

Chapter 2

Principle #2:



LEARN HOW TO “INFER”

“I hate these kinds of cases,” Mark muttered as he carefully pulled back the sheet on the bed. Detective Mark Richardson had a child of his own about the same age as the victim. Nothing is more disturbing than the homicide of a small infant, and it was Mark’s turn to handle this murder. Three of us stood there and examined the scene while we waited for the coroner’s investigator to arrive. Two of us were glad it wasn’t our turn.

“How do parents do this kind of thing to their own kids?” Mark posed the question rhetorically, as if he didn’t know the kind of response he was going to get from our senior partner.

“Don’t call this dirtbag a ‘parent,’” Al responded, casting a look of disgust in the direction of the disheveled parolee sitting on the couch down the hall. “If he did this, he’s nothing more than the sperm donor for this kid.”

I often get called out to assist members of our homicide unit at suspicious death scenes such as these when the manner of death is not immediately obvious. Better safe than sorry; these scenes must be investigated as homicides (until we determine otherwise) or they may become cold cases on my list. The situation surrounding this death was suspicious, so I got called to lend a hand. The baby appeared to have asphyxiated as he was lying in his father’s bed, just feet away from an unused crib located in the same room. Mom and Dad had recently separated, and the baby’s father had a history of violence against his wife going back several years. The baby’s mother was no longer living at the house, and she often worried about the safety of

her child. Her husband refused to release the baby to her, and she was afraid to seek legal help to retrieve the infant, based on her husband's violent nature. To make matters worse, her husband made several threats about strangling the boy in an effort to terrorize her.



Cold-Case Homicides

While most felonious crime investigations are limited by a *statute of limitations* (a legislated period beyond which the case cannot be legally prosecuted), homicides have no such restriction. This means that *fresh* homicides, should they go unsolved, can be investigated many years after they were committed. Investigators who have experience with cold cases can sometimes recognize the investigative pitfalls that cause cases to go cold in the first place.

As we removed the bedding around the body and examined the child more closely, we discovered he was surprisingly clean and tidy. He looked healthy and well fed. He was



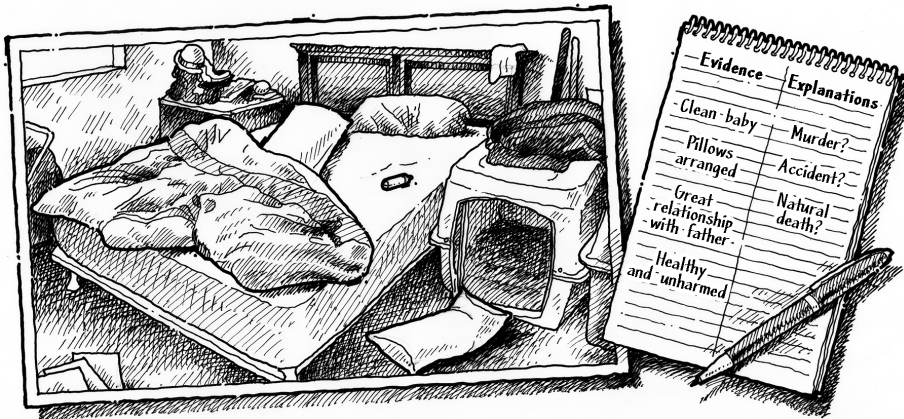
Inferences

To infer means “to gather in.” In logic, inference refers to the process of collecting data from numerous sources and then drawing conclusions based on this evidence. In legal terms, an inference is a “deduction of fact that may logically and reasonably be drawn from another fact or group of facts found or otherwise established” (Cal Evid Code § 600 [b]).

We observed the house was generally filthy and unkempt, and there were signs of drug use in the living room. When we first spoke to the victim's father, he seemed nonresponsive and hostile. He initially refused to answer simple questions and displayed a general distrust of law enforcement personnel. He was a parolee with a history of drug use, domestic violence, and felonious behavior. At first glance, one might suspect this man was capable of doing the unthinkable.

We called the coroner as we began to collect evidence and photograph everything in sight, and we didn't touch the body until the coroner's investigator arrived. Only then were we able to get a clear picture of the baby's condition. He was lying next to a bottle of fresh formula, cleanly dressed in a new diaper and pajama suit. His hair was washed, and he was lying next to a long pillow that was propped up against one side of his torso. A second long pillow appeared to have been propped against the other side of the baby, but this pillow was now lying on the floor. The baby was lying facedown on the bed a short distance from the first pillow. There were no signs of neglect or abuse on the child, not a single bruise or suspicious mark.

In our follow-up interview of the baby’s father, Al came to learn the child was his greatest treasure. Despite his many admitted failures and his emotionless, hardened exterior, the baby was this man’s one joy. He carefully slept with the infant every night and was so concerned about sudden infant death syndrome that he placed the child faceup between two large pillows next to him on the bed so he could monitor his breathing. On this particular night, one of the two pillows rolled off the bed and the baby managed to roll over on his stomach. Given everything we saw at the scene and the condition of the baby, we ruled his asphyxiation an accidental death. Al agreed this was not a homicide.



THINKING LIKE A DETECTIVE

As investigators, we just employed a methodology known as *abductive reasoning* (also known as “inferring to the most reasonable explanation”) to determine what we had at this scene. We collected all the evidential data and made a mental list of the raw facts. We then developed a list of the possible explanations that might account for the scene in general. Finally, we compared the evidence to the potential explanations and determined which explanation was, in fact, the most reasonable inference considering the evidence.

As it turns out, detectives aren’t the only people who use abductive reasoning to figure out what really happened. Historians, scientists, and all the rest of us (regardless of vocation or avocation) have experience as detectives. In fact, most of us have become accomplished investigators as a matter of necessity and practice, and we’ve been employing abductive reasoning

without giving it much thought. I had a partner once who gave me a bit of parental advice. Dave was a few years older than I was, and he had been working patrol for many years. He was



Reasonable Inferences

Courts across the land instruct jurors to draw “reasonable inferences.” These are described as “conclusions which are regarded as logical by reasonable people in the light of their experience in life” (Lannon v. Hogan, 719 F.2d 518, 521, 1st Cir. Mass. 1983).

a seasoned and salty officer, streetwise, cynical, and infinitely practical. He had two children who were already married when mine were still in high school. He was full of sage advice (along with some other stuff).

“Jim, let me tell ya something about kids. I love my two boys. I remember when they were in high school and used to go out with their friends on the weekends. I would stay up late and wait for them to come home. As soon as they walked

in the door, I would get up off the couch and give them a big hug.”

This struck me as a bit odd, given what I knew about Dave. He seldom exposed a sensitive side. “Wow, Dave, I have to tell you that I don’t usually think of you as a touchy-feely kind of guy.”

“I’m not, you moron,” Dave said, returning to form. “I hug them as tightly as possible so I can get close enough to smell them. I’m not a fool. I can tell if they’ve been smoking dope or drinking within seconds.”

You see, Dave was an evidentialist, and he applied his reasoning skills to his experience as a parent. The smell of alcohol or marijuana would serve as evidence he would later take into consideration as he was evaluating the possible activities of his children. Dave was thinking *abductively*. I bet you’ve done something similar in your role as a parent, a spouse, a son, or a daughter.



DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN *POSSIBLE* AND *REASONABLE*

All of us have learned the intuitive difference between *possible* and *reasonable*.

When it comes right down to it, just about anything is *possible*. You may not even be reading this book right now, even though you think you are. It’s *possible* aliens covertly kidnapped you last night and have induced a dreamlike, out-of-body, extraterrestrial hallucination. While

you think this experience of reading is real, you may wake up tomorrow morning to discover yourself in an alien spaceship. But let’s face it, that’s not reasonable, is it?

While it’s interesting to imagine the *possibilities*, it’s important to return eventually to what’s *reasonable*, especially when the truth is at stake. That’s why judges across the land carefully instruct juries to refrain from what is known as “speculation” when considering the explanations for what has occurred in a case. Jurors are told they “must use only the evidence that is presented”¹ during the trial. They are told to resist the temptation to consider the attorneys’ opinions about unsupported possibilities and to ignore unsupported speculation wherever they may hear it.

We also tell jurors to resist the impulse to stray from the evidence offered by asking questions like “What if ...?” or “Isn’t it possible that ...?” when these questions are driven by evidentially unsupported speculation. They must instead limit themselves to what’s reasonable considering the evidence presented to them.

In the end, our criminal courts place a high standard on *reasonableness*, and that’s important as we think about the process of abductive reasoning. This rational approach to determining truth will help us to come to the most reasonable conclusion in light of the evidence. It can be applied to more than criminal cases; we can apply the process of *abduction* to our spiritual investigations as well. But first, let’s examine the concept with a real-life example from the world of homicide investigations.



ABDUCTIVE REASONING AND DEAD GUYS

Let’s use the example of another death scene to fully illustrate the process. You and I have been called out to a “dead-body scene”—a location where a deceased person was discovered, and the circumstances seemed rather suspicious. While scenes



Speculation

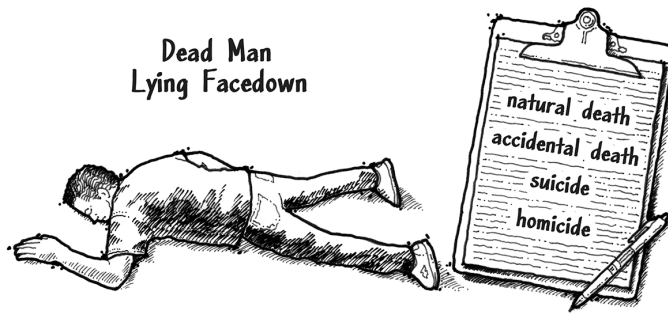
By its very definition, speculation is dangerously non-evidential:

“Reasoning based on inconclusive evidence; conjecture or supposition” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., 2003).

“A hypothesis that has been formed by speculating or conjecturing, usually with little hard evidence” (*Collins Thesaurus of the English Language, Complete and Unabridged*, 2nd ed., 2002).

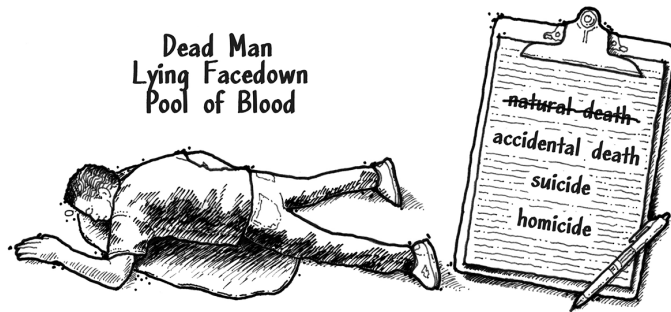
like this are sometimes homicides, they are often less sinister; there are a few other explanations. Deaths fall into one of four categories: natural deaths, accidental deaths, suicides, or homicides. It's our job to figure out which of the four explanations is the most reasonable in the following scenario.

We have been called to the scene of a DBR (a "Dead Body Report") to assist patrol officers who have already arrived and secured the location. Here are the facts we are given when we enter the room: A young man was discovered on the floor of his apartment when his roommate returned from work. The man was lying facedown. The man was cold to the touch, nonresponsive, and stiff. Okay, given these minimal facts, it seems clear we have a dead guy, but which of the four potential explanations is most reasonable, given the facts? Is this death a natural death, an accident, a suicide, or a homicide?



Given the minimal facts so far, all four of the potential explanations are still in play, aren't they? Unless we have something more to add evidentially, it will be difficult to decide if this case should be *investigated* as a homicide or simply *documented* as something other than criminal.

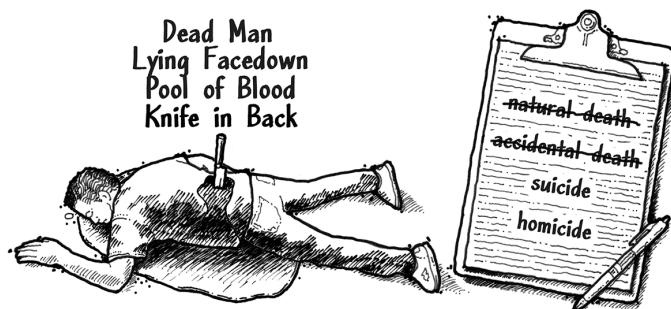
Let's change the scenario slightly and add a new piece of evidence to see if it will make things clearer. Imagine we entered the room and observed the man was lying in a pool of his own blood and that this blood seemed to come from the area of his abdomen (under his body). These are the new minimal facts: (1) A man is dead, (2) lying facedown on the floor, (3) in a pool of blood coming from the front of the man's lower abdomen. Given this new set of facts, is there any direction our investigation might take? Are any of our four explanations now more or less reasonable?



Given the new evidence, we should be comfortable removing the *natural death* explanation from consideration. After all, what kind of natural event in the human body would cause someone to bleed from his lower abdomen? Without an orifice from which to bleed naturally, this does seem an unfounded conclusion to draw; a natural death might be *possible*, but it isn't *reasonable*.

What about the other three explanations? Could this still be an accidental death? Sure, the man could have tripped and fallen on something (we wouldn't know this until we turn him over). What about a suicide or a homicide? It seems these three remaining explanations are still reasonable considering what limited evidence we have about this case. Until we learn a bit more, it will be difficult to decide which of these final three options is the most reasonable.

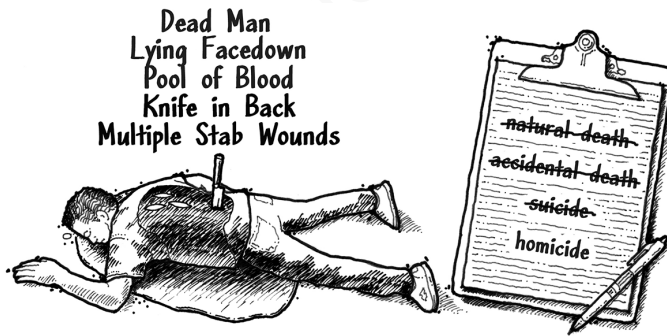
Let's add a new dimension to the case. Imagine we enter the room and see the man lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood, but now we observe a large knife stuck in his lower back. This presents us with a new set of facts: (1) The man is dead, (2) lying facedown on the floor, (3) in a pool of blood, and (4) there is a knife stuck in the man's lower back.



The presence of a knife in the victim's back seems to eliminate any reasonable inference he died *accidentally*. It's hard to imagine an accident that would account for this fact; an accidental death might be *possible* but it's not *reasonable*. More obviously, the presence of the knife most certainly affirms the unreasonable nature of a natural death, doesn't it? The most reasonable remaining explanations are either suicide or homicide, and suicide seems less and less likely, given the fact the victim's wound is located on his back. But since the wound is in the *lower* portion of his back (within his reach), let's leave this option on the table for now.

Imagine, however, a new fact exists in our scenario. Imagine that we discover three extra wounds on the victim's upper back, in addition to the one we observed earlier. Our fact list now includes: (1) A man who is dead, (2) lying facedown on the floor, (3) in a pool of blood, (4) with multiple knife wounds on his back. Our reasonable explanations are dwindling, aren't they?

In this situation, natural death, accidental death, and suicide seem out of the question. While someone may argue they are still *possible*, few would recognize them as *reasonable*. The most reasonable conclusion is simply *murder*. As responsible detectives, you and I would have no choice but to initiate a homicide investigation.



MAKING MORE DIFFICULT DISTINCTIONS

We just used abductive reasoning to determine which explanation most reasonably explained what happened at this scene. It was simple, right? But what if the scenario is more ambiguous than our dead-body scene? What if two competing explanations seem similarly reasonable? Are there any rules or principles to help us distinguish between the most reasonable explanation and a close contender? Well, over the years, I've given

this a lot of thought as I’ve investigated potential homicide suspects in cold-case murders. When considering two or more closely competing explanations for a particular event (or suspects in a murder), I now assess the following factors (keep in mind these terms are mine and may not reflect the language of other philosophers or thinkers):



1 THE TRUTH MUST BE *FEASIBLE*

(The explanation has explanatory viability)

Before I even begin to think about the evidence related to a particular murder suspect, I need to make sure he or she was available to commit the crime in the first place. I investigate the *defenses* of potential suspects, eliminating those who cannot be involved based on confirmed alibis.



2 THE TRUTH WILL USUALLY BE *STRAIGHTFORWARD*

(The explanation demonstrates explanatory simplicity)

When considering several suspects, I look for the man or woman who most simply accounts for the evidence. If *one* person’s actions can explain the evidence (rather than a theory requiring three or four different potential suspects to account for the same evidence), he or she is most likely the killer.



3 THE TRUTH SHOULD BE *EXHAUSTIVE*

(The explanation displays explanatory depth)

I also consider the suspect who most exhaustively explains the evidence I have in a case. While a particular suspect may explain one, two, or three pieces of evidence, the suspect who accounts for most (or all) of the evidence is typically the killer.



4 THE TRUTH MUST BE *LOGICAL*

(The explanation possesses explanatory consistency)

The truth is rational; for this reason, the truth about the identity of my killer must also *make sense*. Suspects commit murders for reasons of one kind or another, even if these reasons seem insufficient to you and me. The true killer will *make sense* to the jury once they understand his or her misguided motivation. Conversely, some candidates will appear logically inconsistent because they lack motive altogether.

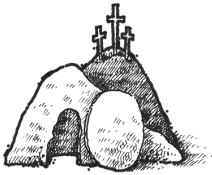


THE TRUTH WILL BE **SUPERIOR**

(The explanation achieves explanatory superiority)

Finally, I recognize that one of my suspects is unique in the superior way he or she accounts for the evidence. In essence, this suspect is a far better choice when compared to other candidates. The quality of his or her connection to the evidence is better. When I see this characteristic of *explanatory superiority*, I know I have my killer.

When a suspect meets these five criteria, I am confident I have reached the most reasonable conclusion; I know I have identified the killer.



AN ANCIENT DEATH-SCENE INVESTIGATION

Now it's time to apply this form of reasoning to a death scene that has been the topic of discussion for over two thousand years. What happened to Jesus of Nazareth? How can we explain His empty tomb? Did His disciples steal His body? Was He only injured on the cross and later recovered? Did He truly die and resurrect from the dead? We can approach these questions as detectives, using abductive reasoning.

The question of Jesus's fate might be compared to our dead-body investigation. We

examined our death scene by first identifying its *characteristics* (the facts and evidence at the scene). We next acknowledged several potential explanations to account for what we observed. Let's apply this same approach to the alleged death and resurrection of Jesus.



The *Minimal Facts* Approach

Dr. Gary Habermas (Chair, Department of Philosophy and Theology at Liberty University) has popularized the "minimal facts approach" to examining the resurrection by identifying those aspects of the resurrection story accepted by most scholars and experts (from Christians to nonbelievers). This list of accepted "minimal facts" can then be used as the basis for our process of abductive reasoning.

Dr. Gary Habermas² and Professor Mike Licona³ have taken the time to identify the "minimal facts" (or evidences) related to the resurrection. While there are many claims in the New Testament related to this important event, not all are accepted by skeptics and wary investigators.

Habermas and Licona surveyed the most respected and well-established historical scholars and identified several facts *accepted* by most researchers in the field.

They limited their list to those facts that were strongly supported (using the criteria of textual critics) and to those facts that were granted by virtually all scholars (from skeptics to conservative Christians). Habermas and Licona eventually wrote about their findings in *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.⁴

As a skeptic myself, I formed a list of New Testament claims as I first investigated the resurrection. My list was much shorter than the list assembled by Habermas and Licona. As a non-Christian, I only accepted four truths related to the death of Jesus:

1. Jesus died on the cross and was buried.
2. Jesus’s tomb was empty, and no one ever produced His body.
3. Jesus’s disciples believed they saw Jesus resurrected from the dead.
4. Jesus’s disciples were transformed following their alleged resurrection observations.

You’ll notice none of these “minimal evidences” necessitate Jesus truly rose from the dead, and I certainly did not believe the resurrection was true. In my view as an atheist, any number of explanations could account for these facts. As I examined these *bare-bones* claims related to the resurrection, I assembled the possible explanations for each assertion (employing the process of abductive reasoning). I quickly recognized every one of these explanations had its own deficiencies and liabilities (including the classic Christian account). Let’s examine the potential explanations and list their associated difficulties:



THE DISCIPLES WERE WRONG ABOUT JESUS’S DEATH

Some skeptics believe the disciples were mistaken about Jesus’s death on the cross. They propose Jesus survived the beating (and the crucifixion) and simply appeared to the disciples after He recovered.

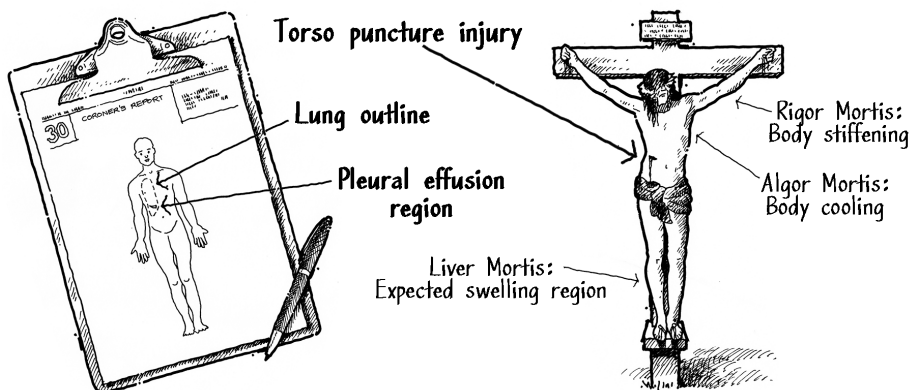
THE PROBLEMS:

While this proposal seeks to explain the empty tomb, the resurrection observations, and the transformation in the lives of the apostles, it fails to satisfactorily explain what the disciples observed and experienced when they pulled Jesus from the cross. It’s been my

experience that witnesses who first come upon the dead body of someone they care about quickly check for the most obvious sign of life. Is my friend or loved one *still breathing*? This test is simple and effective; everyone can perform it, and even those who know nothing about human biology have instinctively (and historically) relied on it. The disciples of Jesus would have reasonably checked to see if He was breathing.

In my experience as a homicide detective, I've also observed three conditions common to the bodies of dead people (known as the "Mortis Triad"). When your heart stops pushing warm blood through your body, you begin to lose warmth until you eventually reach the temperature of your environment. Dead people begin to feel "cold to the touch." This condition (known as "algor mortis") is often reported by those who discover the dead. In addition, chemical reactions begin to take place in the muscles after death occurs, resulting in stiffening and rigidity (known as "rigor mortis"). Dead people become rigid, retaining the shape they were in when they died. Finally, when the heart stops pushing your blood, gravity begins to draw it. Blood begins to pool in the bodies of dead people, responding to the force of gravity. As a result, purple discoloration begins to become apparent in those areas of the body closest to the ground (a phenomena known as "livor mortis").

In essence, dead bodies look, feel, and respond differently from living, breathing humans. Dead people, unlike those who are slipping in and out of consciousness, never respond to their injuries. They don't flinch or moan when touched. Is it reasonable to believe those who removed Jesus from the cross, took possession of His body, carried Him to the grave, and spent time treating and wrapping His body for burial would not have noticed any of these conditions common to dead bodies?



In addition to this, the Gospels report the guard stabbed Jesus and observed both blood and water pour from his body (refer to John 19:34). That’s an important observation, given John was not a coroner or medical doctor. I’ve been to my share of coroner’s autopsies, and I’ve spoken at length with coroner investigators at crime scenes. When people are injured to the point of death (such as the result of an assault or traffic accident), they often enter some form of “circulatory shock” prior to dying (because their organs and body tissues are not receiving adequate blood flow). This can sometimes result in either “pericardial effusion” (increased fluid in the membrane surrounding the heart) or “pleural effusion” (increased fluid in the membrane surrounding the lungs). When Jesus was pinned to the cross in an upright position following the terrible flogging He received, it’s reasonable to expect this kind of effusion might have taken place in response to the circulatory shock He suffered prior to dying. These fluids would certainly pour out of His body if He were pierced with a spear.

While John might expect to see blood, he knew nothing about effusion, and at this point in medical history, his readers were equally unknowledgeable. Perhaps this is why many of the early-church fathers interpreted John’s passage *allegorically* or *metaphorically*.⁵ Given their limited understanding, they simply could not comprehend how water could literally emerge from the side of Jesus. But if Jesus was already dead when the soldier stabbed Him with the spear, the appearance of water makes sense. This observation by John (made well before effusion was understood medically) is strong evidence Jesus was dead before He was removed from the cross. It is unlikely (and equally unreasonable) John inserted this confusing forensic detail to convince his readers.

In addition to these concerns from the perspective of a homicide detective, there are other problems with the proposal Jesus didn’t die on the cross:

1. Many first-century and early second-century *unfriendly* Roman sources (e.g., Thallus, Tacitus, Mara Bar-Serapion, and Phlegon) along with Jewish sources (e.g., Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud) affirmed and acknowledged Jesus was crucified and died.
2. The Roman guards faced death if they allowed a prisoner to survive crucifixion. Would they really be careless enough to remove a living person from a cross?
3. Jesus would need to control His blood loss from the beatings, crucifixion, and stabbing to survive, yet was pinned to the cross and unable to do anything that might achieve this goal.

4. Jesus displayed wounds following the resurrection but was never observed to behave as though He was wounded, even though He appeared only days after His beating, crucifixion, and stabbing.
5. Jesus disappeared from the historical record following His reported resurrection and ascension and was never sighted again (as one might expect if He recovered from His wounds and lived much beyond the young age of thirty-three).

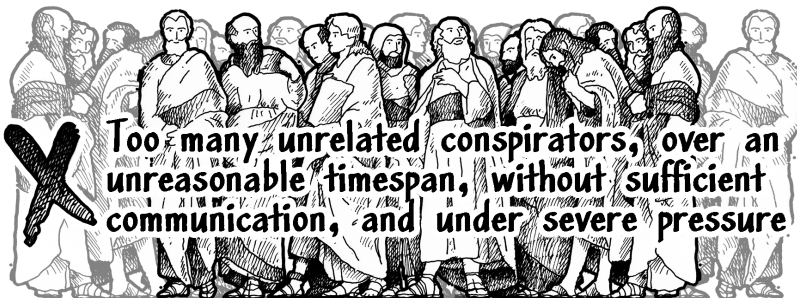


THE DISCIPLES LIED ABOUT THE RESURRECTION

Some non-Christians claim the disciples stole the body from the grave and later fabricated the stories of Jesus's resurrection appearances.

THE PROBLEMS:

While this explanation accounts for the empty tomb and the resurrection observations, it fails to account for the transformed lives of the apostles. In my years working robberies, I had the opportunity to investigate (and break) several conspiracy efforts, and I learned about the nature of successful conspiracies. We'll examine the challenge of conspiracy theories in chapter 7, but until then, let me simply say I am hesitant to embrace any theory requiring the conspiratorial effort of (1) large numbers of people who, (2) don't have significant familial relationships, nor (3) sufficient means by which to communicate, and (4) must sustain the lie over an unreasonably long timespan, while (5) enduring unimaginable pressure. The notion that the resurrection is simply a conspiratorial lie on the part of the apostles requires us to believe these men were transformed and emboldened not by the miraculous appearance of the resurrected Jesus, but by an elaborate conspiracy created without any benefit to those who were perpetuating the hoax.



In addition to this concern from the perspective of a detective, there are other factors to consider when evaluating the claim that the disciples lied about the resurrection:

1. The Jewish authorities took many precautions to make sure the tomb was guarded and sealed, knowing the removal of the body would allow the disciples to claim Jesus had risen (see Matt. 27:62–66).
2. The people local to the event would have known it was a lie (remember Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 there were still five hundred people who could testify to having seen Jesus alive after His resurrection).
3. The disciples lacked the motive to create such a lie (more on this in chapter 14).
4. The disciples’ transformation following the alleged resurrection is inconsistent with the claim the appearances were only a lie. How could their own lies transform them into courageous evangelists?



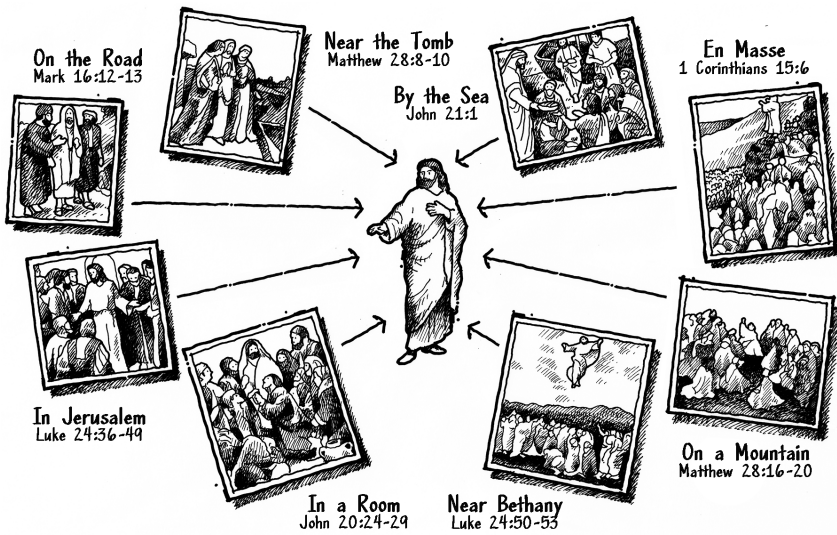
THE DISCIPLES WERE DELUSIONAL

Some skeptics believe the disciples, due to their intense grief and sorrow, only *imagined* seeing Jesus alive after His death on the cross. These critics claim the appearances were simply hallucinations resulting from wishful thinking.

THE PROBLEMS:

This only accounts for the resurrection experiences at first glance and fails to account for the empty tomb or the diversity of the resurrection observations. On those occasions and cases when I suspect someone may have imagined (or simply misinterpreted) an observation, I rely on a *cumulative* approach to establish the truth. Are there additional accounts I can compare to corroborate the statement? What is the most reasonable inference based on all available sources?

The resurrection accounts, for example, are diverse and robust. Jesus appeared to groups of varying sizes, at a variety of locations and times, involving both friends and strangers, for differing purposes and varying periods of time, as recorded by multiple authors.⁶ It’s unlikely these diverse observations are all simply hallucinations.



I frequently encounter witnesses who are related in some way to the victim in my case. These witnesses are often profoundly impacted by their grief following the murder. As a result, some allow their sorrow to impact what they remember about the victim. They may, for example, suppress all the negative characteristics of the victim's personality and amplify all the victim's virtues.

Let's face it, we all tend to think the best of people once they have died. But these imaginings are typically limited to the nature of the victim's character and not the elaborate and detailed events that involved the victim in the past. Those closest to the victim may be mistaken about his or her nature, but I've never encountered loved ones who have collectively imagined an identical set of fictional *events* involving the victim.

It's one thing to remember someone with fondness, another to imagine an elaborate and detailed history that never occurred.

In addition to these observations from the perspective of a detective, there are other reasonable concerns when considering the explanation that the disciples hallucinated or imagined the resurrection:

1. While *individuals* hallucinate, there are no examples of large *groups* of people having the exact same hallucination.

2. While a short, momentary group hallucination may seem reasonable, long, sustained, and detailed hallucinations are unsupported historically and intuitively unreasonable.
3. The risen Christ was reportedly seen on more than one occasion by several different groups (and subsets of groups). It's unreasonable these diverse sightings were additional group hallucinations of one nature or another.
4. Not all the disciples were inclined favorably toward such a hallucination. The disciples included people like Thomas, who was skeptical and did not expect Jesus to come back to life.
5. If the resurrection was simply a hallucination, what became of Jesus's corpse? The absence of the body is unexplainable under this scenario.



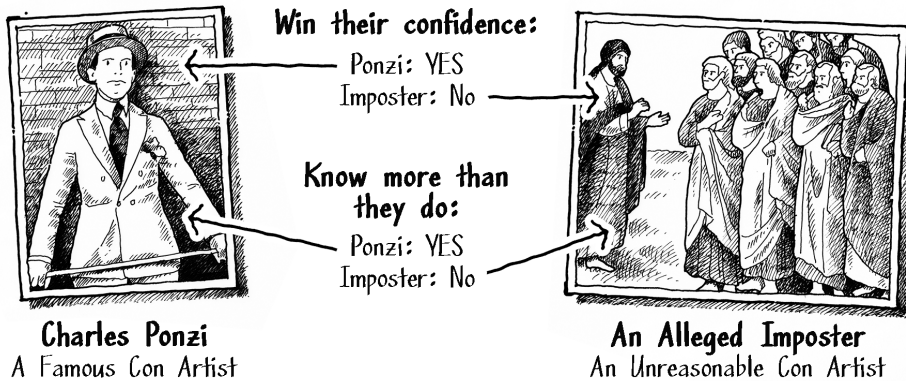
THE DISCIPLES WERE FOOLED BY AN IMPOSTER

Some nonbelievers have argued an imposter tricked the disciples and convinced them Jesus was still alive; the disciples then unknowingly advanced the lie.

THE PROBLEMS:

While this explanation accounts for the resurrection observations and transformed apostles, it requires an additional set of conspirators (other than the apostles who were later fooled) to accomplish the task of stealing the body.

Many of my partners spent several years investigating fraud and forgery crimes prior to joining us on the homicide team. I've learned a lot from these investigators, including what it takes to pull off a successful con. Accomplished con artists must (1) win the confidence of those they are trying to fool (hence the title “con” artist), and (2) know more about the subject of the deception than the person being deceived. The less the victim understands about the specific topic and area in which they are being “conned,” the more likely the con artist will be successful. Victims are often fooled and swindled out of their money because they have little or no expertise in the area in which the con artist is operating. The perpetrator can use sophisticated language and make claims outside the victim's expertise. The crook *sounds* legitimate, primarily because the victim doesn't really know what truly *is* legitimate. When the targeted victim knows more about the subject than the person attempting the con, the odds are good the perpetrator will fail at his attempt to fool the victim.



For this reason, the proposal that a sophisticated first-century con artist fooled the disciples seems unreasonable. There are many concerns with such a theory:

1. The impersonator would need to be familiar enough with Jesus's mannerisms and statements to convince the disciples. The disciples knew the topic of the con better than anyone who might con them.
2. Many of the disciples were skeptical and displayed none of the necessary naïveté that would be required for the con artist to succeed. Thomas, for example, was openly skeptical from the beginning.
3. The impersonator would need to possess miraculous powers; the disciples reported the resurrected Jesus performed many miracles and "convincing proofs" (Acts 1:2–3).
4. Who would seek to start a world religious movement if not one of the hopeful disciples? This theory requires someone *other* than the disciples to impersonate Jesus.
5. This explanation also fails to account for the empty tomb or missing body of Jesus.



THE DISCIPLES WERE INFLUENCED BY LIMITED SPIRITUAL SIGHTINGS

More recently, some skeptics have offered the theory that one or two of the disciples had a *vision* of the risen Christ and then convinced the others these spiritual sightings were legitimate. They argue additional sightings simply came as a response to the intense influence of the first *visions*.

THE PROBLEMS:

This proposal may begin to explain the transformation of the apostles, but it fails to explain the empty tomb and offers an explanation inconsistent with the biblical record. It’s not unusual to have a persuasive witness influence the beliefs of other eyewitnesses (we’ll discuss this in greater detail in chapter 4). I’ve investigated several murders in which one emphatic witness has persuaded others something occurred, even though the other witnesses weren’t even present to see the event for themselves. But these persuaded witnesses were easily distinguished from the one who persuaded them once I began to ask for their account of what happened. Only the persuader possessed the details in their most robust form. For this reason, his or her account was typically the most comprehensive, while the others tended to generalize since they didn’t see the event for themselves. In addition, when pressed to repeat the story of the one persuasive witness, the other witnesses eventually pointed to that witness as their source, especially when pressured. While it’s possible for a persuasive witness to convince some of the other witnesses his or her version of events is the true story, I’ve never encountered a *persuader* who could convince *everyone*. The more witnesses involved in a crime, the less likely all of them will be influenced by any one eyewitness, regardless of that witness’s charisma or position within the group.



This theory also suffers from all the liabilities of the earlier claim that the disciples imagined the resurrected Christ. Even if the *persuader* could convince everyone of his or

her first observation, the subsequent group *visions* are still unreasonable for all the reasons we've already discussed. There are many concerns related to the claim that a select number of *persuaders* convinced the disciples of resurrection:

1. The theory fails to account for the numerous, diverse, and separate group sightings of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. These sightings are described specifically with great detail. It's not reasonable to believe all these disciples could provide such specified detail if they were simply repeating something they didn't see for themselves.
2. As many as five hundred people were available to testify to their observations of the risen Christ (according to Paul in 1 Cor. 15:3–8). Could all these people have been influenced to imagine their own observations of Jesus? It's not reasonable to believe someone could persuade all these disciples to proclaim something they didn't truly see.
3. This explanation also fails to account for the empty tomb or the missing corpse.



THE DISCIPLES' OBSERVATIONS WERE DISTORTED LATER

Some unbelievers claim the original observations of the disciples were amplified and distorted as the legend of Jesus grew over time. These skeptics believe Jesus may have been a wise teacher, but argue the resurrection is a legendary and historically late exaggeration.

THE PROBLEMS:

This explanation may account for the empty tomb (if we assume the body was removed), but it fails to explain the early claims of the apostles related to the resurrection (more about this in chapters 11 and 13). Cold-case detectives investigate the possibility of “legendary” distortions more than other types of detectives. Given the passage of time, it seems possible witnesses may now amplify their original observations in one way or another. Fortunately, I have the record of the first investigators to assist me as I try to separate what the eyewitnesses truly saw (and reported at the time of the crime) from what they might recall today. If the original record of the first investigators is thorough and well documented, I will have a much easier time discerning the truth about what each witness saw. In my experience,

the first recollections of the eyewitnesses are usually more detailed and reliable than what they might offer thirty years later. Like other cold-case detectives, I rely on the original reports as I compare what witnesses once said to what these witnesses are saying today.

The reliability of the eyewitness accounts related to the resurrection, like the reliability of the cold-case eyewitnesses, must be confirmed by the early documentation of the *first investigators*. For this reason, the claim that the original story of Jesus was a late exaggeration is undermined by several concerns:

1. In the earliest accounts of the disciples’ activity after the crucifixion, they are seen citing the resurrection of Jesus as their primary piece of evidence that Jesus was God. From the earliest days of the Christian movement, eyewitnesses were making this claim.
2. The students of the disciples also recorded the resurrection was a key component of the disciples’ eyewitness testimony (more on this in chapter 13).
3. The earliest known Christian *creed* or oral record (as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15) includes the resurrection as a key component.
4. This explanation also fails to account for the fact the body of Jesus was not produced to demonstrate this late legend was false.



THE DISCIPLES WERE ACCURATELY REPORTING THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Christians, of course, claim Jesus truly rose from the dead and the Gospels are accurate eyewitness accounts of this event.

THE PROBLEMS:

This explanation accounts for the empty tomb, the resurrection observations, and the transformation of the apostles. It would be naive, however, to accept this explanation without recognizing a liability highlighted by skeptics and nonbelievers. The claim Jesus truly rose from the dead presents the following concern and objection:

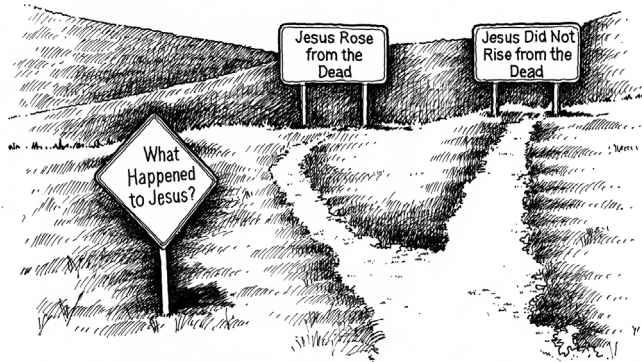
1. This explanation requires a belief in the supernatural: that Jesus had the supernatural power to rise from the dead in the first place.



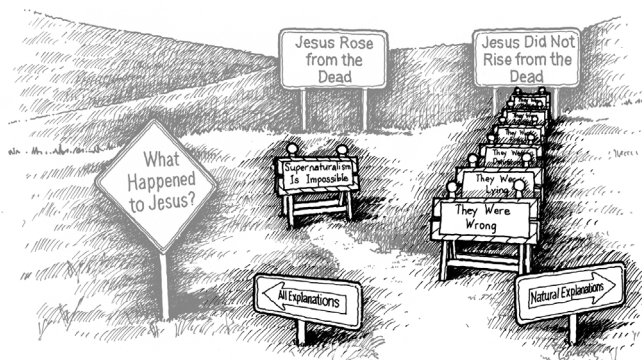
ABDUCTIVE REASONING AND THE RESURRECTION

I limited the evidence to four modest claims about the resurrection and kept my explanatory options open to all the possibilities (both *natural* and *supernatural*). The last explanation (although it is a miraculous, supernatural explanation) suffers from the least number of liabilities and deficiencies, while retaining the greatest explanatory power.

Allow me to illustrate it a different way. When it comes down to the claims about the resurrection, there are just two possibilities: Jesus either (A) rose from the dead or (B) He didn't. It's really that simple.

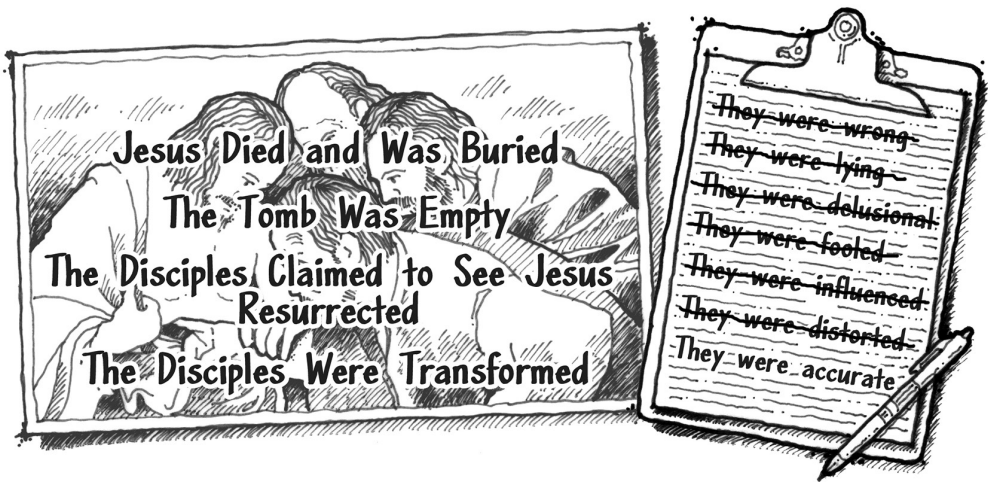


As a committed philosophical naturalist who rejected supernatural explanations, I was inclined to select *option B*. But all the naturalistic theories typically offered to explain the evidence related to Jesus were fatally flawed. Each stood as an obstacle, preventing me from reasonably reaching the conclusion the resurrection was untrue.



The Christian explanation for the resurrection involved a far less encumbered path. It only required me to jump one hurdle: my presuppositional bias against the supernatural. If I was willing to enter the investigation without this pre-existing bias, the Christian explanation accounted for the evidence most simply and most exhaustively. It is logically consistent (if we simply allow for the existence of God in the first place). It is also superior to the other accounts (given it does not suffer from all the problems we see with the other explanations).

If we approach the issue of the resurrection in an unbiased manner (without the presuppositions described in the previous chapter) and assess it as we evaluated the dead-body scene, we can judge the possible explanations and eliminate those that are unreasonable. The conclusion that Jesus was resurrected (as reported in the Gospels) can be sensibly inferred from the available evidence. The resurrection *is reasonable*.



A TOOL FOR THE CALLOUT BAG, A TIP FOR THE CHECKLIST

Okay, let's add another tool to our callout bag: an attitude about *reason* that will help us as we examine and discuss the claims of Christianity. Like other nonbelievers in our world today, I used to think of *faith* as the opposite of *reason*. In this characterization of the dichotomy, I believed atheists were reasonable “freethinkers” while believers were simple, mindless drones who blindly followed the unreasonable teaching of their leadership. But if you think about

it, *faith* is actually the opposite of *unbelief*, not *reason*. As I began to read through the Bible as a skeptic, I came to understand that the biblical definition of faith is a well-placed and reasonable inference based on evidence.⁷ I wasn't raised in the Christian culture, and I think I have an unusually high amount of respect for evidence. Perhaps this is why this definition of faith comes easily to me. I now understand it's possible for reasonable people to examine the evidence and conclude that Christianity is true. While my skeptical friends may not agree on how the evidence related to the resurrection should be interpreted, I want them to understand I've arrived at my conclusions *reasonably*.

As I speak around the country, I often encounter devoted, committed Christians who are hesitant to embrace an *evidential* faith. In many Christian circles, faith that requires evidential support is seen as weak and inferior. For many, *blind faith* (a faith that simply trusts without question) is the truest, most sincere, and most valuable form of faith we can offer God. Yet Jesus seemed to have a high regard for evidence. In John 14:11, He told those watching Him to examine "the evidence of the miracles" (NIV) if they did not believe what He said about His identity. Even after the resurrection, Jesus stayed with His disciples for an additional forty days and provided them with "many convincing proofs" He was resurrected and was who He claimed to be (Acts 1:2–3 NIV). Jesus understood the role and value of evidence and the importance of developing an evidential faith. It's time for all of us, as Christians, to develop a similarly reasonable faith.