain why Jesus met a violent death at the hand of the ruling authorities—that is, a benign or bland Jesus would not have posed a threat to the powers and thus could not be historical. All of these criteria used in tandem are mutually self-correcting, and provide a means for one to understand what can be taken to most probably be a saying or action of the historical Jesus.

2.2.3 Historical Interpretation

Even though it is vital, in a historical investigation of our kind, to utilise the Criteria of Authenticity, doing so can only provide results that are minimal. That is, they can provide a historical outline of an individual's life; however, as Wright (1991, 1994) has argued, for one to *truly* understand a historical figure or event, one must grasp not only the 'what' but also the 'why' and the 'how.' In other words, to simply catalogue events of an individual's life without understanding the beliefs, hopes, fears, and context that underpin them is to miss a significant portion of the story of that individual. And thus, to ward this off, one should, as Wright (1992) states, adopt a methodology that is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing not just from history but also from theology, literature, sociology, and more. Moreover, one should focus on the worldview of that individual and the stories and symbols related to them. That is, according to Wright (1992), for one to gain a deeper grasp of historical figures, one must first understand the worldview of the time. This thus means digging into the cultural, religious, and philosophical assumptions that shaped the way people thought and acted. Furthermore, as Wright (1992) notes, it is also the symbols and stories that are central to understanding the worldview of a culture. Hence, in the context of the person of Jesus, one must understand him within the worldview of Second Temple Judaism. That is, one must understand what the first-century Jews understood about God, humanity, the problem of evil, and the solution to that

problem. Moreover, in the case of first-century Judaism, symbols such as the Temple, Torah, and Land held deep significance —that is, they carried with them profound stories about God's relationship with Israel and thus included within them a great amount of meaning and expectation. Thus, by engaging with this aspect of history, and not only that of the bare data produced by the application of a criteria, one would be able to paint a historical picture of Jesus that is deeply rooted in Jewish expectations and hopes of the time —that is, one will be able to paint a picture of the 'real Jesus'.[11] Hence, in the historical background of our analysis will be that of historical sources concerning the person of Jesus: the four Gospels, a historical methodology—centred on Meier's Criteria of Authenticity—and a certain historical interpretation of the data, which is derivable from an application of this criteria, and is centred on an interpretive portrait of the historical Jesus provided by Wright.

So, now, that our philosophical background and historical background are set, we can turn our attention to further information that is connected to these two forms of background evidence—namely, that of the theological background evidence.

2.3. Theological Background

The third aspect of the general background evidence is that of theological background evidence, which focuses on the beliefs of a certain people group, the Second Temple Jews, who are relevant to our analysis. We can state this aspect more succinctly:

(13) (Theological) The theological aspect of the general background evidence centres on the beliefs held by the Second Temple Jews concerning monotheism, election, covenant and resurrection.

It will be important to now go through each of the central tenets of this aspect and provide further detail concerning the nature of them.

2.3.1 Beliefs Concerning Second Temple Jewish Monotheism

According to Bauckham (2008), Second Temple Jewish theology is a theology that is grounded on the notion of 'monotheism'—with the concept of 'transcendent' uniqueness, rather than that of the 'ontological' concept of (divine) nature, being the principal category for understanding this theological worldview. That is, as Bauckham (2008) notes, for the Second Temple Jews, what was most important for them was *who* the one God is—*who YHWH, the God of Israel is*—rather than what divinity is. The essential element of Second Temple Jewish monotheism is not the denial of the existence of any other 'gods', instead, it is the *unique identity* of God (i.e., the divine identity) that places him in a wholly different category than any other supernatural being that can be referred to as 'god'. Central to this 'divine identity', according to Bauckham (2008), is the possibility of God being identified by features within the two fundamental categories: *God in his relationship to Israel* and *God in his relation to reality*. The identifiable features within the former category are, first, that God has a name, YHWH, setting him apart from all other 'gods'. And, second, that YHWH is the God who brought Israel out of Egypt. These features expressed the fact that the one God of Second Temple Jewish belief was in a 'covenantal relationship' with Israel. The monotheism of Second Temple Jewish beliefs emphasised the fact that the one God had a unique name, YHWH, and a unique relationship with his chosen people, Israel. However, what was especially important for the Second Temple Jews for identifying the transcendent uniqueness of YHWH were features that distinguished him from his relationship to reality as a whole. That is, the latter category is

[11] Which, Meier (1991) himself believed to not be accessible through the sole application of his methodology.

distinguished from the former based on the characterisation of the divine identity in reference to God's unique relationship with the whole of reality, rather than his covenantal relationship with Israel. The identifiable features in the latter category are: first, that YHWH is the sole creator of all things. Second, YHWH is the sovereign ruler of all things and, third, that YHWH is the only being worthy of worship. These features, according to Bauckham (2008), are the features in which the Second Temple Jews focused on when they wished to identify God as unique in comparison to all other reality. These three identifying features characterised God's relationship to the whole of reality, and together were the most precise way, for this people group, for one answering the questions: What distinguishes YHWH, the only true God, from all other reality? What does YHWH's uniqueness consist of? These identifying features thus established a clear and absolute distinction between God and all other reality. That is, first, God is the sole creator of all things; he creates all things outside of himself. God is seen as the sole actor in his creative activity. It is God alone who brought all other beings into reality, without assistance or him acting through an intermediary agent. God is alone, the creator of all things, and no other being takes part in this activity. Second, God is the sole sovereign ruler over all things; all other things, including beings worshipped as 'gods' by non-Jews, are subject to him, in that he reigns supreme over all things outside of himself. All reality, outside of God, is thus in 'strict' subordination as servants to him—there are no co-rulers with God. Lastly, God is the only being worthy of worship, which is that of there being a recognition that worship was the appropriate response to a being who had the previous unique identifying features. Thus, as God was the sole being who possessed these attributes, he is the only being worthy of worship. This prescription to worship God alone is thus grounded upon an acknowledgement of God's transcendent uniqueness and identity as the sole creator and ruler. God's unique identity and the exclusive worship of God were correlated with, and reinforced by, each other. Thus, in answering the question of why the Jews would not worship any other being than the one God, one would simply point to the fact that they were created by him, and are subject to him, with any good that comes to them, ultimately finding its source in God. In Second Temple Jewish thought, these features thus enabled one to define the uniqueness of God and marked him out from all the reality. YHWH, the God of Israel, was worthy of worship because he is the sole creator and ruler of all reality. Reiterating the above through a different perspective, Bauckham (2008) thus sees Second Temple Jewish monotheism as being specified in three ways as: *creational monotheism*, *eschatological monotheism* and *cultic monotheism*. First, creational monotheism, as noted above, emphasises the fact that God alone—without any advisors, assistants or collaborators—created all other things. Second, eschatological monotheism emphasises the fact as was the sole creator and the sole lord over all things, there was an expectation that, at some point in the future—when YHWH fulfils his promises to Israel—he would demonstrate his deity to the nations, and establish his universal kingdom such that all will recognise him as Lord. Third, cultic monotheism emphasises the fact that only the sole creator and ruler of all things should be worshipped—since worship in the Jewish tradition was the specific manner in which the unique identity of the God was recognised.

More precisely, worship, within the context of Second Temple Jewish monotheism, was the central means of expressing the monotheistic conception of God that was held by these individuals. At a general level, as noted by Hurtado (2003), in the ancient Roman world, the notion of 'religion' was focused on 'cultic' actions—especially sacrifices—rather than on specific beliefs. That is, while beliefs existed, such as the belief in the existence of gods, these beliefs were usually implicit and not the primary focus—as it was believed that the ancient deities weren't typically concerned with daily behaviour or ethics, unlike the God of Second Temple Jewish belief (Hurtado, 2003). Hence, for most pagans, ethical teachings were associated more with philosophy than with religion. In this context, it was the act of worship—such as sacrifice—that primarily defined one's religious identity (Hurtado, 2003). And thus, to

refuse to honour a deity was considered an offense—potentially even a threat to societal well-being if the deity became displeased. For both ancient pagans and Jews, sacrifice was central to their religious identity, and thus, in the Roman era, as noted by Hurtado (2003), every nation worshipped its own gods, with most accepting the validity of other nations' gods. However, the unique aspect of Jewish practice was their refusal to worship other gods, considering it 'idolatry'—with this term indicating disdain, and suggesting these gods were illusory or invalid (Hurtado, 2003). Importantly, however, Jews didn't necessarily deny the existence of pagan gods but believed it wrong to worship them—that is, monotheism concerned the exclusivity of worshipping only one God. Hence, while the contemporary usage of the word 'monotheism' typically means the belief in only one deity's existence, Second Temple Jews didn't deny the existence of other deities but emphasised that they shouldn't be worshipped (Hurtado, 2003). Worship was thus central to ancient religion, and Jews emphasised worshipping only the one God, the sole creator and ruler of all things, which functioned as the central ground of their monotheistic belief. From the beliefs concerning Second Temple Jewish monotheism, we can now turn our attention to the specific beliefs held by the Second Temple Jews concerning the notion of Election and Covenant.

2.3.2 Beliefs Concerning Election and Covenant

The Second Temple Jewish belief in a singular God was closely tied, as noted by Wright (1992), to their conviction that Israel was this God's *special people*. That is, the Second Temple Jewish monotheistic belief had implications concerning its covenant theology, where, on a broad scale, Jewish covenant theology posited that despite creation's rebellion, the creator had chosen a people, Israel, to restore it. However, on a narrower scale, Israel's own troubles and questions about God's sovereignty and their suffering are to be attributed to their breach of the covenant. Yet, they believe God will remain committed and restore them (Wright, 1992). More fully, according to Wright (2016), God expressed his perfect goodness in creating humans, Adam and Eve, for fellowship with him and to fulfil their vocation as 'royal stewards' over creation—in a manner that fills the earth with God's blessing, reflecting the praises of creation to God and, in turn, reflecting his justice, goodness and love into the world (in a manner analogous to an 'angled mirror'). However, these humans turn from God and thus 'fall', leading to them becoming 'corrupted' and alienated from God and each other. That is, the first humans fall into 'sin'—rebellious idolatry in which they worship and honour the elements of the natural world rather than the God who created them. The result of this is that the cosmos, and everything within it, becomes disordered—all things thus enters into slavery to the 'dark powers' that have been given the authority to rule through the idolatrous actions of God's image-bearing human creatures. As, instead of humans being God's wise viceregents over created reality, they, instead, ignore the creator and, in turn, worship created reality. The result of this is 'death'—where the controlling image for death is 'exile' (Wright, 2012). And thus, the death that Adam and Eve were promised by God, in response to their rebellion, was that of them being expelled from the Garden—and thus they were exiled from their 'land' to wander in lands that had no life in themselves. In the beliefs of the Second Temple Jews, as noted by Wright (1992), we see a positioning of Abraham as the solution to humanity's downfall—such that Abraham and his descendants (Israel) have inherited Adam and Eve's role. God thus elects Abraham and enters into a covenant with Israel in order to have a special people for himself who live in faithfulness to him. And thus, the idea of a covenant was crucial to ancient Judaism, where, at the basis of this covenant is that of Israel being the creator's true representation of humanity (Wright, 1992). Yet, the election of Israel is not an act of isolation from the other nations of the world, but, instead, they were created to fulfil the vocation of being royal stewards over creation as a nation of priests—and thus serve the role of being a light onto the

other nations, ultimately connecting the creator to the rest of his creation. Hence, God's original creation plan was still in place: humans are to fulfil the vocation of being royal stewards and fill his earth with his glory, with the election of Abraham, and Israel in him, being the means of accomplishing it. That is, the Second Temple Jews thus believed that God had entered into a covenant with Abraham, where he was elected for a purpose, with the terms of their agreement being: God would be faithful to Abraham and his descendants, such that they would be his people. And they were required to keep his commandments set out in the Torah, and thus be a light to the world. However, if they were unfaithful to their covenant, they would ultimately be taken into exile. And, over time the unfaithfulness of Israel to their covenant led to the forewarned exile occurring—historically enacted by the Babylonians invading and destroying Jerusalem in 597 BC, and carrying away the Judaeans captives into exile, which coincided with God's (YHWH's) presence leaving the land of Israel (Zion). Yet, despite the forewarning of the exilic consequences of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, the Jewish covenantal belief led to questions about why Israel was in this condition as the chosen people of God, and why she continued to suffer in this state (Wright, 1992). And it was these questions that shaped Israel's hope and covenant requirements—with a prevailing belief, expressed by the various prophets, that one special day, God would act in such a manner to put an end to exile. However, even after various remnants of the Israelites returned from Babylon, the full prophesied 'return from exile' had not occurred. That is, according to Wright (1992), though some of the Jews had returned from *geographical* exile, most believed that the *theological* state of exile was still continuing—and had been continuing since the sixth century B.C. Hence, the Second Temple Jews believed that they were living in a centuries-old story that was still awaiting a turn in the story that would change these state of affairs forever—in short, the Second Temple Jews were awaiting a *real* return from exile. The hope and expectation were thus that the creator would eventually intervene to transform the current realities—that a 'new exodus' would occur where Israel is released from their oppression and freed to live under God within his 'kingdom'. However, for this to occur—for Israel to be delivered from her problems—it was believed that God needed to address the root cause of her problem—namely, her sin. Hence, the prophets consistently conveyed that Israel's troubles stemmed from her sins, and their resolution was intertwined with her redemption (Wright, 1992). Sacrifices and rituals weren't just acts of individual piety but affirmed national hope and identity, and amidst these challenges, there was a belief that through suffering and redemption, Israel would eventually find her promised glorious future, when Israel finally returns from exile and YHWH finally returns to Zion. This is the plan that throughout scriptures affirmed by the Second Temple Jews is articulated in terms of God's choice of Israel as the means of redemption, and then, after the long history of God and Israel, God will send the 'messiah' (i.e., the anointed one)—who is one of Abraham's descendants, and thus is Israel's representative—to deal with the problem. And so the belief here is that, as humans were made to be God's royal stewards over creation, so the anointed one sent by God will be God's true royal steward and ruler over all of his world. In short, the true human being, the Messiah, God's 'son', would come to free humanity from their sins and lead the human race into their true identity.

Focusing our attention now on the final beliefs held by the Second Temple Jews, which focuses on the notion of the Resurrection.

2.3.3 Beliefs Concerning Resurrection

The ancient pagans held, as noted by Wright (2003), varied beliefs about life after death. That is, pagan beliefs affirmed the fact that once an individual is dead, they could not return to life—in short, death was final. And thus, people either wished for a new body but knew it was unattainable, as portrayed in Homer's works, or, like Plato's followers, preferred a disembodied

soul state (Wright, 2003). The Greek term for 'resurrection', as noted by Wright (2003), is 'anastasis', which means 'a standing-up'. Thus, in the first century, this term did not refer to 'life after death' or post-death experiences. Rather, for the Second Temple Jews, the term resurrection referred to a physical event that involves a life after life after death (Wright, 2003) That is, 'resurrection' in ancient languages referred specifically to a renewed physical bodily life *after* a period of death—not to the immediate afterlife state. Moreover, most ancients believed in life after death, but aside from Jews, Christians, and possibly Zoroastrians, these individuals did not believe in resurrection—where, again, however, resurrection emphasised a physical, tangible body, not just a spirit or ghost (Wright, 2003). The Romans, for instance, believed their departed emperors became divine but *never* resurrected. This distinction is important as it shows that resurrection meant a unique, physical revival, not just a spiritual experience (or elevation). However, in the Second Temple Jewish world, views on afterlife varied, as the Sadducees denied any post-death existence, while some, such as the philosopher Philo, believed in a disembodied future for souls (Wright, 2003). However, the majority believed in resurrection, where God would resurrect His people in a renewed world at the end of days. And thus, the Second Temple Jews believed that resurrection was not only a physical event, but one that was corporate, and, therefore, was not applicable to an individual ahead of everyone else. The resurrection of the dead that will be experienced by all individuals, according to the Second Temple Jews that affirmed its reality, would occur at the end of time as an expression of God's intention to rectify wrongs, restore order, and bring about a new creation that is in line the original divine plan. The background provided by the theological background evidence concerning Second Temple Jewish belief thus supports the position that there was an expectation amongst this people group—who are the important people group for our historical assessment—that God would, in some manner, send a messianic divine prophet to the world, which, as noted previously, would be expressed in a specific manner within this societal and cultural context. And thus the prophethood, divinity and atoning life of this individual—who is taken to have been sent in 1st Century Israel—would be intertwined with background theological story that has been detailed, and thus be expressed through the beliefs and concepts that are central to this story (such as that 'return from exile', 'new exodus', 'covenant', 'Temple/Torah', 'Zion' and 'resurrection' etc.).

Hence, now that we have detailed each aspect of the general background evidence: philosophical, historical and theological, it will be important to now focus on assessing the evidence concerning the life of Jesus in order to see if he did, in fact, live the life of the messianic divine prophet that God is expected to send, as would be expressed within the historical and theological context that has been detailed. In initiating our assessment, it will be helpful to closely follow Meier (1991, 1994 and 2001) in stating a basic historical outline of the life of Jesus.

3. Prior Evidence for Jesus of Nazareth

3.1. Historical Outline of the Life of Jesus of Nazareth

The prior evidence for the life of Jesus centres on historical evidence and interpretation concerning the beliefs that he held and actions that he performed during his life. We can state this evidence succinctly as follows:

(14) (Prior Evidence) Jesus of Nazareth, in A.D. 28-29, believed and acted as if he were an Elijah-like eschatological prophet that was sent by God to inaugurate his kingdom, bring about the return from exile, the new exodus and be the embodiment of YHWH in Israel.

It will be important to now state a basic outline concerning the life of Jesus that is found within the work of Meier, apply his criteria to it, and then proceed to further flesh this specific historical interpretation concerning his life.

A) Basic Outline

Jesus was, most probably, born around 7 or 6 B.C. during Herod the Great's reign, with his Hebrew name being Yēšū, derived from Yĕshúa (Joshua), meaning 'Yahweh helps'. Jesus' mother was Mīryām (Mary), and his legal (adoptive) father was Yōsef (Joseph). While birth accounts place him in Bethlehem—that is, Jesus' birth details come mainly from the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke—most of the other Gospels (Mark and John) reference Nazareth, a modest town in Lower Galilee, as his origin. Irrespective of his place of birth, it is speculated that Jesus was viewed as a descendant of King David. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, with his mother, Mary, and four brothers,[12] James, Joses, Jude, and Simon, and sisters, with none of his brothers (and sisters) becoming a follower during his public ministry—though some of his brothers did become prominent leaders later in the Christian church. Jesus most probably worked as a craftsman, and by the time of his public ministry, his legal father, Joseph, is absent—which leads many to believe he had died. While many Jewish men were married, there is no mention of Jesus having a wife in the historical sources, suggesting he might have been celibate—a choice which could be linked to his reference about men becoming eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:19), and the fact of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 16:1) also choosing celibacy, which mirrors Jesus' prophetic role. As for education, while Jesus could have been illiterate, his role as a teacher and his engagement with experts in the Law suggests he could read Hebrew scriptures—with Jesus most likely speaking Aramaic and having some knowledge of Greek.

Around 28-29 A.D., Jesus began his ministry influenced by John the Baptist, an ascetic prophet baptising in the Jordan River. Jesus initially followed John but later adopted and evolved John's eschatological teachings, with some of the early disciples of Jesus, such as Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael, possibly having originated from John's circle. While Jesus continued John's eschatological teachings, elements of this teaching had shifted to highlight God's joyous intent to save Israel. And thus, at the centre of Jesus' teaching was the 'kingdom of God', representing God's dynamic action to save Israel from its oppressors and establish his rule on earth—through the way of love, compassion and forgiveness. Using parables, Jesus conveyed urgent messages about this kingdom, calling for immediate decision and action. Moreover, Jesus enacted his teachings by associating with marginalised individuals such as tax collectors and sinners, emphasising inclusivity and forgiveness in God's inaugurated kingdom. Jesus also performed acts that were perceived to be miracles—with many during his lifetime believing in his miraculous abilities.

Jesus' teaching and actions resulted in various followers, categorised into three main groups: the general crowd, dedicated disciples (including notable women), and an inner circle called the Twelve—which symbolised the twelve tribes of Israel. Concerning Jesus' relation to the Torah (Mosaic Law), Jesus acknowledged the Law but provided a radical interpretation that occasionally appeared to challenge certain precepts—such as his repudiation of divorce and the practice of fasting—ultimately causing conflicts with religious groups (such as the religious-political group known as the 'Pharisees'). Throughout his life, Jesus frequented the Jerusalem temple but symbolically challenged its relevance, especially during his final trip in 30 A.D. (or 33AD), where he performed symbolic acts in the Temple that led to his arrest.

[12] Meier (1991) identifies Jesus' siblings as his full siblings. However, I leave this controversial issue open here.

Despite sensing his imminent death, Jesus saw it as a step towards the final realisation of God's kingdom. And thus, after a series of events involving Caiaphas, the high priest, and Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, Jesus was crucified. Jesus' body was then buried hastily due to the approaching Sabbath, marking the end of his earthly journey.

On the basis of this basic outline, we can now be more explicit about the manner in which the Criteria of Authenticity, provided by Meier (1991), provides one with grounds for holding to the historicity of the events, as featured in the above outline of Jesus' life. Though we can only apply these criteria to certain aspects of this outline, doing so will indeed be helpful in establishing its historical grounding.

B) Application of Criteria of Authenticity

First, for the Criterion of Embarrassment, the depiction of Jesus associating with marginalised individuals is noteworthy as, given the societal norms of the time, Jesus' close interactions with individuals such as tax collectors and sinners would have been seen as controversial. Yet, these accounts persisted in the narrative, underscoring their likely authenticity. Moreover, Jesus' crucifixion, a punishment reserved for the most heinous of criminals, contrasts sharply with the subsequent veneration of him in Christian worship. The crucifixion narrative's preservation in all four Gospel, despite its potential to undermine his divine portrayal in these texts, indicates its historical authenticity. Second, for the Criterion of Multiple Attestation, the infancy narratives of Jesus are corroborated by both Matthew (Matthew 1:18-25) and Luke (Luke 2:1-20), providing multiple independent sources that attest to his birth details. This criterion emphasises the reliability of an event or teaching if it's mentioned in several independent sources. And thus, given that both Matthew and Luke—two evangelists with varied audiences and emphases—converge on specific details about Jesus' birth, it strengthens the case for the historical credibility of these accounts. That is, their convergence on key details, despite their differences in audience and theology, underlines the significance and likely historicity of Jesus' birth narratives. Third, for the Criterion of Discontinuity or Dissimilarity, Jesus' adoption, and further development, of John the Baptist's teachings stand out, as while John was primarily focused on eschatological themes, Jesus expanded them to emphasise God's joyous intent for Israel. Moreover, Jesus' teachings on the 'kingdom of God' do not precisely align with pre-existing Jewish beliefs, indicating their distinct origin with Jesus. Additionally, his use of parables to convey the urgency of the kingdom's arrival was both unique and characteristically distinct from the surrounding teachings of the time. Furthermore, this criterion is also important when considering Jesus' teachings on the Mosaic Law, as while he recognised the Law, Jesus' radical interpretation of it, even sometimes appearing to challenge certain precepts, shows a divergence from traditional Jewish teachings of the time. Fourth, with the 'Criterion of Coherence' in mind, the commitment of Jesus' diverse following—from the general populace to the inner circle of the Twelve—complements his broader teachings on inclusivity and the impending kingdom of God. Moreover, the portrayal of Jesus' followers, especially the dedicated Twelve, harmonises well with the established understanding of his ministry—that is, it is a consistent picture of a leader who appealed to various societal groups, breaking traditional boundaries. This coherence in the narrative, spanning different accounts, reaffirms the historical reliability of Jesus' wide-reaching and inclusive ministry. This criterion also supports the portrayal of Jesus, emphasising love, compassion, and forgiveness, which coherently aligns with his overall ministry's character.

Fifth, for the 'Criterion of the Rejection or Execution of Jesus', Jesus' symbolic challenges to the Jerusalem Temple's significance make sense in the context of the events leading up to his arrest. Given that a benign moralist would likely not have faced such a fate, Jesus' actions in the Temple and his subsequent crucifixion emphasise his profound impact and the perceived

threat he posed to the established order. Given this historical outline, which has been shown to be founded on strong historical grounds, on the basis of an application of the Criteria of Authenticity, we can now further precisify our account of the life of Jesus, by following Wright (1994, 1999, 2016) in detailing a certain historical interpretation of the life of Jesus that seeks to illuminate the meaning behind the central events in his life—in light of our general background evidence— and his self-understanding concerning them. Again, why it is important to do this is due to the fact that all history has to be interpreted in a certain manner, [13]and thus, it will be important, as noted previously, to assess the influential interpretation that has been proposed by Wright within the literature. This historical interpretation will thus provide the specific prior evidence that will show that the life of Jesus fits with our expectation of the type of life that the messianic divine prophet sent by God would live, given our general background evidence. Though the prophetic element of Jesus' life has already been evidenced in our basic outline (as Jesus is to be taken to be an eschatological prophet), it will be important for this to be further precisified, and for evidence of the divine and atoning aspect of his life to be provided as well.

3.2. Historical Interpretation of the Life of Jesus of Nazareth

3.2.1 Prophetic Role and Kingdom Inauguration

Jesus, during his public career, portrayed God's salvation plan as unfolding through him, inaugurating the kingdom of God and bringing about the 'new exodus' for Israel and the world. In a similar manner to John the Baptist (i.e., the cousin of Jesus and a preacher and forerunner of him), Jesus conveyed a prophetic message in the manner of the 'oracular' prophets (i.e., prophets who delivered messages believed to be directly from God) and inaugurated a movement of renewal in the manner of the 'leadership' prophets (i.e., prophets who led people or guided societal changes). Moreover, Jesus bore close resemblances to both 'clerical' prophets (i.e., prophets associated with religious institutions) and 'sapiential' prophets (i.e., prophets known for their wisdom teachings).[14] However, most of all, Jesus, following John the Baptist's arrest, emerged as an 'Elijah-like eschatological prophet', who emphasised God's imminent reign and its implications for Israel and the Temple—with Jesus calling people to choose sides. Essentially, Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the anticipated kingdom of God, but it differed from expectations. More specifically, the phrase 'The kingdom of God is at hand' was the centre of Jesus's proclamation, addressing a world where Jews awaited their God's intervention from pagan oppression—as the Gospels link these ancient hopes with the pressing issues of Jesus's time. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah and other scriptures envisioned God's kingdom as a time when divine promises are fulfilled, Israel is liberated, evil is judged, and an era of peace is inaugurated. And prophet Daniel saw this time as a victory over oppressive empires. Hence, in announcing God's kingdom, there was an implication that this long narrative was finally reaching its climax. Thus, Jesus' teachings implied that he believed that Israel's ancient prophecies were coming true, with God renewing Israel. Israel's hope had focused on this radical change, emphasising God's power; however, Jesus saw this divine intervention differently—in that it was not only about Israel's victory over pagans but also God judging Israel. That is, it was about the fulfilment of God's promises in unexpected ways. Hence, Jesus's teachings, such as the 'Sermon on the Mount', showcased a path of peace and

[13] Which is a criticism that has been raised in the literature to Meier's own application of his criteria, where the data produced by the application of it has expressed at times his own interpretation of the data, and not simply the result of an objective application of the criteria.
[14] Though Jesus can also be interpreted as counter-clerical (i.e., opposing or critiquing the established religious order) also.

love, and called Israel to be the royal stewards of God's creation and the light to the nations as they were created to be. Moreover, Jesus used symbols, such as choosing twelve disciples, which represented the twelve tribes of Israel, and he used healings as manifestations of his message. Furthermore, Jesus' parables, such as the parable of the Sower and the Prodigal Son, expressed that Israel's long-awaited return from exile was a present reality. And thus, Jesus' message, while it promised a return from exile, and the defeat of evil, and YHWH's return to Zion, it wasn't in the anticipated manner. Nevertheless, the time for restoration had come, inviting all to participate. However, Jesus warned that Israel's current approach was misguided and would lead to disaster. That is, Jesus opposed the prevailing nationalist zeal for rebellion against Rome and called for a new way—a path of peace, of turning the other cheek, of being the light to the world. And thus, by Jesus calling all of Israel to 'repent and believe', this meant during his time an abandoning current agendas and trusting his approach to salvation. As during Jesus's time, Jewish revolutionaries challenged Rome's authority—emphasising God's sovereignty—and thus were met with Roman brutality. Thus, if Israel was to continue on this path, the same end would be realised. Jesus' teaching was thus about a broader redirection of life—the formation of a renewed community, the true followers of God, characterised by radical acceptance, forgiveness, and commitment to a new, peaceful way of life. And thus, his vision saw Jerusalem's fall as a result of its refusal to choose peace. That is, Jesus' prophetic teachings were not about the literal end of the world but a warning, through the use of apocalyptic language (sourced from scriptures like Daniel, to signify this impending catastrophe) that, unless his way—the way of peace and renewal—was followed, Jerusalem would face dire consequences. And when it eventually did fall, this will serve as vindication of Jesus' teachings and the true path he advocated for—with an assurance also of a vindication for all who followed his path. Jesus, with his diverse followers, embodied the mission that he preached, and his parables redefined what it meant to be a true part of Israel— highlighting the joy of entering the kingdom and the risks of rejecting God's anointed messenger. And through Jesus' inclusive meals and teachings, he proposed a different approach to battle, which, in Jesus' mind, targeted the true enemy: the dark powers, that held Israel in bondage. Through his teachings, actions and healings, Jesus thus led many to see him as a prophet—more specifically, the eschatological (and thus messianic) prophet—who emphasised the creation of a renewed people of God, centred on the inauguration of the kingdom of God—such that God was *now* becoming king *through him*. More specifically, the establishment of God's reign on earth, as in heaven, by Jesus, through the inauguration of the kingdom, promised the end of exile, a new exodus, forgiveness of sins, and liberation from oppressive evil. And through his exorcisms and healings, Jesus visibly showcased this liberating power of the kingdom. However, according to Jesus, if Israel wanted these blessings, then they needed to embrace his message, turn away from violent revolution, economic oppression, and fulfil their divine calling as a light to the nations. As the prophet of the kingdom, Jesus thus presented a new way of being Israel *for* the world,

3.2.2 Messianic Atoning Life and Death

During Jesus' life, however, he was not only seen to be a prophet (akin to Elijah) but was viewed by many of his followers, and—most importantly—by himself, to be the promised Messiah. And, Jesus' actions in the Temple serve as the strongest evidence for this 'messianic consciousness'. That is, by Jesus symbolically overturning tables—ceasing the usual sacrifices—he indicated that the Temple was facing divine judgment—with his teachings emphasising that God would not only destroy the city and Temple but would also vindicate Jesus and his followers. Hence, rather than being seen as a reform, Jesus' actions in the Temple symbolised God's divine decree against it, and its leaders. And as this judgment can

traditionally only be pronounced by the King on God's behalf, then by Jesus enacting this judgment over the Temple, he was claiming this status for himself. Moreover, this idea is underscored by Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which had royal implications—as it was reminiscent of Judas Maccabeus' similar entry in 164 BC. However, these Temple actions are not standalone but are surrounded by teachings that further elucidate their meaning. That is, key instances include Jesus' interactions with various individuals—such as when he is questioned about his authority, Jesus points to his miraculous works, implying his own messianic anointment, and power over the dark powers. Moreover, the parable of the Wicked Tenants further elaborates on the theme of rejected prophets, culminating in the rejected messianic 'son'—which parallels Jesus' own story and the judgment he pronounced on those who rejected his message. And so, through parabolic speech and symbolic action, Jesus proclaimed YHWH's judgment on the Temple and Israel. This, however, would ultimately lead to his own suffering as a representation of Rome's judgment on its rebellious subjects. Thus, recognising the potential consequences, Jesus gathered his disciples for a meal, identified as a Passover meal, giving it a new symbolic interpretation. Passover recalls Israel's liberation from oppression, and in celebrating it, hopes are kindled for a similar divine intervention. Jesus showcased his belief in a final exodus, that would launch a new creation that is free from the bondage of the oppressive dark powers. And thus, Jesus indicated that God's intervention was imminent, but unlike anything they had anticipated, Jesus would face the messianic battle by seemingly losing it—confronting not just Rome but the deeper powers of evil. That is, by holding this meal, Jesus was indicating that his death would be central to God's redemption plan for Israel, and those who partook in the meal were the real beneficiaries of the renewed covenant, representing the true eschatological Israel.

So, following a prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus faced a swift trial by the chief priests, resulting in charges of blasphemy and sedition, and the Roman procurator, Pilate, under the influence of the priests, sentenced Jesus to death. Now, in the context of Second Temple Jewish beliefs, as noted previously, there was an understanding of Israel's suffering as not just a form of punishment but a means of redemption—that the return from exile would occur after Israel's sins had finally been forgiven. And thus, Jesus' self-understanding during his final moments was rooted in this belief. That is, Jesus felt that he was embodying Israel's destiny, by taking on the nation's suffering during the climax of its exile—as was expressed through Jesus' words about gathering Israel like a hen, which signified his hope to absorb Israel's impending judgment. Jesus' death was the climaxing moment of Israel's fate, the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies predicting intense suffering before redemption. Jesus thus envisioned his crucifixion as the means by which the real return from exile would happen, the new exodus would transpire—combating evil and achieving forgiveness—and God's kingdom would be finally inaugurated—as is evidence by the title placed on Jesus' cross that read "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).[15] The probable outcome of his actions, being tried as a false prophet and handed to the Romans, was clear to him. Yet, he remained steadfast in his belief that through his sacrifice, Israel's long exile would finally come to an end, and a new dawn for Israel and the world would emerge. That is, Jesus' death on the cross brought about a profound revolution that overcome evil and established God's kingdom on Earth, as on the cross, Jesus embodied every individual's experiences and sins, thereby confronted and defeated the powers of evil and sin once, and for all—as the proclaimed messiah and kingdom bringer was expected (though in a non-violent manner) to do.

Hence, Jesus took on the role of a sacrificial figure, undergoing suffering to bring about the forgiveness of sins, the return from exile and the new exodus for Israel. Jesus' death thus

[15] See John 19:9.

symbolised the defeat of evil and the ushering in of YHWH's universal reign—ultimately fulfilling Israel's vocation to serve as the world's light to all the nations.

3.2.3 Embodiment of YHWH

Throughout his ministry, Jesus positioned himself as the ultimate representation of the will of God, challenging and transcending established symbols like the Torah and its precepts. Thus, Jesus' actions and teachings hinted at the belief that he was not just a prophet—or, even just the long-awaited Messiah—but the very presence of God among people. This again can be seen in Jesus' relationship to the Temple, as Jesus' conception of his mission was not only to symbolise God's judgment over the Temple but also embody what the Temple in Jewish tradition signified. That is, Jesus believed that he was called to be, for Israel, what the Temple had been—namely, the embodiment of God's presence on earth. This is evident from Jesus' actions of forgiving sins, healing the sick, and dining with sinners, which traditionally would have necessitated the Temple. Hence, rather than forwarding the Temple's functions—as a prophet and the Messiah would do—Jesus presented himself as the ultimate realisation of the Temple, and the new covenantal replacement of it. Central to Jesus' self-understanding was his belief that he was called to play a role in relation to Israel that was analogous to the Temple's role in Second Temple Jewish belief. That is, in ancient Judaism, the Temple symbolised God's (YHWH's) presence among his people. And thus, Jesus—by his actions and teachings—seemed to position himself as the new embodiment of the Temple. That is, he offered 'forgiveness of sins' directly to people—a blessing that was traditionally sought through the Temple. Yet, this was not just an extension of the Temple's functions, but rather an offer of a new covenant, which positioned Jesus as the embodiment of what the Temple symbolised. More fully, in several instances, Jesus' actions signified his role as a counterpart to the Temple. That is, when Jesus healed people, it often didn't require the Temple's confirmation because the miracles were evident. And thus, this, combined with his teachings, conveyed the message that God was actively present in a new way through him. Hence, for Jesus, the Temple was not just a building but a representation of the old covenant; hence, Jesus' actions in Jerusalem suggested a new means through which God would dwell with his people. That is, Jesus saw his work as the creation of the new Temple—where he believed that upon his arrival in Jerusalem, there would be an inevitable confrontation between him and the Temple establishment. And thus, Jesus was signalling a new way, one in which God would be present not through buildings but through a community centred around Jesus and his followers. This authoritative vocation positioned Jesus not just as a teacher of his followers but as the manifestation of God's presence in Israel—with Jesus' entire public mission seemingly pointing towards one goal: the embodiment of the return of YHWH to Zion—which set the stage for his confrontations in Jerusalem, and lead to his eventual crucifixion. In essence, Jesus viewed himself as the culmination of God's covenant with Israel, and the embodiment of the Temple—the means through which God was with Israel. Moreover, his teachings and actions over that of the Torah presented him as the personal manifestation of YHWH's presence, which culminated in his journey to Jerusalem, which symbolised YHWH's return to Zion.

Taking this all into account, we can thus see that the evidence provided by the basic historical outline, and historical interpretation grounded on this outline, is such as to be expected if Jesus lived the life of a divine and atoning prophet, and is not as to be expected if he did not live this life—that is, if he did not believe and act as if he were this individual sent by God. More precisely, on the basis of the prior evidence, the life of Jesus was, first, divine, as he believed and acted as if he was the embodiment of YHWH amongst his people. Second, it was atoning, as he believed and acted as if his life and death would provide the means of bringing about the return from exile and new exodus, which was predicated on the forgiveness

of sins. Third, it was prophetic, as Jesus believed and acted as if through his (Elijah-like) prophetic utterances, the kingdom of God, was being inaugurated, and by his message, people must live ethically within this kingdom—which are plausibly in line with the basic goods inherent within reality. The prior historical evidence concerning Jesus' life thus supports the position that he was, in fact, the messianic divine prophet sent into the world. It will be important to now assess whether this is also the case concerning the historical evidence available after his death—however, as we have sufficient evidence for Jesus fulfilling the prophetic role that was expected for the individual that God would send into the world, there will be a more limited range of evidence that is examined in favour of this. And thus, the wider range of evidence will be examined for the more contentious position of his life and death being atoning and him being divine.

4. Posterior Evidence for Jesus of Nazareth

The posterior evidence available after the death of Jesus centres on three different lines of evidence that support the fact of Jesus being, firstly, the (messianic) prophet that, secondly, lived an atoning life, which is evidenced by him being resurrected by God,[16] and, thirdly, him being divine. We can state the nature of this evidence succinctly as follows:

(15) (Posterior Evidence) After the death of Jesus of Nazareth there is:
- (i) Socio-religious evidence in support of him being the messianic prophet sent by God to establish his kingdom.
- (ii) Epistemological, literary and historical evidence in support of him been resurrected by God and thus having lived an atoning life, and
- (iii) Pragmatic, literary and historical evidence in support of his divine status.

It will be important to now state the primary line of evidence in support of Jesus being the (messianic) prophet. And then proceed on to an unpacking of the three lines of evidence in support of Jesus having been resurrected, and thus lived an atoning life, and the three lines of evidence in support of him having a divine status.

4.2 Evidence for Messianic Prophethood

The primary form of evidence in support of the messianic prophethood of Jesus that will be assessed is 'socio-religious evidence'—that is, evidence concerning the sociology-religious impact that resulted immediately, and over time, from the prophetic teaching of Jesus, and his inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. We can utilise the work of Hurtado (2016) to explicate this form of evidence as follows:[17] through the life and teaching of Jesus, a major shift occurred in the religious understanding and cultural values in the Western world. This shift was not merely a reflection of the existing cultural norms of the Roman world, but a radical departure from them, showcasing a unique and subversive character inherent in the

[16] And thus the lines of evidence here are directly in support of the resurrection, and so, in turn, they are indirectly evidence for Jesus having lived an atoning life—as God would only have resurrected him, in light of our general background evidence if his life would have fulfilled this role.

[17] For each of the lines of evidence in this section I am wholly in debt to the insights in the work of Hurtado (2003, 2016), Wright (2003), Meier (1991) and Bauckham (2008, 2017)—with the originality of this section being that of synthesising these insights and applying them within the context of providing evidence for Jesus being the divine and atoning prophet sent by God.

early Christian movement. This is indicative of Jesus' role as the messianic prophet as his teachings were not conforming to existing beliefs but were creating a new paradigm. That is, four distinct features of Jesus' ministry set in motion by the small, obscure beginnings of Christianity, contributed to its distinctiveness and eventual prominence. These features disrupted the prevailing religious and societal norms, introducing novel ideas and ethics, such as a marked emphasis on sexual morality that was not just theoretical but aimed at altering societal behaviour. This shows Jesus as the messianic prophet because he brought forth a global societal and cultural revolution, changing not just beliefs, but also actions—and, through this, inaugurating God's kingdom on earth. Moreover, the early Christian rejection of traditional Roman gods and the introduction of a new form of religious identity not only distinguished Christianity from other religious groups but also contributed to its resilience and growth despite opposition. This resistance to the prevalent religious norms highlights Jesus' role in establishing a foundational shift toward a monotheistic faith. These transformative societal shifts, which were initiated by the teachings and ministry of Jesus, could be interpreted by believers as a testament to Jesus' divine mission as a prophet sent by God. The radical departure from established religious and cultural norms, as well as the enduring and profound impact of Jesus' teachings, embody the prophetic essence of bringing forth the message of God to the world, challenging existing paradigms, and thus fostering a new religiously and moral framework that eventually leading to the spread and establishment of God's kingdom on earth. It will be helpful to walk through the four distinctive features of early Christianity that find their root in Jesus' prophetic ministry.

The first distinctive feature of early Christianity that finds root in Jesus' prophetic work is that of 'religious exclusivism'—that is, there was an emphatic monotheism and exclusivist stance toward worship that was at the heart of early Christianity. This stance shows Jesus as the messianic prophet because it redirected worship from a multitude of gods to the one true God, which was a radical departure from existing religious practices. In stark contrast to the polytheism that characterised Roman pagan religion, Christians worshipped only one God. This refusal to acknowledge the plethora of traditional gods, as noted by Hurtado (2016) was seen as a dangerous departure from religious norms by pagans, who valued openness to honouring all deities. Yet, Christians referred to the Roman gods as 'idols' and their worship as 'idolatry'—a rhetoric inherited from Judaism expressing utter disdain toward pagan deities. The language used by early Christians reflects Jesus' teachings, portraying him as the messianic prophet who ushered in a new era of monotheistic belief. The claim made by Christians that there is one 'God' to believe or disbelieve in was thus a very unusual in the polytheistic Roman Empire; however, the monotheism introduced by early Christianity has now become an unexamined premise in much of the Western world. As Hurtado (2016), notes, it is one's 'cultural amnesia' that obscures the fact that this fundamental religious notion arose from the distinctive stance of early Christianity. And this commitment to one God is a testament to the fulfilment of prophecy, as Jesus, being regarded as the ultimate prophet and Messiah, brought people back to the true worship of God, as foretold in the scriptures. As Paul declares in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, converts had 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God'. Moreover, Gentile converts to Christianity were firmly expected to completely abstain from their former worship of household, city, and imperial gods. This complete transformation in the object of worship is a clear indicator of Jesus' role as the messianic prophet, as he successfully redirected an entire society's religious focus. This withdrawal from traditional worship was unprecedented in the ancient Roman context and was regarded as objectionable by the wider populace. According to Pliny the Younger, Christians refused to worship pagan gods or curse Christ. As a result, Christians were frequently accused of 'atheism' by pagan critics due to their refusal to recognize the gods that were foundational to Roman religion and society. This accusation further solidifies Jesus' position as the messianic prophet because it

shows how radically his teachings shifted the religious landscape. The exclusivity of Christian worship, as Hurtado (2016) notes, was seen as bizarre and dangerous by polytheistic Romans. Pagans saw it as impious not to worship all gods. This stark distinction between Christianity and the surrounding religious practices emphasises Jesus' role as a prophet, bringing a radical message that defied the norm and directed people toward the worship of the one true God. His ability to instil such a profound transformation in religious beliefs and practices is characteristic of the messianic prophet sent by God to establish his kingdom on earth, which would result in a new religious order. This unwavering commitment to monotheism and rejection of pagan gods, despite societal pressure and misunderstanding, reflects Jesus' teachings and example. He consistently emphasised the worship of the one true God and condemned idolatry, showcasing his role as a prophet sent by God to guide people back to the truth.

The second distinctive feature of early Christianity that finds root in Jesus' prophetic work is that of 'ethnic inclusivism' —that is, Christianity in its early decades spread rapidly across ethnic lines, incorporating both Jews and Gentiles. This breaking down of ethnic barriers in religious practice is a hallmark of Jesus' ministry and evidences his role as the messianic prophet. In contrast to ancient pagan religion where gods and worship practices were inherent attributes of one's ethnicity or nationality, Christian identity was defined by faith commitment, not by ethnicity. This inclusive nature of Christianity echoes the teachings of Jesus, who preached love and acceptance for all, breaking down the barriers of ethnicity and status, with ancient pagan religions tied to locality and ethnicity. But early Christianity appealed widely across ethnic lines and did not require converts to change ethnicity. So Christianity, according to Hurtado (2016) was arguably the first religion with an identity not rooted in ethnicity. Yet, we now take for granted this separation of religion and ethnicity, forgetting it originated with distinctive features of early Christianity. Hence, Jesus' ministry was revolutionary in its inclusivity, reaching out to Samaritans, tax collectors, and other marginalized groups, demonstrating that he was indeed the prophesied prophet bringing God's salvation to all people, irrespective of their background, as part of the inauguration of the kingdom of God. As Paul states in Galatians 3:28, concerning life in the inaugurated kingdom, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' This represented a novelty, allowing conversion based on personal choice rather than birth right. In this way, early Christianity fostered a distinct religious identity that was separate from and transcended ethnic identity. The appeal across ethnic lines was unprecedented. Pagan converts did not take on a new ethnicity like proselytes to Judaism. Their only connection was shared faith. The universality of Christianity's message, stemming from Jesus' teachings, serves as a strong indicator of his role as the promised prophet, sent by God to unite all people under the banner of faith. This inclusivity and transcendence of ethnic boundaries align with Jesus' teachings and actions. He welcomed all, regardless of their background, into his teachings and ministry, demonstrating the universality of God's love and message, which is a clear indication of his role as a prophet sent to bring salvation to all and inaugurate the kingdom of God. More fully, a foundational prophet is not just a teacher or a guide; they are a transformative figure sent by God to establish a new covenant and lay down principles that will define the faith for generations to come. Jesus' emphasis on love and acceptance for all, regardless of ethnicity or social status, directly challenged the existing societal norms and religious exclusivity of his time. His teachings and actions demonstrated a universal call to faith, inviting everyone to partake in the kingdom of God. This inclusivity is a hallmark of Jesus' ministry and aligns with the role of the messianic prophet, who is sent to bring a universal message of salvation and establish a new path to God. The nature of this ethnic inclusivism did not just stay within the confines of rhetoric—rather, it actively shaped the early Christian community and its practices. The apostles and early believers took Jesus' teachings to heart, reaching out to Gentiles and incorporating them into the faith. This active living out of Jesus' teachings further solidifies

his role as the messianic prophet, as his message was not just heard but was also put into practice, resulting in a transformative movement that spread across ethnic lines and brought diverse communities together under the banner of Christianity. This active incorporation of diverse ethnic groups into the early Christian community was a radical departure from the religious exclusivity that characterised many other religious groups of the time. It showcased the potency of Jesus' teachings and the transformative impact of his prophetic ministry. That is, his message was not limited to a particular ethnic group or region; it was a universal call to faith, breaking down barriers and establishing a new religious identity centred on faith in Christ. By actively living out the inclusive teachings of Jesus, the early Christians were not just followers of a new faith; they were participants in a prophetic movement initiated by Jesus. This is that, they were part of the fulfilment of his mission as the messianic prophet, helping to lay down the foundations of a faith that would transform the world. The legacy of this prophetic movement is still evident today, as Christianity continues to be a faith that transcends ethnic and social boundaries, inviting all to partake in its message of love and salvation. In this way, the ethnic inclusivism of early Christianity is a testament to Jesus' role as the messianic prophet. His teachings broke down barriers, established a new religious identity, and set in motion a transformative movement that continues to impact the world to this day. This is a clear indication of the enduring and foundational nature of his prophetic ministry, solidifying his place as the ultimate prophet sent by God to guide humanity back to Him.

The third distinctive of early Christianity that finds root in Jesus' prophetic work is that of 'scriptural centricity' —that is, the reading and study of texts was absolutely core to early Christian practice, both corporate and private. This centrality of scriptures set early Christianity apart from anything else in the ancient Roman context. Jesus himself was known for his profound knowledge of the scriptures and frequently cited them in his teachings, showcasing the fulfilment of prophecies and emphasising the importance of God's word. Old Testament writings functioned as scriptures from the outset for Christians, and New Testament writings emerged quickly as scripture as well. The New Testament, including the Gospels and letters, documents Jesus' life, teachings, and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies, serving as a testament to his prophetic role. As Hurtado (2016) notes, regular scripture reading in worship and vigorous production of new religious texts were unique to early Christianity and Judaism in the ancient Roman context. So the now familiar assumption that scriptures are integral to religion comes from forgotten early Christian influence. And this reverence for scriptures in early Christianity reflects Jesus' own regard for the scriptures, further solidifying his role as a prophet who upheld and taught the word of God, which is integral to the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. According to Justin Martyr, the 'memoirs of the apostles' were read alongside 'the writings of the prophets' in worship. Christians preferred the codex for their scripture texts, diverging from the broader cultural preference for the book roll, a choice which may have contributed to the ultimate triumph of the codex. Public reading of texts, according to Hurtado (2016), featured prominently in worship gatherings, with special efforts made to make the scriptures accessible. Moreover, early Christians produced a prolific output of literature across genres and devoted immense energy to copying and disseminating texts among their circles. There was no equivalent emphasis on texts in the pagan religions of the time. The public reading of texts in worship was unique, resembling philosophical schools more than pagan cults. Immense effort went into copying and circulating texts. That is, the scriptural centricity of early Christianity, rooted in Jesus' own teachings and practices, reflects his foundational role as a prophet. His deep understanding and application of scripture set a precedent for his followers, establishing a tradition of scriptural reverence and study that would distinguish early Christianity from its contemporary religious landscapes. This commitment to scriptures underlines Jesus' role in guiding humanity back to God's Word, fulfilling prophecies and teaching the principles of the Kingdom of God. That is, Jesus utilisation of scriptures to

teach, correct, and prophesy showcased his authority and insight as a prophet, confirming the continuity between the Old Testament and his own teachings. The emergence of New Testament writings, documenting Jesus' life and teachings, further solidified this scriptural foundation, creating a comprehensive religious narrative that upheld Jesus as the ultimate prophet and guide for Christian believers. This scriptural centricity, unique to early Christianity and Judaism in the Roman context, reflects Jesus' prophetic mission to establish a faith deeply rooted in the Word of God, guiding believers towards a deeper understanding of God's will and truth.

The fourth distinctive of early Christianity that finds root in Jesus' prophetic work is that of 'ethical equality' —that is, early Christianity made everyday ethics central to commitment in a way unlike the pagan religions of Rome. Social behaviour was integral to the religious devotion expected of believers, not optional. Jesus' teachings placed a strong emphasis on ethical living and treating others with kindness, justice, and compassion, principles that became central to Christian teachings. That is, unlike ancient pagan religion focused just on pleasing the gods, early Christianity strongly emphasised everyday conduct as essential to faith. Our modern assumption that religion teaches morals and shapes behaviour is a legacy of early Christianity's forgotten distinctive emphasis on ethics. This aligns with Jesus' teachings during his ministry, where he constantly urged people to live righteous lives, uphold moral values, and treat one another with love and respect, demonstrating his role as a prophet who came to guide people in the ways of righteousness and manifest the Kingdom of God. As Paul teaches in 1 Thessalonians 4, believers must reject 'porneia' and live in sexual 'holiness.' Sexual ethics in particular, as Hurtado (2016) notes, represented a direct challenge to the sexual double standards prevalent in Roman society, with marriage elevated and extramarital relations condemned. These teachings mirror Jesus' own emphasis on purity and holiness, further evidencing his prophetic mission to bring a higher moral standard to humanity. The treatment of subordinates, such as women, children, and slaves, was also directly addressed, with direct exhortation to them representing an innovation. Jesus was known for his revolutionary treatment of women and other marginalised groups, treating them with dignity and respect, which was radical for his time and points to his prophetic nature. The 'Didache' lays down commands for virtuous living as part of 'the way of life.' Radical transformation of behaviour was urged of believers, empowered by God's Spirit, and the effort to live ethically was very much emphasised as a collective, corporate endeavour. The communal aspect of ethical living in early Christianity reflects Jesus' teachings on the importance of community and supporting one another in the faith, characteristic of his prophetic ministry. Through its strong moral teachings, delivered in the intimate setting of house churches, early Christianity fostered a potent group identity and sense of distinctiveness from the wider culture. Ethics were made central to religious commitment, not optional as in pagan cults. Social transformation was emphasised, delivered corporately in intimate house church settings. This approach to ethics and community life, according to Hurtado (2016), is a direct continuation of Jesus' teachings and practices, marking early Christianity's adherence to his prophetic message and their understanding of him as the prophet sent by God to transform lives and society. By embedding ethics, inclusivity, scripture, and monotheism into its core teachings, early Christianity not only distinguished itself from the religious norms of the Roman Empire but also solidified the perception of Jesus as a prophet sent by God. His teachings and practices, as recorded in the New Testament, served as the foundation for these distinctive features, demonstrating his pivotal role in shaping Christianity and guiding believers toward a deeper understanding of God's will. This strong moral emphasis reflects Jesus' teachings, where he emphasised love, respect, and ethical living as central to religious life. By making ethics a core part of their commitment, early Christians were following the prophetic guidance of Jesus, embodying his teachings in their everyday lives and fostering a community that sought to live out God's will.

The distinctive emphasis on ethical equality in early Christianity is a clear extension of Jesus' prophetic teachings and practices. That is, Jesus' revolutionary approach to everyday ethics and his insistence on integrating moral living into the fabric of religious practice and commitment marked a stark departure from the prevailing religious attitudes of the Roman Empire. Jesus, as a prophet, emphasised the intrinsic connection between faith and ethics, urging his followers to embody the values of the Kingdom of God in their daily lives. This emphasis on living a righteous life, treating all individuals with dignity and justice, is a testament to Jesus' role in laying the ethical foundations of Christian faith. Early Christians, in adopting these teachings, were not just establishing a religious identity—they were following the prophetic guidance of Jesus, seeking to transform society through their commitment to ethical living. This moral consciousness embedded in the fabric of early Christian communities reflects Jesus' profound influence as the messianic prophet, demonstrating his central role in shaping a religious tradition that valued and prioritised ethical equality.

Hence, one can take it to be the case that prophetic influence of Jesus was instrumental in shaping the formation of early Christianity, and thus ultimately laying down a religious foundation that significantly impacted the Western world. Through his teachings, Jesus introduced religious exclusivism, which challenged the prevailing polytheistic norms and directed worship towards a singular God. Jesus' ethos of ethnic inclusivism transcended existing societal and religious boundaries, fostering a faith community that was diverse and inclusive. Through scriptural centricity, Jesus elevated the reverence for sacred texts, establishing a scriptural foundation that informed religious practices and theological understanding in early Christianity. Furthermore, his emphasis on ethical equality brought a moral consciousness and a standard of ethical living that was integrally tied to religious commitment. Through early Christianity, Jesus' prophetic teachings not only brought about a new religious tradition but also significantly contributed to the religious landscape and understanding in the Western world, thereby manifesting the profound and enduring impact of Jesus' prophetic ministry, underlining his foundational prophetic role in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. We thus have good reason to believe that Jesus' teaching and life fulfilled a foundational prophetic role through its transformative effect and lasting impact over the religious fabric of society. That is, these distinctive features of early Christianity—scriptural centricity and ethical equality—and the manner in which these tenets have been taken to be foundational tenets of religion within contemporary society provides good evidence in support of Jesus' role as the messianic prophet sent to the world by God to establish his kingdom on earth (with its values and ways of expressing the religious life).

4.1 Evidence for Resurrection of the Prophet

4.1.1 Epistemological Evidence

The first line of evidence that will be assessed is 'epistemological evidence'—that is, evidence concerning the beliefs of Jesus' followers after his death, with the important beliefs to be considered here being those concerning the afterlife. We can utilise the work of Wright (2003) to explicate this form of evidence as follows: the early Christian perspective on the afterlife—although rooted in Jewish tradition—was distinct from its origins in several keyways. That is, from Paul in the first century to Tertullian and Origen in the second, this transformed hope centred on the notion of resurrection. Early Christians held to the Second Temple Jewish 'two-step' belief about the future: First, death and whatever lies immediately beyond it, and then, second, a new bodily existence in a newly remade world. However, within this ancient Judaic system, there were seven significant 'mutations' (or 'modifications') that took place to this belief. First, despite diverse origins, early Christians, according to Wright (2003), held a

surprisingly unified belief about the afterlife—with the range of belief within early Christianity being narrow by it focusing on a specific aspect of resurrection, whereas, as noted previously, Second Temple Jewish belief concerning the afterlife was indeed very broad. In early Christianity, there was a striking narrowing of the spectrum of beliefs about life after death compared to in Judaism. Whereas Jews like the Sadducees denied any resurrection (Matthew 22:23) and others like Philo held more spiritual views, early Christians from diverse backgrounds all modified their views to focus on bodily resurrection. There are no traces of competing perspectives lasting very long, even though the early Christians were drawn from various strands of Judaism and paganism that must have brought very different initial beliefs. This unanimous embrace of bodily resurrection makes early Christianity look more like a form of Pharisaic Judaism in its views on the afterlife (Acts 23:8). And this muting of diversity is noteworthy given the otherwise lively debates in early Christianity on all manner of issues.

Second, the importance of the notion of resurrection had shifted—in that, while it was not the focal point in broader Jewish traditions, for early Christians, resurrection became central. In second-Temple Judaism, resurrection was important but not central. Many Jewish works don't mention it at all. But in early Christianity, resurrection moved right to the very heart of belief. The reality of future bodily resurrection is assumed across early Christian writings from the New Testament through the second century fathers like Ignatius and Irenaeus. Resurrection was a key belief that outraged pagan observers like Galen and led to martyrdoms (such as the martyrdom of Polycarp). Whereas in Judaism resurrection was more peripheral, in early Christianity it became thematic and fundamental in a way it never was before.

Third, concerning the nature of the resurrected body, as Wright (2003), notes, whilst Jewish texts were vague about the body that will be possessed by individuals at the resurrection, early Christians had a fully formed and set belief in a transformed body—one that was physical but had different properties, as animated by the Spirit. In Judaism, there was little clarity or specificity given on what form the resurrected body would take, apart from it being physical. But starting with Paul, early Christianity taught that the resurrected body would be a transformed and 'transphysical' body animated by the Spirit and clothed in immortality and imperishability (1 Corinthians 15:42-54). This was a dramatic development in defining the nature of the resurrected state compared to vaguer Jewish precedents. The new body would be physical but radically differ from the present mortal body, as 1 Corinthians 15 stresses.

Fourth, there was a split in two concerning the time of the resurrection: one for Jesus and one for the rest of humanity—such that the resurrection had already started with Jesus, with the anticipation of the culmination of this through a final resurrection for everyone at the end of time. Hence, as Wright (2003) notes, no Jews prior to Christianity expected resurrection to happen first to one person ahead of a final general resurrection. Resurrection was seen as a single future event. But early Christians believed Jesus's resurrection split this into two stages (1 Corinthians 15:20-23), with him as the 'first fruits' ahead of the final resurrection at the end of history. His resurrection was an unexpected precursor that anticipated and guaranteed the ultimate resurrection. This two-stage understanding was a novel mutation in Jewish views.

Fifth, there was a 'collaborative eschatology' such that, according to Wright (2003), the resurrection of Jesus was seen as the grounds for humans being tasked with shaping the present in light of this future resurrection. Because early Christians believed resurrection had already begun with Jesus, they saw themselves as charged with transforming present life in alignment with God's inaugurated future kingdom (Rom 6:4-11). Where Jews saw resurrection as wholly future, Christians saw themselves collaborating with God's kingdom that was already present but not yet fully realized. This led to a new emphasis on living out resurrection-shaped ethics and spirituality in the here and now.

Sixth, concerning the metaphorical use of resurrection, whilst in the Old Testament, this symbolised the return from exile, in the New Testament, it was now related more to Baptism

and holiness. That is, as Wright (2003) notes, in Judaism, resurrection functioned as a metaphor for Israel's national restoration from exile (Ezekiel 37). But it took on very different metaphorical meanings in early Christianity related to baptism (Col 2:12), personal ethics (Rom 6:4-11), and spiritual renewal. These were concrete new referents grounded in present Christian experience, not yet a more abstract 'spiritual' meaning. The concrete national referent was largely lost, quite remarkably since Christianity began as a Jewish movement.

Lastly, the resurrection was now closely tied with messiahship. That is, no Second Temple Jewish tradition anticipated the Messiah's death and subsequent resurrection. Yet, according to Wright (2003), early Christians, seeing Jesus's resurrection, modified their belief, bringing together messiahship and resurrection. No Jews expected a suffering, dying, and rising Messiah. But early Christians like Paul linked the idea of resurrection to their radical claim that the crucified Jesus was indeed the Messiah (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). His resurrection was the basis for this otherwise impossible identification. Resurrection came to redefine messianic expectation and show how Jesus fulfilled it in paradoxical fashion. This was a huge mutation in Jewish messianic belief only explicable by the early Christian resurrection claims.

These seven modifications within early Christian belief on the resurrection demand a historical answer—with the consistent answer from early Christians for these modifications being what they believed occurred to Jesus three days after his crucifixion—namely, that he had resurrected from the dead. It will be important to now turn our attention to the literary evidence.

4.1.2 Literary Evidence

The second line of evidence that will be assessed is 'literary evidence'—that is, evidence concerning the form of the literature produced by Jesus' followers after his death. This literature focuses on the form of these texts—namely, the four Gospels—being that of the of eyewitness testimony, with various 'strange' features being present in the resurrection accounts. We can utilise the work of Bauckham (2017) to further explicate this evidence by first taking a look at some reasons to affirm the fact of each of the four Gospels being based on eyewitness testimony. And then, in utilising the work of Wright (2003), we can proceed onto the resurrection accounts themselves to see that they also exemplify certain strange features that indicate this to be the case for them as well.

According to Bauckham (2017) the nature of the four Gospels is best conceptualised as 'ancient biographies' that contain 'eyewitness testimony'. That is, instead of the now more traditional view of the Gospels as being a result of evolving oral traditions. One is to take the Gospels to be rooted in the testimony of individuals who directly witnessed Jesus's life and teachings—with these eyewitnesses not being passive tradition-starters, but, instead, they actively served as the primary sources and guardians of these accounts throughout their lives. Thus, an affirmation is to be made, according to Bauckham (2017), of the Gospels being the product of 'oral history' rather than that of 'oral tradition' by them being tied to specific, known eyewitnesses who, rather than just starting traditions, remained their authoritative sources.

On the basis of this, one can understand the eyewitness nature of each of the Gospels as follows: first, the Gospel of Mark, which holds a distinguished place in the New Testament, due to it being recognised by most scholars as the earliest written However, one can also further highlight its unique position on the basis of Peter being its primary eyewitness. That is, as noted by Bauckham (2017), external sources, such as Papias of Hierapolis, suggest that Mark meticulously documented Peter's recollections, despite not being an eyewitness himself. This thus positions Mark's Gospel as essentially Peter's first-hand account of Jesus, as transcribed by Mark. This conclusion, according to Bauckham, can be further emphasised by certain internal evidence within Mark. This internal evidence centres on the identification of a literary

device termed an ‘inclusio’, which, in this specific context, places Peter prominently at both the beginning and end of Mark's Gospel, framing the narrative. This inclusio thus suggests Peter as the main eyewitness source, thereby supporting the claim that Mark wrote based on Peter's testimonies. Moreover, Peter's consistent prominence among the disciples further cements the narrative's grounding in eyewitness accounts (Bauckham, 2017). And, in addition to this, the specific named characters in Mark, even those playing minor roles, serve as potential corroborative sources, adding to the historical credibility of the account, as Peter’s eyewitness testimony.

Second, the Gospel of Matthew, which, distinctly includes Jewish traditions, is grounded in eyewitness accounts. According to Papias, as noted by Bauckham (2017), Matthew originally compiled Jesus' sayings in Hebrew, which were later translated and formed the basis for the Gospel. As stressed by Bauckham (2017), however, even if not directly authored by the disciple Matthew, this Gospel is shaped by his various first-hand encounters with Jesus. This is evidenced by certain naming patterns (onomastics), featuring both common and rare Palestinian Jewish names, which align with external data, and thus indicate the historical accuracy of the Gospel. Moreover, the names of individuals in the Gospel serve a similar function as in Mark, and thus provide possible eyewitness sources from which the author of the Gospel drew from. Moreover, Matthew's frequent Old Testament references serve as reminders of the Gospel's roots in Jewish traditions, acting as a thematic inclusio.

Third, the Gospel of Luke, though Luke was not an eyewitness himself, he emphasises sourcing his account from those as he frames his narrative with themes of 'orderly accounts' and testimony from 'those who were with him from the beginning', and echoes the Petrine inclusion of Mark—yet, also highlighting the role of women disciples, potentially signalling Joanna as a primary source (Bauckham, 2017). Moreover, as the narrative is steeped in details, and names the characters who could verify events, there is evidence of Luke's commitment to preserving accurate accounts.

Fourth, the Gospel of John, has as its author the ‘Beloved Disciple,’ believed, according to Bauckham (2017), to be John the Elder (not Zebedee), who had an intimate relationship with Jesus. This particular disciple's testimony frames the Gospel, as Bauckham (2017) identifies the literary device of the inclusio in John, which emphasises the ‘Beloved Disciple’ as its primary source. Moreover, the detailed portrayal of characters in John, from Lazarus to Nicodemus, not only enriches the narrative but also reinforces its historical foundation. However, unlike the Synoptics, John doesn't provide a formal list of disciples but underlines the pivotal roles of the ‘Beloved Disciple’ and Peter within the Gospel, which suggests that the foundation of the Gospel is predicated on real encounters with Jesus.

The nature of the four Gospels as a whole is that of biographical, eyewitness testimonies concerning the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And further reason can be provided for this conclusion, concerning the resurrection accounts themselves. That is, the resurrection accounts, as noted by Wright (2003), that are featured in all four Gospels have unique features that suggest they are early accounts rather than later inventions. First, there is a notable absence of Old Testament references in the resurrection stories. That is, as noted by Wright (2003), as certain Old Testament texts were heavily relied upon elsewhere in the Gospels, this absence is peculiar—especially considering the early church's emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus aligning with the scriptures. Second, the women, who were not viewed as credible witnesses in that era, are the primary witnesses to the resurrection in the Gospels. Now, if the accounts were fabricated later, it's unlikely that women would have been chosen as the central figures, suggesting that the accounts are genuine. Third, the portrayal of the risen Jesus is unique, in that, instead of depicting Jesus in a glorified state as might be expected from scriptural prophecies–such as him being illuminated with light— the Gospels depict him in a more human form, albeit transformed (Wright, 2003). Thus, this lack of conformity to existing expectations about the

risen Jesus suggests authenticity. Fourth, the resurrection narratives do not focus on the future hope of Christian believers—even though this theme is prevalent in other New Testament writings. However, if the stories were later constructs, they likely would have included this theme. Thus, the Gospel accounts provide foundational insights into specifically why early Christianity began and took the particular form that it did—especially concerning beliefs about resurrection and Jesus. Now, two main options, according to Wright (2003), emerge to explain the nature of these accounts: first, one could suggest that the evangelists, such as Matthew, Luke, and John, constructed their narratives from the theological perspectives of early Christians such as Paul. That is, these individuals could have adapted, what Wright (2003), terms a 'transphysicality' theology—a transformative state of resurrected bodies which remains similar yet distinct from their previous state. However, this idea is historically unprecedented and surpasses the Jewish resurrection beliefs of that period. Hence, it would be astonishing if four evangelists—all independently—turned this theology into diverse narratives—all with a similar, puzzling essence, without, however, relying on the in-depth theological analyses found in earlier writings. Second, these Gospel accounts could be early oral traditions, that date back even before Paul's own writings—which thus explains the puzzling events of Jesus's resurrection. As instead of being late adaptations or fabrications, these narratives are taken here to represent the early astonishment and bewilderment of those who experienced the events. This explains why there are notable consistencies across the accounts, such as events happening on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene's presence, an angelic announcement, and early visits to the tomb (Wright, 2003). These shared details, despite their differences, suggest early traditions rather than later constructions—which would have sought to remove these inconsistencies. Certain aspects of the narratives themselves, as noted previously, challenge the idea of them being inventions. That is, the internal evidence (such as the inclusio and inclusion of names) and external evidence (such as Papias' testimony) for each Gospel, the significant role of women(often seen as unreliable witnesses) the absence of a post-mortem hope for Christians (which became increasingly significant) and the surprising omission of references to well-known scriptures, all point towards the Gospels and the resurrection stories not being fabricated or heavily edited later. Hence, the most historically probable stance is that the Gospels (and the resurrection accounts included within them)—though containing editorial elements—largely are the product of early oral history (i.e., guided eyewitness testimony). The key question here is why would anyone have written (or collated) these eyewitness-based biographies and resurrection stories concerning a figure like Jesus who had been executed as a false prophet and messianic pretender? And the answer for the early Christians was that they had genuinely believed in a resurrection event similar to these narratives, which then provided strong motivation for them witnessing to the resurrection stories, and providing the detailed biographical information for the individual whom this had uniquely happened to.

The challenge now is to explain what led to the epistemological and literary evidence that we have. That is, one can ask the important question of what the specific causal grounds for the modifications that took place and for the existence of the eyewitness stories in the Gospels? Well, two historically secure elements, as noted by Wright (2003), are that of the empty tomb and the encounters with the risen Jesus. Understanding the beliefs of early Christians within the context of ancient Judaism reveals that these two phenomena are central. First, as noted previously, within the world of ancient Judaism, the concept of resurrection was known, but the distinct Christian understanding of it differed from the traditional Jewish context—and the early Christians linked their beliefs to stories about an empty tomb and experiences of meeting a living Jesus. However, neither the empty tomb nor the appearances alone would have sparked the early Christian belief. That is, as noted by Wright (2003), an empty tomb without the appearances would be a mystery, and visions of Jesus without the empty tomb could be dismissed as hallucinations or spiritual experiences. However, when combined, the empty tomb

and Jesus' appearances provided a compelling foundation for early Christian belief (Wright, 2003). The context of ancient Judaism thus suggests that without evidence of Jesus' body disappearing and his subsequent reappearance as alive, reshaped resurrection beliefs would not have taken root, and provide the impetus for the writing of the eyewitness Gospel accounts. Therefore, there is a close link between the psychological evidence and literary evidence, and the historical evidence, which will be assessed now in light of the Criteria of Authenticity proposed by Meier (1991).[18]

4.1.3. Historical Evidence

A) Outline

The third line of evidence that will be assessed is 'historical evidence'—that is, evidence concerning the historical events of the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea, the finding of the empty tomb by the women disciples and the resurrection appearances to Jesus' followers after his death. The historical credibility of Jesus' burial account—in which Joseph of Arimathea buried the body of Jesus—indicates that there was an empty tomb when his resurrection was proclaimed, as it is thus plausible that both Jews and Christians would be familiar with the tomb's location. And, given the general background detailed previously, as early Christians conceived of Jesus' resurrection as physical, if the location of the tomb was known, the proclamation of the resurrection would not have been able to be made if it was not empty. Moreover, the discovery of the empty tomb is backed by early and independent accounts—with Mark's straightforward narrative of the events surrounding it exemplifying authenticity. Furthermore, the narrative's trustworthiness is further bolstered by its primary witnesses, as noted previously, being women—who were not seen as reliable in that era. Additionally, early Jewish objections never denied the empty tomb; instead, they claimed the disciples stole Jesus' body—which indirectly confirms an empty tomb. In line with the evidence of the empty tomb, evidence also strongly indicates that Jesus appeared to various individuals and groups after his death. As the Gospels and Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 name, multiple eyewitnesses to these appearances—who most would have would have been alive and able to be questioned concerning this. Moreover, the Gospels consistently describe these encounters as physical and align with the historical context—thus differentiating between personal visions and shared physical appearances. Taken together, this evidence thus supports Jesus' post-mortem appearances as being tangible and physical.

B) Application of Criteria

Focusing now on the empty tomb, specifically, the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, first, for the Criterion of Embarrassment, Joseph of Arimathea was part of the Sanhedrin, a powerful religious council in ancient Judea, which appears to have unanimously voted for Jesus' execution—as is evident from Mark 14:55, 15:51. Moreover, although he was a secret disciple of Jesus—a position that must have placed him in a challenging and conflicting situation—Joseph did not come to his defense during the trial, as depicted in Matt. 27:57 and John 19:38. This decision, which is undoubtedly complex, further sheds light on the intricacies of the political and religious dynamics of that time. Furthermore, his approach to Pilate in the

[18] Meier (1994) did not believe that his criteria could, in fact, be applied to the events that occurred after Jesus' burial due to his belief that a historian cannot make judgements concerning miraculous events. However, as the nature of the resurrection that is affirmed in this article is not conceived of as a miraculous event—but a natural event brought about by the direct action of God—and as this article seeks to go beyond Meier's own work in various ways, we will proceed forward to apply the criteria to these events.

evening—as described in Matt. 27:57— suggests that he wanted to keep his allegiance to Jesus discreet, which would have been embarrassing for those who were calling all to explicit allegiance to Jesus. Second, for the Criterion of Discontinuity, there are not any references in the Old Testament, in the accounts surrounding the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, which hints at someone from 'Arimathea' providing a proper burial for an adversary. Hence, this absence of predictive scriptural references makes the act even more unique in its historical context. Thus, the act of Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus isn't seen as a 'historicised prophecy'—meaning the event wasn't crafted to fit an existing prophecy. Third, for the Criterion of Multiple Attestation, all four Gospels mention Joseph of Arimathea: Mark 15:43; Matt. 27:57; Luke 23:50; and John 19:38. This widespread mention, spanning across different authors and communities, thus signifies the importance and acceptance of Joseph's role in the burial narrative. They all also confirm that Jesus received a proper burial: Mark 15:43-47; Matt. 27:57-60; Luke 23:50-53; and John 19:38-42. The unanimous portrayal underscores the fact that this burial was both respectful and in line with the Jewish customs of the time. Additionally, two independent traditions, Matt. 27:57 and John 19:38, refer to Joseph of Arimathea as a secret disciple, highlighting a consistent theme of his covert faith and admiration for Jesus amidst potential risks. Fourth, for the Criterion of Coherence, Joseph of Arimathea's actions of giving Jesus a proper burial align with Jesus' sayings on the kingdom's nearness. More specifically, his act of respect towards Jesus—despite being a member of the Sanhedrin—could be seen as an acknowledgement or at least a deep reverence for the imminent divine intervention. That is, this act can be perceived as more than just a simple act of compassion or duty—it potentially signifies Joseph's personal recognition or deep respect for the prophetic message that Jesus embodied. The risk and reverence in Joseph's actions might be an indication that he, too, was touched or moved by Jesus' teachings and saw in them the seeds of the promised divine kingdom. Fifth, for the Criterion of Rejection or Execution of Jesus, Joseph's actions are significant in this context, as, despite being part of the body that condemned Jesus, he went out of his way to ensure Jesus received a proper burial, perhaps indicating an internal conflict or acknowledgement of Jesus' unique significance. This move can be seen as a deed aligning with the understanding that Jesus wasn't just a benign moralist but a transformative figure who had a profound impact even on members of the Sanhedrin.

Now, again, for the empty tomb, specifically the women being the initial witnesses, first, for the Criterion of Embarrassment, the women are depicted as the initial eyewitnesses of the empty tomb. This is significant, as noted previously, in the societal context of the time, women were often not considered reliable witnesses. That is, their testimony in court cases was often viewed with suspicion or discounted entirely. Moreover, in further emphasising this fact, Mary Magdalene's account is given significance despite her past reputation as a former demoniac—as noted in Luke 8:2. Such a detail thus adds layers of complexity, which suggests the Gospel writers were recounting actual events rather than crafting an idealised or more culturally acceptable version. Furthermore, the male disciples' portrayal is less than favourable as they seem sceptical of Mary's account—as mentioned in Luke 24:10, 23. This scepticism adds another layer of authenticity, by capturing the genuine human reactions and uncertainties of the moment. Additionally, in Matthew's Gospel (28:13), there's an inclusion of a Jewish polemic countering the resurrection, which insinuates that the disciples might have stolen the body—such counter-claims indicate that the empty tomb was a known and acknowledged fact even among early critics of Christianity. Second, for the Criterion of Discontinuity, there are, again, no allusions in the Old Testament suggesting that the narrative of the women discovering the empty tomb is based on any existing scriptural reference. This lack of prophetic anticipation thus adds evidence to the argument that the Gospel writers weren't merely inserting Jesus' story into pre-existing Jewish expectations. Hence, the accounts of the women being the first to witness the empty tomb and their subsequent interactions with heavenly figures (be it angels

or Jesus) shouldn't be seen as a manifestation of any prophetic narrative. Rather, their narratives stand apart, and emphasise the uniqueness and ground-breaking nature of these events. Third, for the Criterion of Multiple Attestation, various Gospels unanimously highlight multiple women as the primary witnesses of the empty tomb, with references in Mark 16:1; Matt. 28:1; Luke 24:10; and John 20:1, 2. The consistency across diverse sources thus suggests that this wasn't just a single author's perspective but a widely acknowledged fact, and thus, the core message across all four Gospels is clear: the tomb was empty, and was found first by the women disciples. This conclusion is further emphasised by the consistent mention of the consistent identification of Mary Magdalene as the foremost among the women at the tomb in Mark 16:1; Matt. 28:1; Luke 24:10; and John 20:1. Mary's recurring mention indicates her pivotal role and highlights her testimony's significance, which, for no other reason than it being the case that this was so, significance is given to an otherwise marginalised figure in ancient history. Fourth, for the Criterion of Coherence, the narrative of the empty tomb and its discovery by women integrates coherently, as Jesus consistently broke societal norms—whether in his interactions with tax collectors, Samaritans, or sinners. And thus, in a culture that often marginalised women, Jesus acknowledged their worth and significance. Therefore, women being the first witnesses to such a pivotal event as the empty tomb fits well with the broader image of Jesus challenging societal conventions. Moreover, their role as witnesses also coheres with Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God, which often emphasises the last being first and the marginalised and outcast having significant roles in God's impending kingdom. Fifth, for the Criterion of Rejection or Execution, the inclusion of the women's testimonies, especially in light of societal prejudices against the testimony of women, underscores why Jesus might have been seen as so challenging and confrontational to the established order. That is, by having a narrative where marginalised individuals played a crucial role, Jesus indirectly subverted the dominant social hierarchy. Moreover, his teachings often placed him in opposition to the religious and social elite of his time. And thus, the empty tomb narrative, especially with its focus on women, offers another glimpse into the kind of revolutionary teachings and actions Jesus endorsed—which potentially contributed to the tensions that eventually led to his crucifixion.

Turning our attention now onto the appearances, for the Criterion of Embarrassment, the scriptures highlight that Jesus' siblings, including James, didn't believe in him during his earthly ministry, as evidenced in Mark 3:21, Matthew 12:46-50 and John 7:5. This initial disbelief, documented in these range of scriptures, adds a layer of embarrassment, given their later roles in the early Christian movement—as James eventually ascended to the leadership of the Jerusalem church, which would have been an embarrassing that such a leader was not a believer 'from the beginning'. Now, this dramatic change of James from sceptic to leader underscores the profound impact of the resurrection narratives on those close to Jesus, as the traditional explanation is that of the turning point that transformed James from a sceptic to a believer is on the basis of a resurrection appearance, as evidenced by 1 Corinthians 15:7, where it's mentioned that Jesus appeared to James post-resurrection. Additionally, Paul's exclusion of the women as witnesses to the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection falls under this criterion as well, as it is conceivable that Paul—in emphasising the historicity of the resurrection—might have chosen to exclude the testimony of women to avoid embarrassment and scepticism, especially when presenting his case to communities deeply influenced by Greco-Roman values. Thus, given that women's testimonies were often doubted in the Greco-Roman world, as noted previously, Paul might have strategically highlighted other witnesses to make his case more persuasive in that cultural context. Second, for the Criterion of Multiple Attestation, the phrase ‘On the third day’ finds its mention across a variety of texts, Matthew 16:21; Matt 20:19; Luke 9:22, and Luke 24:7, indicating a shared tradition and mutual agreement among diverse sources about the timeline of events. Moreover, the appearances of Jesus to Peter are documented in 1

Cor. 15:4 and Luke 24:34, and his appearances to the Twelve are noted in multiple books such as Matthew 28:16-20, Luke 24:36-49, and John 20:19-23; 26-28, underscoring the widespread attestation of these post-resurrection encounters. Furthermore, James's transformation into a firm believer of Jesus is corroborated in Acts 15:13-21, which describes him as the head of the Jerusalem church. This repeated reference across scriptures reinforces the authenticity of James's leadership and the reasons behind it, with this shift in belief being arguably attributed to Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to James, as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:7. Moreover, Paul's encounter with Jesus is both depicted in 1 Corinthians 15:8 and is also stated in Acts 9:3-6; 22:6-10; 26:12-18, which provides further multiple attestation concerning this event. Third, for the Criterion of Discontinuity, the appearances, particularly to individuals who were once sceptics, are not common themes either in pre-existing Jewish thought in the Old Testament or the subsequent Christian narrative. That is, the resurrection, followed by personal encounters with the risen Christ, particularly stands out in Jesus' narrative. For instance, the transformation of James, a former sceptic, into a key figure in early Christianity does not follow typical patterns of Jewish religious conversions or Christian evangelism post-Jesus. Similarly, Paul's dramatic turnaround after his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus does not find parallels in prior Jewish traditions or the subsequent efforts of Christian missionaries. Hence, these narratives, due to their distinctive nature, provide compelling evidence of their authenticity as they are unlikely to have been crafted based on prior traditions or later Christian narratives. Fourth, for the Criterion of Coherence, the radical transformation of figures like James, from scepticism during Jesus' ministry to leadership roles post-resurrection, is congruent with this larger framework of Jesus' teachings. That is, such transformative experiences, including that of Paul's as well, align cohesively with Jesus' consistent message of a divine, imminent intervention that will radically change the structures of society. Moreover, the resurrection appearances, when viewed in light of Jesus' prior teachings about the kingdom, serve as a culminating affirmation of his message, and a vindication of his life. That is, the appearances resonate with the recurring theme of the impending kingdom and are not just isolated, miraculous events; rather, they are consistent with Jesus' overarching narrative about God's active role in history, where Jesus and his followers, despite their suffering, will be ultimately vindicated by God. Fifth, for the Criterion of Rejection or Execution, the resurrection appearances and testimonies, by virtue of their very nature, offer insights into why Jesus was perceived as a threat to the established religious and political authorities. That is, the resurrection was not just an assertion of Jesus' prophetic status, atoning life or divine nature , but also a powerful vindication against those who rejected him. More precisely, the post-mortem appearances further established the significance of Jesus as one who was not a false prophet, or a benign moralist, but a God's agent in ushering in his kingdom. Hence, given this portrayal, it is understandable why he would meet a violent end. As Jesus' resurrection claims and subsequent appearances made him more than just a prophet uttering oracles, but, instead, they positioned him squarely against the religious and political authorities of the day. These resurrection appearances, alongside his teachings and actions during his ministry, rendered him a significant religious and potential political disruptor. The claims of his resurrection thus reinforced and heightened his challenge to the status quo, ultimately making his crucifixion at the hands of the authorities more comprehensible. In summary, applying the Criteria of Authenticity to the narratives surrounding the empty tomb, burial by Joseph of Arimathea, the initial discovery by women, and the resurrection appearances, it becomes evident that the early Christian belief concerning these events have strong historical grounds. Joseph's discreet yet respectful burial of Jesus, the courageous testimonies of women despite societal scepticism, and the transformative resurrection appearances to sceptics like James and Paul provide a basis for explaining why a modification occurred to the beliefs concerning the resurrection of the earliest Christians and the existence

of the eyewitness-based biographies that are the Gospels, and the specific Gospel stories that attest to this event.

Taking this all into account, we can thus see that the three forms of evidence: epistemological—modifications concerning beliefs on the afterlife, literary evidence—the eyewitness form of the four Gospels—and historical evidence—the evidence concerning the empty tomb and resurrection appearance—taken together are such as to be expected if Jesus did resurrect from the dead, and thus lived an atoning life—given that the resurrection was a central element of the atonement. Now, if Jesus' followers believed him to have been resurrected from the dead (and thus lived an atoning life) this belief is of vital importance, given the fact that our prior (and posterior) historical evidence indicates that he is the (messianic) prophet sent by God who established his followers ('the Twelve' and their subsequent followers) as the *authoritative community* after him. More precisely, if Jesus was the (messianic) prophet sent by God, as the prior (and posterior) evidence indicates, then it will be expected that God would ensure that his followers will seek to continue on his authoritative teaching and promulgate correct facts about his life. And thus, if his followers ('the Twelve' and their subsequent followers) believed and acted as if Jesus was resurrected from the dead, and thus lived an atoning life, then these must be the authoritative facts concerning the life of Jesus that God has permitted his followers to promulgate—and thus, given all of this, it is expected that we will find these three lines of evidence. However, this evidence is not to be expected, if this was, in fact, not the case, on the basis of our general background evidence that included a Second-Temple Jewish belief in the resurrection (and thus atonement) that would not have expected the resurrection to have occurred to anyone—let alone the Messiah—prior to the time of the general resurrection of all of creation. Hence, the second part of the posterior evidence supports the fact of Jesus being an atoning prophet. We can now turn our attention to the lines of evidence that can be provided in support of the divinity of Jesus. This will focus on certain 'pragmatic' evidence concerning the cultic devotion to Jesus by his earliest followers, and literary evidence concerning the existence of certain texts within the New Testament that ascribe to Jesus the features that were taken by the Second Temple Jews to only be had by God—and thus there being an affirmation of his divine status.

4.2 Evidence for the Divinity of the Prophet

4.2.1 Pragmatic Evidence

The first line of evidence that will be assessed is 'pragmatic evidence'—that is, evidence concerning the practice of Jesus' followers after his death, with these practices focusing on cultic devotion. We can utilise the work of Hurtado (2003) to further explicate this form of evidence as follows: for Second Temple Jewish belief, as noted previously, there was a strict adherence to cultic monotheism, which saw that of God being the sole being that was worthy of any form of worship, or cultic devotion. Yet, what can be seen in the early Christian circles is that of a very early veneration of the risen Jesus, as found in a wide range of Paul's Letters, that had emerged rapidly within Jewish circles of believers. However, this cultic devotion marked a significant 'mutation' (or 'modification') from traditional Roman-era Jewish practices, with five main features characterising this unique devotion: first, concerning prayer, early Christian prayers, as noted by Hurtado (2003), often addressed God in relation to Jesus or invoked Jesus directly. For instance, Paul references giving thanks to God 'through Jesus Christ', and God is often addressed with reference to Jesus—such as 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 1:3–4). In early Christian texts, prayer is typically offered to 'God the Father,' but God is also usually linked to Jesus, whether implicitly or explicitly. Romans 1:8 refers to giving thanks 'through Jesus Christ,' reflecting his important place in

prayer. Several prayer-wish statements in Paul's letters likely reflect actual prayers invoking God and Jesus jointly, like 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 appealing to 'our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus.' As Hurtado (2003) notes, there are similar jointly-addressed prayers in 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 and 3:5. In 2 Cor 12:8-10, Paul directly prays to 'the Lord' (Jesus) to remove his 'thorn in the flesh,' showing prayer specifically to Christ. Paul's opening and closing greetings in letters invoke God and Jesus jointly as blessing sources (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:3), reflecting liturgical prayer customs. Moreover, his closing grace benedictions feature Jesus prominently (e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:23). Collectively, these practices are unprecedented and involve direct appeal to Jesus in corporate worship.

Second, concerning invocation/confession, the early Christians frequently invoked Jesus in their worship—such as Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 1:2 to believers as 'all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' suggesting this practice. These invocations, as Hurtado (2003) notes, made the name of Jesus central to early Christian identity. 1 Corinthians 1:2 refers to believers as those who 'call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,' depicting the invocation of Jesus in worship. Acts 9:14,21 shows this was a defining practice. Romans 10:9-13 appropriates OT language about invoking YHWH for invoking Jesus instead, reflecting his centrality. Use of the Aramaic phrase Maranatha (1 Corinthians 16:22) points to invocation of Jesus in Aramaic-speaking circles. Romans 10:9-13 also refers to confessing 'Jesus is Lord,' likely another worship act. 1 Corinthians 12:3 likewise associates confessing 'Jesus is Lord' with the Holy Spirit, prefiguring Jesus' future exaltation (Phil 2:9-11). This invocation and exalted confession of Jesus have no parallels in early Judaism.

Third, concerning Baptism, this is an initiation rite which prominently featured the invocation of Jesus' name. Moreover, according to Hurtado (2003), the marking of a person as belonging to Jesus was unprecedented within Second Temple Jewish traditions. Baptism 'in/into the name of Jesus' was a signature initiation rite, marking those baptized as belonging to Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 22:16). Linking baptism specifically to Jesus in this way is unprecedented in early Judaism. Fourth, concerning the Lord's Supper, this shared meal, in early Christian worship was directly tied to the remembrance of Jesus and his sacrifice. Hence, this meal gave significance to the communal gathering and distinguished Christian worship from other religious practices of the time. The Lord's Supper commemorated Jesus' death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), with Paul calling it 'the Lord's supper' (11:20) and warning against profaning 'the body and blood of the Lord' (11:27). 1 Corinthians 10:16-22 contrasts it with pagan meals, calling it 'cup/table of the Lord' (Jesus). This gives the meal an unprecedented cultic focus on Jesus.

Fifth, concerning hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, sung praises were a hallmark of early Christian worship—with compositions often focused being on Jesus and his redemptive work. Again, in Hurtado's (2003) thought, the emphasis on Jesus in these hymns was unparalleled in other Jewish traditions of the time. Hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs were part of worship (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). These likely praised Jesus and his redemptive work, whether addressed to God or Jesus. And, this musical celebration of Jesus has no parallel in other Jewish groups.

Lastly, concerning prophecy, prophetic oracles, as Hurtado (2003) notes, were another integral part of early Christian gatherings—such that these were seen as messages from God or directly from the risen Jesus. This interchangeability of the source—God, the Holy Spirit, or Christ—was notable, especially considering the Old Testament's stance on prophecy. Prophecy was considered inspired by the Spirit or risen Jesus interchangeably (1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Rev 2-3; Acts 13:1-3). Prophecy, according to Hurtado (2003), from Jesus puts him in a God-like prophetic role. In these ways, the 'dyadic' devotional pattern in early Christianity involving Jesus and God was novel in Jewish tradition. And these practices highlight Jesus' central place in early Christian worship, and attest to Jesus' divine status—as was noted

previously in the general background evidence, cultic devotion was the means by which the divine identity was to be recognised within the Second Temple Judaic worldview.

4.2.2 Literary Evidence

The second line of evidence that will be assessed is 'literary evidence'—that is, evidence concerning the content of the literature produced by Jesus' followers after his death. We can utilise the work of Bauckham (2008) to explicate this form of evidence as follows: in correspondence to the cultic devotion that the early Christians had in relation to Jesus, the literary texts of early Christianity, which were grounded on the Second Temple Jewish theological framework detailed previously, developed—what has been termed by Bauckham (2008)—a distinct 'Christological monotheism' incorporated Jesus into the unique identity of the one God of Israel, in the sense of him being taken to be directly involved in the creational role and eschatological rule of the one God. More specifically, for creational monotheism—which affirmed the fact of God being the sole creator of all reality—with no assistant or contributor —we see, however, the early Christians, in their literary works, attributing creation directly to Jesus. For instance, John 1:1-3 depicts Jesus as the Word who was instrumental in the creation process. Similarly, we see in Colossians 1:16-17 an emphasis being made that everything was created through and for Jesus, asserting his preeminent role in creation. Moreover, by Paul, in Romans 11:36, paralleling Deuteronomy 6:4, there is a signification here of Jesus's foundational role in creation and salvation. For eschatological monotheism—where the sovereignty of God would be universally proclaimed—we see, however, in the texts of the early Christians expressing that of the sovereignty of Jesus. This finds early expression in certain interpretations of Psalm 110.1, which expresses that of Jesus being exalted on the divine throne, signifying his importance and his inclusion in God's unique rule over all creation. Further depictions of Jesus' exaltation on God's throne in the New Testament show Jesus being seated beside his Father, sharing his throne (Heb. 8:1; Rev. 3:21). Moreover, Jesus's elevated status is also indicated by his name being superior to angels (Heb. 1:5), him receiving worship alongside God (Rev. 5:11-14), and his overall superiority over all things (Ephesians 1:20-22). That is, for the former, Hebrews portrays Jesus as superior to angels using a chain of certain scriptures. This series of scriptures demonstrates Jesus's divine status, by emphasising his eternality and lordship. Moreover, it contrasts Jesus's dominion over all with the angels' roles as servants. Such descriptions thus, again, associate Jesus closely with the unique divine status reserved for YHWH.

Closely related to this elevation of Jesus, from a creational and eschatological point of view, is that of the 'Christ hymn' in Philippians 2:6-11, which provides important insights about Jesus Christ's nature and mission. According to Bauckham (2008), this important passage is best interpreted as suggesting Jesus' pre-existence—due to there being certain correlations with Isaiah's prophecies, especially Isaiah 40-55. Hence, the important phrase that is found there, 'equality with God,' indicates Christ's pre-existent sovereign status—that was only that of YHWH's, according to Second Temple Jewish belief—was now also to be ascribed to Jesus as well. This ascription of things that were believed to be only possessed by YHWH to Jesus is not an isolated incident in the literature of the early Christians, as the New Testament often interprets scriptures about YHWH as pertaining to Jesus—for example, Isaiah 8:14-15 and 45:23 are often used to demonstrate Jesus's significance and relation to YHWH, such as that of in Romans 10:9 and 14:1-11, which asserts the unity of Jesus with YHWH. And, most importantly, in Paul's declaration in I Corinthians 8:6, there is a reshaping of the Shema in such a manner as to include Jesus within God's unique divine identity.

Now, religious traditions, as noted by Hurtado (2003), in a similar manner to languages, experience an evolution leading to new variations within them. Early Christian devotion and

the literary evidence in support of Christological monotheism, can indeed be traced back, according to Hurtado (2003), to the monotheistic beliefs and practices of Second Temple Jewish traditions during the Greco-Roman period. That is, these ancient beliefs and practices did indeed recognise a divine agent, a chief figure positioned next to God, and thus, this concept provided early Christians with a framework to understand the elevated status of Jesus (Hurtado, 2003). However, while this tradition laid the groundwork, it was not the *sole* reason for the existence of the pragmatic and literary evidence—that is, the sudden eruption of dyadic devotion and Christological monotheistic beliefs, expressed through writing, in early Christian groups. Rather, what was the significant causal factor for this was the revelatory experiences had by the followers of Jesus after his death. Hence, as with the atoning life of Jesus, there is also a link between the pragmatic and literary evidence, and the historical evidence in support of the divinity of Jesus. Thus, we will now turn our attention to assessing the historical evidence for these experiences, again, in light of the Criteria of Authenticity provided by Meier (1991).

5.2.3. Historical Evidence

A) Outline

The third line of evidence that will be assessed is 'historical evidence'—that is, evidence concerning the historical events of the post-resurrection 'revelatory' experiences of Jesus' exalted status that was had by his followers after his death. Now, the ministry of Jesus, his teachings and the authority he asserted, created a deep impression on his followers. As Jesus believed he was sent by God and acted on that conviction, this led to conflicts with authorities—and thus, his crucifixion posed a dilemma for his followers regarding his relation to God. Yet, after his crucifixion, the early Christians now came to believe in Jesus as the chief divine agent, set to return for redemption. That is, after Jesus' death, his followers were convinced that he had been raised to heavenly glory by God. And thus, the risen Jesus became central in early Christian belief and worship, suggesting that their experiences and visions placed him next to God in reverence. This belief most probably stemmed from powerful experiences or visions that his followers had —with Acts, Paul's letters and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament alluding to various encounters with the risen Christ, which suggest that these visions played a significant role in shaping early Christian beliefs and practice. That is, the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were life-changing revelations for his disciples—Stephen's vision of the exalted Jesus, and Paul's transformation after encountering the resurrected Jesus further underline the profound impact of these experiences. Moreover, the Book of Revelation, though written later, also reflects these visions of the risen Christ—underpinning the belief that such experiences significantly influenced early Christian devotion, such that these experiences were not merely reactions to existing beliefs but were often the catalyst for them.

Hence, the rise of early Christian devotion to Jesus, and their Christological monotheistic beliefs concerning him, can be attributed to a mix of historical religious traditions and profound revelatory experiences. However, one can indeed take it to be the case that the visions and encounters with the risen Christ deeply influenced early Christian beliefs, leading them to view Jesus alongside God in status and worthy of worship—and thus, the power and immediacy of these experiences being pivotal in shaping the foundations of early Christian faith in the divinity of Jesus.

B) Application of Criteria

First, for the Criterion of Embarrassment, one can see that it is an evident fact that shortly after Jesus' execution, his followers believed not only in his resurrection but also in his exaltation to heavenly glory. This suggests that they had experiences that were so powerful that they could not, in fact, ignore or deny them. And thus, such profound conviction emerging shortly after what would have been perceived as a tragic defeat (the crucifixion) is unexpected. Yet, to proclaim a crucified man as the risen Messiah, who had now been exalted to glory, and is worthy of cultic glory, would have appeared foolish or even scandalous in a Jewish context. More specifically, the subsequent portrayal of Jesus as central to religious devotion, sharing God's glory and creative activity, seems counter-intuitive to what the early church would have wanted to have promoted, if they were wanting to ward off embarrassment, given the monotheistic context they emerged from. Second, for the Criterion of Discontinuity or Dissimilarity, Jesus' revelatory appearances in the New Testament seem to diverge from pre-existing Jewish beliefs. For instance, while Judaism held to the elevation of certain martyrs after their death, this did not involve that of any purported false prophets or messiahs having any sovereign status in relation to God after their death. However, in certain texts, such as in Acts 7:55-56, where Stephen, while being stoned, sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God, in Hebrews 8:1, where Jesus is deemed the high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty, in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, where Paul visions and revelations of Jesus, and a 'man in Christ' is allowed to be caught up to the third heaven, in Revelation 3:21, where Jesus' promises that he will grant them to sit with him on his throne, or in Revelation 22:1, where John sees a vision of the throne that is shared by God and Jesus, we see this being the case, which underscores the transformative nature of these revelatory encounters. Third, for the Criterion of Multiple Attestation, the appearance of Jesus post-resurrection is referred to in diverse sources: Paul's letters (1 Corinthians 15:3-8), the Gospels (Matthew 28:5-10; Mark 16:9-10; Luke 24:34; John 20:11-18), and other New Testament texts (Acts 1:3; 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 Acts 7:55-56 Revelation 1:12-18, Revelation 22:1, 3). This widespread testimony across different writers, contexts, and even geographical locations provides multiple attestation of there being various transformative appearances, visions and revelations after Jesus' death. Fourth, for the Criterion of Coherence, the vision of Stephen, as recorded in Acts 7:55-56, resonates with the larger picture of the risen Christ. As Stephen's vision, occurring in a moment of intense persecution, aligns with the broader early Christian understanding of Jesus' presence with his followers, as was stated by him in Matthew 28:20. Hence, while Stephen's vision may not detail his death, it reflects early Christian experiences that shaped their beliefs about Jesus' post crucifixion elevated status, and their subsequent devotional practice in response to this. The unprecedented nature of early Christian worship, where Jesus was venerated alongside God, suggests profound revelatory experiences. In a culture steeped in Jewish monotheism, this departure was radical and can only be attributed to experiences so profound that they reshaped theological understanding. These experiences likely depicted Jesus in connection with God, affirming his divine status without compromising the uniqueness of God. Revelatory experiences, whether through visions, prophetic utterances, or charismatic interpretations of Scriptures, were pivotal in shaping early Christian beliefs. Lastly, for the Criterion of the Rejection or Execution of Jesus, the prominence of revelations of the risen Jesus in religious devotion contrasts with an image of a benign, non-threatening Jesus—such revelations, like those detailed in the Revelation account, could indeed be perceived as challenging to religious authorities. Moreover, Paul's dramatic shift post-encounter with the risen Jesus is a further testament to this, as his descriptions in Corinthians and Galatians not only affirm the profound impact but also hint at the contentious nature of Jesus' teachings. Furthermore, Stephen's vision in Acts of Jesus' heavenly glory and the vivid experiences in Revelation both showcase the revolutionary implications of these encounters—as such encounters were not taken to simply be personal epiphanies, but had theological and socio-political implications that might have

been perceived as confrontational by the authorities. Thus, these experiences, emphasise certain reasons why the authorities believed that he was an individual who should have been rejected and executed. That is, it is apparent that the characteristics, teachings, and the very nature of Jesus, as reflected in these experiences, would be grounds for his eventual rejection and execution by the powers of his time. In summary, by using the Criteria of Authenticity, it is evident that the early Christian convictions about Jesus' resurrection and exaltation were rooted in transformative experiences that were both unique and compelling. That is, they shaped the innovative Christ-centric worship, and monotheistic beliefs, in early Christian communities, which set them apart in their Second Temple Jewish religious context.

Taking this all into account, we can thus see that the three forms of evidence: pragmatic—modifications concerning the actions of Jesus' followers after his death— literary evidence—the content of various texts within the New Testament— and historical evidence—the evidence concerning the post-resurrection revelatory experiences—taken together, as with the previous lines of evidence, are such as to be expected if Jesus' followers believed him to be divine. Again, as before, if Jesus was the foundational prophet sent by God, as the prior evidence tells us he is, then it will be expected that God would ensure that his followers will seek to continue on his authoritative teaching and promulgate true facts about his life. And thus, if his followers believed and acted as if Jesus was divine, then these must be the authoritative facts concerning Jesus that God has permitted his followers to promulgate—and thus, given all of this, it is expected that we will find these three lines of evidence. However, this evidence is not to be expected, if this was, in fact, not the case, on the basis of our general background evidence that included a Second-Temple Jewish conception of monotheism that would not have included another person besides God in the 'divine identity', or allowed for the cultic devotion of any other person outside of him. Hence, the second part of the posterior evidence supports the fact of Jesus being a divine prophet.

5.3 Grand Deception and Fulfilment of Expectations

We can thus conclude from all of this that the prior and now posterior evidence strongly indicates that Jesus is the divine and atoning prophet. However, in following Swinburne (2003) closely, we can now go beyond the prior and posterior evidence indicating this to be the case, to it *actually being the case*, based on the fact that—when focusing on the other ARs of Judaism and Islam—we do not have any prior or posterior evidence for an individual being the messianic divine prophet sent by God—in the same manner that we have for Jesus. Hence, given God's perfect goodness, he would not permit a grand (universal) deception, and thus God would not allow the available evidence to be such a manner, *if* Jesus was not, in fact, the messianic divine prophet that was sent by him. More fully, on the basis of background evidence, we have seen that there is reason to believe that God will send a messianic divine prophet to the world in order to enable humans to (personally, creatively and relationally) flourish maximally. Yet, based on the available evidence, there is no other individual—outside of the person of Jesus—that claims, or his followers have claimed, to be a candidate for having fulfilled our background expectations for what this individual sent by God would be like—namely, that of being the messianic prophet that is divine and seeks to provide humanity with an atonement. That is, on the one hand, we do have good reason to believe that the prior and posterior evidence concerning the person of Jesus strongly supports the fact of Jesus himself, and his followers, having believed this to be the case about him. Yet, there is no other candidate in the major ARs of Judaism and Islam that has, or their followers have, made a claim to have fulfilled these background expectations—as each of the other foundational prophet candidates, specifically, Moses and Muhammad, claim, on the one hand, to be a prophet but, on the other hand, do not claim (or explicitly deny) that they are divine or sought to provide humanity with a means of

atonement through their life (and/or death). Thus, the non-existence of any other plausible candidate (consistently) claiming to have fulfilled our background expectations shows that the aim to fulfil such a thing by a given individual, within the scope of the ARs, is not a common aim—despite God wanting this aim to be fulfilled (as he desires that humans flourish by following the prophet he sends). Thus, if God did not, in fact, send the person of Jesus as *the* messianic divine prophet but has established another (currently unknown) figure, or plans to establish one in the future, then, given our background expectations (that God will inevitably seek to fulfil), and the fact of there being no other plausible candidate, it would be *deceptive* of him to bring about (or permit other individuals to bring about) the existence of the amount and kind of prior and posterior evidence that there is for Jesus having fulfilled this expectation—since if he brings this about (or permits other individuals to bring this about) *and* Jesus is not this specific prophet, God would be deceiving us (or allowing a deception to occur by some other entity like the devil) on a matter of vast importance for the human race (Swinburne, 2003). In other words, God would allow individuals to rationally believe that Jesus is the messianic divine prophet sent by God into the world—and thus follow the revealed teaching that he provided—when, in fact, they are not, as another individual, yet to be discovered, is it. This would thus be like, as Swinburne (2003, 64) notes:

> leaving someone's fingerprints at the murder scene when they had not committed the murder, or spreading a rumour that someone had won a presidential election and therefore had the right to give orders to soldiers to kill, when that person had not won the election.

In virtue of his perfect goodness, God would not do this sort of thing—that is, he would not thus deceive (or permit such a massive deception). Hence, we can reasonably conclude that, if there is a God that has sent a messianic divine prophet into the world, then the prior and posterior evidence that shows Jesus to be this individual is not misleading—that is, in short, Jesus *is* the messianic divine prophet sent into the world by God to help all humans to live (personal, creative and relationally) flourishing lives to the maximal level—and this conclusion, which is grounded on philosophical, historical and theological general background evidence, can be fully affirmed without any problems concerning probability or the Historical Jesus in sight.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the article focused on providing an argument for the Christian conception of the Abrahamic religious tradition, centred on Jesus of Nazareth and his distinctive role as a divine and atoning prophet. Through utilising an a posteriori framework that is similar to that of Richard Swinburne's approach, this exploration focused on assessing the prior and posterior in light of certain philosophical, historical and theological background evidence. In this assessment, there was an employment of various themes from the works of John P. Meier, N.T. Wright, Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado, which provided a solid foundation for the conclusion that was reached: if there is a God who sent a messianic divine prophet into the world—in order for humans to (personally, creatively and relationally) flourish to the maximal level—then Jesus was, and is, this messianic figure.

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