

Expectations and the Resurrection

Dissonance, Grief, Postdiction, and the Social Psychology of Easter Belief

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Central claim

Sincerity and costly commitment establish that early Christians believed; they do not, by themselves, establish that Jesus returned bodily from death. Expectation collapse, bereavement-type experiences, scriptural reinterpretation, and social transmission form a historically live family of sincere-belief pathways. The surviving evidence does not prove that pathway's full chronology, but it leaves the pathway insufficiently excluded for a fraud-or-fact inference to succeed.

Preview: Conviction is evidence of belief, not yet of its cause

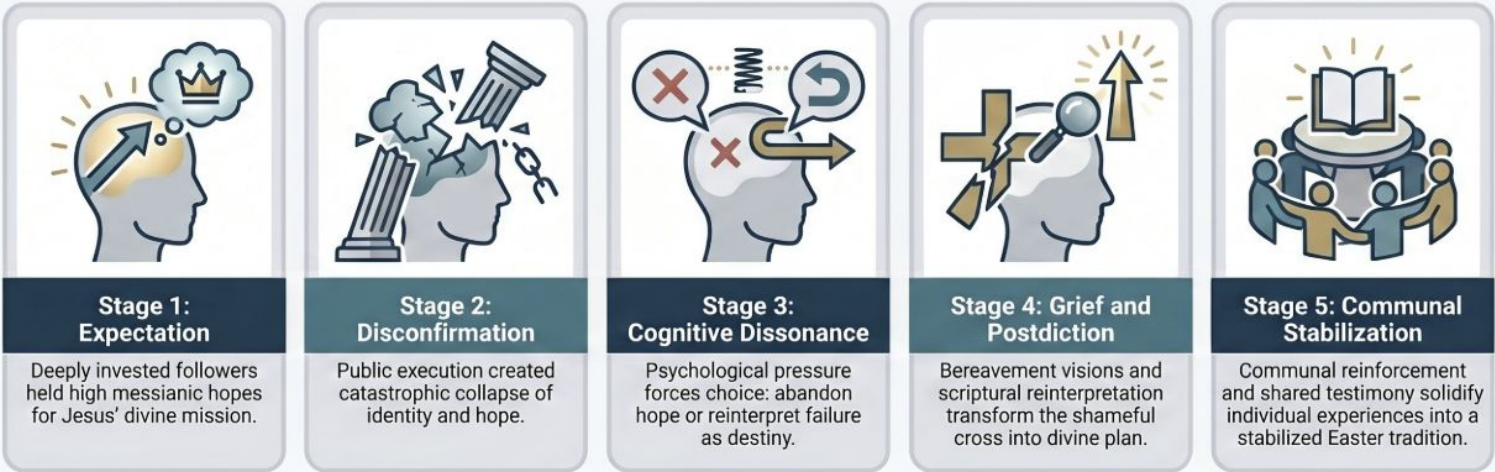
Observed record	Resurrection reading	Sincere-belief pathway	Bounded result
Early conviction, appearance traditions, proclamation, and costly commitment.	Followers encountered the bodily risen Jesus.	Experiences were interpreted and stabilized amid grief, failed expectation, scripture, and community.	Sincerity supports conviction under both; further evidence must discriminate between their causes.

The comparison does not diagnose the first followers or reduce their testimony to one mechanism. It identifies a family of ordinary pathways that a historical resurrection argument must independently constrain.

Visual preview:

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SINCERE BELIEF

Sincerity as a product of psychological expectation repair, not a choice between fraud or fact.



Read the five stages as a map of possible contributions, not a proven chronology or a complete explanation. Arrows mean that one condition can make another more likely; they do not mean that every follower passed through every stage or that psychology alone produced the Easter traditions. The map explains how honest conviction can arise without fraud. Whether group-appearance reports, empty-tomb narratives, and bodily language independently rule out that family of pathways remains a separate historical question.

Abstract

Arguments for Jesus' bodily resurrection often appeal to the sincerity, transformation, and costly commitment of the earliest Christians. Those facts bear on honesty: they make deliberate fraud less plausible. They do not yet identify what caused the conviction. This paper compares a bodily-resurrection hypothesis with a family of sincere-belief pathways involving failed expectation, cognitive dissonance, bereavement-type experience, scriptural rereading, hindsight reconstruction, social remembering, and communal reinforcement.

The comparison is causal and historical, not diagnostic. Each proposed mechanism is independently documented in human cognition or social life, but the surviving record does not establish one complete psychological sequence for the first followers. The narrower result is that early conviction, appearance tradition, conversion, and costly commitment are substantially expected under both hypotheses once experiences are interpreted as encounters with the risen Jesus. Group-appearance language, empty-tomb narratives, bodily vocabulary, and women witnesses create additional questions, yet none is an unmediated observation with a secure enough transmission history to exclude the sincere-belief family by itself.

Accordingly, sincerity defeats a simple fraud theory but not the broader class of non-fraud alternatives. A resurrection argument must show that the total record is appreciably more expected under bodily resurrection than under the strongest sincere-belief pathways, rather than asking whether those pathways can reproduce every later narrative detail from one mechanism. This conclusion is non-establishment, not disproof: it neither shows that resurrection was impossible nor claims that the proposed pathway occurred in all its details.

Keywords: resurrection; sincere belief; cognitive dissonance; bereavement experience; postdiction; social memory; scriptural reinterpretation; historical inference

1 What Sincerity Can Establish

The strongest historical resurrection arguments do not usually depend on an accusation of fraud. They emphasize that at least some early Christians were convinced that Jesus had been raised, that resurrection proclamation appeared early, and that commitment sometimes carried real costs. Major defenses then compare resurrection with rival explanations and argue that the former best accounts for the evidence (Wright 2003; Licona 2010). The important insight is that Easter belief itself requires explanation. The invalid step occurs when sincerity is allowed to decide which explanation is true.

Sincerity is evidence about a witness's relation to a claim. It counts against the hypothesis that the witness knowingly invented the claim. It is not automatically evidence of equal strength about the external cause of the witness's experience. People can be honest about what they remember, perceive, infer, or were told while being mistaken about why it occurred. This ordinary distinction is especially important when the evidence reaches us through ancient summaries, letters, narratives, and community traditions rather than direct interviews.

Four objects should therefore be kept apart:

1. an **event** in the world, such as a body returning to life;
2. an **experience**, such as seeing, sensing, dreaming of, or receiving a revelation of the deceased;
3. an **interpretation**, such as identifying that experience as an appearance of the risen Jesus; and
4. a **transmitted account**, shaped as it is remembered, repeated, disputed, and written.

The surviving sources provide evidence most directly for the third and fourth objects: some early Christians interpreted experiences and traditions as encounters with a risen Jesus, and those interpretations became central to the movement. They provide less direct access to the first two. Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 is early and important, but it is a compact received tradition rather than an

interview transcript. The Gospel narratives are richer, but their literary detail is later and the stories participate in the theological work of each text. This is not a reason to discard them. It is a reason to avoid collapsing event, experience, interpretation, and narration into one evidential unit (Allison 2005; Allison 2021).

The fraud-or-fact mistake

If costly commitment makes conscious fraud unlikely, it follows that the believers were probably sincere. It does not follow that bodily resurrection is the only remaining cause. Honest error, interpreted experience, socially transmitted memory, and combinations of these remain logically and historically distinct alternatives.

2 Historical Constraints and Historical Limits

A useful alternative must respect what the evidence plausibly constrains. It cannot begin by assuming that no one had experiences, that resurrection conviction appeared only centuries later, or that every witness was dishonest. At minimum, an adequate account should accommodate early resurrection proclamation, experiences interpreted as appearances, scriptural interpretation, communal transmission, and the movement's survival after its leader's execution.

Those constraints remain coarser than many later narratives. We do not possess contemporaneous diaries from Peter, James, Mary Magdalene, or the groups named by Paul. We do not know the wording, setting, duration, sensory character, independence, or interpersonal development of most experiences behind the traditions. Paul's own experience is included in the same appearance list but is described elsewhere in revelatory terms; how closely it resembled the earlier experiences is disputed. The phrase "appeared to more than five hundred" supplies a claim about a group, but not five hundred independent reports available for comparison.

Historical restraint must run in both directions. A critic cannot fill those gaps with a confident clinical reconstruction. A defender cannot fill them with the complete sensory and physical properties of later narratives and then treat those properties as independently attested from the beginning. Memory research does not authorize replacing a missing archive with a psychological story; it explains why later, socially transmitted narration cannot simply be projected backward without qualification (Kirk and Thatcher 2005; Allison 2010).

The responsible unit of comparison is therefore a *process family*: several mechanisms that can interact in different proportions, not one rigid five-step script. A family is harder to falsify than a single story, but it is also less ambitious. It does not claim to recover precisely what happened to each person. It asks whether ordinary processes make sincere Easter conviction plausible enough that sincerity alone cannot select bodily resurrection.

3 A Family of Sincere-Belief Pathways

3.1 Expectation, identity, and disconfirmation

Jesus' execution was not merely the loss of a teacher. For committed followers it threatened invested expectations, social identity, and judgments about what the divine purpose was accomplishing. Cognitive dissonance names the pressure created when important commitments conflict with experience. It does not imply stupidity, dishonesty, or mental illness. People reduce dissonance in several ways: abandoning a commitment, revising it, adding explanations, intensifying group support, or interpreting new experiences as confirmation (Festinger 1957).

The famous study reported in *When Prophecy Fails* concerns a small modern movement whose failed prediction was followed, for some members under particular social conditions, by renewed commitment and proselytizing (Festinger et al. 1956). It is not a template that can be copied onto first-century Judea. Subsequent analysis stresses that responses to failed prophecy vary with leadership, social support, interpretive resources, and the availability of revisions (Dawson 1999). Its relevance is narrower: disconfirmation does not force abandonment, and sincere reinterpretation is a recognized response.

3.2 Grief and experiences of presence

Bereaved people sometimes report sensing, hearing, seeing, dreaming of, or otherwise experiencing the presence of the deceased. Such reports occur outside psychotic illness and can be meaningful or comforting to those who have them. Classic and contemporary work documents their variety while warning against treating them as a single clinical category (Rees 1971; Kamp et al. 2020). The neutral expression *bereavement-type experience* is useful here because it does not decide whether any particular experience was internal, external, veridical, visionary, or religious.

This mechanism does not explain a resurrection belief by itself. An experience must be interpreted. A sensed presence may be understood as memory, dream, visitation, continued spiritual life, or bodily resurrection. Cultural concepts, scripture, expectation, conversation, and later narration affect the classification. The historical proposal is therefore not “grief caused identical hallucinations.” It is that grief-related experiences offer a non-fraud route to sincere encounter claims, after which interpretation and transmission matter.

3.3 Scriptural rereading and postdiction

Postdiction is the reconstruction of earlier expectations after an outcome is known. Hindsight bias can make an event appear more predictable or narratively prepared than it was beforehand (Roese and Vohs 2012). After Jesus’ death, followers could reread Israel’s scriptures for patterns of suffering, vindication, exaltation, and fulfillment. Such rereading may be religiously profound and historically consequential without showing that the cited texts had unambiguously predicted a crucified and bodily raised messiah before the event.

The issue is not simply mistranslation or isolated proof-texting. Scriptural interpretation can reorganize memory: sayings and events are recalled within a newly coherent story, while the story gains authority from scripture. Hays documents the Gospels’ extensive figural use of Israel’s scriptures (Hays 2016). A companion study analyzes context exchange and retrospective fulfillment claims in greater detail (Stilwell 2026a). Here the narrower point is causal: scripture supplied concepts with which loss and experience could become a resurrection narrative.

3.4 Social remembering and stabilization

Memory is neither a fixed recording nor a private possession. Conversation can align what group members remember, make some details accessible, silence others, and reshape later recall. Experimental and review literature documents both convergence and distortion in conversational remembering and social networks (Hirst and Echterhoff 2012; Coman et al. 2016). Ancient communities are not laboratory groups, and these findings do not tell us which Gospel detail changed. They establish a general caution: agreement after repeated communication is not automatically evidence of initial independence.

Communal reinforcement can stabilize a claim without anyone deciding to fabricate it. A respected person’s experience becomes testimony; testimony guides expectation; expectation affects how new experiences are classified; repeated formulas provide shared language; and public opposition can increase the value of group solidarity. This is a feedback system, not a one-way ladder. Some participants

may doubt, leave, reinterpret, or never report an experience. Others may become more certain as the communal account becomes clearer.

What the mechanism family explains

The family supplies a route from genuine loss and interpreted experience to sincere, socially durable resurrection conviction. It neither proves that this route occurred nor explains every narrative feature. Its evidential function is to show why sincerity and commitment are not exclusive predictions of bodily resurrection.

4 Comparing the Evidence Item by Item

The comparison should not ask whether one psychological mechanism reproduces the entire New Testament. It should ask what each evidential item establishes, how directly it reaches the event, and whether it is appreciably more expected under bodily resurrection than under a sincere-belief family.

Table 1: Evidence ledger: what each item supports and what remains to be shown.

Evidence item	What it directly supports	Live mediation or dependence	Discriminating burden
Early creed or formula	Resurrection belief and named appearance traditions arose early.	A compact received summary; experience details and source independence are mostly unavailable.	Show why this form of early belief is much less expected after interpreted experiences and communal transmission.
Individual appearances	At least some people were remembered as claiming or receiving encounters.	Bereavement-type, revelatory, visionary, and perceptual routes can yield sincere encounter interpretations.	Establish properties that independently favor bodily encounter over those routes.
Group appearances	A tradition reports appearances to groups, including the five hundred.	One group claim is not the same as many accessible independent accounts; shared settings can produce heterogeneous experiences and later convergence.	Recover enough independent, contemporaneous detail to exclude social and transmission pathways.
Empty-tomb narratives	Later texts present an empty tomb as part of the Easter story.	Burial knowledge, literary relations, theological development, and the narratives' relative lateness affect evidential weight.	Establish the historical core and show that it substantially favors resurrection over removal, uncertainty, development, or combinations.
Conversions and transformation	Paul, James, and others became strongly committed.	Transformative conviction follows from what was believed and experienced, not uniquely from the external cause.	Show that the changes are improbable under sincere religious experience and group reinforcement.
Costly commitment	Some adherents accepted danger, exclusion, or suffering.	Cost reveals depth of commitment but does not independently verify the commitment's cause.	Supply evidence of sincerity, then avoid counting that sincerity again as event verification.

The ledger does not assign equal weight to all alternatives. An early formula is harder for a centuries-late legend theory than for a rapid sincere-belief pathway. A well-established empty tomb would constrain hypotheses that require the body to remain publicly identifiable. A detailed set of independent group interviews could be difficult for some visionary accounts. The point is conditional: these items become discriminating only after their historical content, independence, and relative expectedness are established.

This avoids two symmetrical mistakes. The critic should not say that ordinary mechanisms can explain anything and therefore need no evidence. The defender should not demand that one alternative

explain every later detail with the same causal ingredient. Real historical explanations are often mixed: uncertain burial information, one or more powerful experiences, scriptural reinterpretation, and social transmission may jointly generate a record that no single component would produce.

5 The Strongest Resurrection-Specific Replies

5.1 Jewish expectations and bodily language

A common reply is that Jewish resurrection meant bodily life, often collective and eschatological, not an immortal soul or private vision. Therefore, the argument continues, experiences of a deceased Jesus would not naturally produce the claim that he had been raised bodily; something like an empty tomb and physical encounter is needed. Wright develops this challenge in exceptional historical detail (Wright 2003).

This is genuine pressure on an oversimplified visionary theory. It does not eliminate reinterpretation. Novel beliefs arise by modifying available categories, and Easter belief itself is presented as a striking temporal revision: one person raised in advance of the general resurrection. The question is not whether followers possessed a ready-made category labeled “individual messiah rises on the third day.” It is whether experiences, scripture, and communal reasoning could transform existing vindication and resurrection concepts. Bodily language shows what adherents came to affirm; it does not by itself reveal which experience compelled that affirmation.

5.2 Group appearances

Group claims matter because a private bereavement experience does not straightforwardly explain several people believing they encountered the same person. Yet the evidential form must remain visible. Paul supplies a list and a large-number claim, not the individual testimony of the five hundred. The Gospels supply narrated group scenes, not independent transcripts from each participant. Group settings can include ambiguous stimuli, expectation, deference, emotional contagion, different subjective experiences, and later agreement about what the event meant. None of these must be asserted as the actual explanation to see that “many people were named” and “many independent bodily observations were documented” are different propositions.

A strong group case would include early, independent, detailed accounts with controlled opportunity for communication and agreement about the event’s sensory properties. The surviving record is far thinner. Group traditions therefore raise the cost of some alternatives, but they do not make sincere group conviction inexplicable.

5.3 The empty tomb and women witnesses

An empty tomb would not entail resurrection, but it could combine with appearances to favor it over pathways that require an occupied, identifiable grave. The historical question concerns what core is early and independent. The canonical accounts differ in participants, timing, messengers, instructions, and subsequent encounters. Literary embarrassment arguments about women witnesses are not worthless, but their force is limited: women are narratively connected with burial and mourning, and a detail can serve theological or literary purposes while remaining culturally awkward.

The balanced conclusion is not “the tomb was certainly invented.” It is that empty-tomb evidence must carry its own historical argument. It cannot be silently imported into every appearance claim, and its establishment would still leave removal, relocation, burial uncertainty, and narrative development to be compared with bodily resurrection (Allison 2005; Allison 2021; Licona 2010).

5.4 Conversions, transformation, and suffering

Paul's conversion and the prominence of James are important because neither fits a simple picture of disciples protecting a known fraud. They are less decisive against sincere-belief pathways. Religious experiences can transform previous opponents, and social movements often include later converts whose certainty exceeds that of some original members. Likewise, willingness to suffer is powerful evidence that a commitment is valued and probably sincere. It does not distinguish true beliefs from false but deeply held beliefs unless the sufferer had uniquely direct access to the claimed event and knowingly faced a recantation choice tied to that access.

The available martyrdom traditions vary in date and detail. Even where suffering is secure, the evidential conclusion should match the evidence: these people were not casual adherents. The inference from depth of conviction to the cause of conviction still requires the comparative step.

6 What Would Actually Discriminate?

The sincere-belief family should not become an all-purpose refuge. It can be constrained. Evidence would favor bodily resurrection over that family to the extent that it established features difficult to produce through interpreted experience and transmission. Examples include contemporaneous and mutually independent descriptions of sustained, multi-sensory interaction; secure evidence that the corpse was publicly identified as absent under conditions excluding ordinary removal; documented group observations with individual detail preceding communal harmonization; and predictions recorded before the event rather than reconstructed afterward.

Conversely, evidence would increase the relative plausibility of sincere-belief pathways if the earliest reports remained experience-poor and formulaic, if detail grew with later narration, if accounts showed literary dependence, if scriptural patterns organized the stories retrospectively, or if putatively separate evidence items proved causally downstream from the same conviction. None of these features by itself would disprove resurrection. They affect the comparative expectedness of the record.

The broader Bayesian accounting is developed elsewhere (Stilwell 2026b). Its application here can be stated without invented numbers. Let bodily resurrection and the sincere-belief family both predict earnest proclamation after an experience has been interpreted as encounter. Sincerity then has limited power to distinguish them. The comparison must turn on evidence closer to the event and less dependent on the belief it is supposed to confirm.

Table 2: From evidence of conviction to evidence of cause.

Question	Weak inference	Required evidence	Proper conclusion if missing
Were claimants sincere?	They suffered, so the event occurred.	Conduct, consistency, and circumstances bearing on conscious deception.	Fraud may be unlikely; non-fraud error remains open.
Did experiences occur?	A later appearance story supplies its own event.	Early testimony about experience form, timing, identity, and independence.	Early belief is secure; experience properties remain partly unknown.
Were experiences bodily encounters?	Bodily doctrine proves bodily perception.	Independent multi-sensory detail resistant to later interpretation and harmonization.	Doctrine and causal experience must be kept distinct.
Was the tomb empty?	Appearance conviction requires an empty grave.	Early, independent burial and discovery evidence with rival causes compared.	Tomb status should not be counted as settled background.
Does the total record favor resurrection?	Every item is compatible with resurrection.	A joint comparison that models ordinary mechanisms, source dependence, and mixed alternatives.	Compatibility alone does not establish the preferred cause.

7 Conclusion

The social psychology of Easter belief is most useful when it is modest. It cannot recover private experience from sparse ancient sources, and it should not replace historical gaps with clinical labels. It can expose a false dilemma. Followers need not have been frauds for their resurrection conviction to have arisen through ordinary human responses to grief, disconfirmation, scripture, memory, and group life.

Early proclamation, appearance traditions, conversion, and costly commitment support the existence and seriousness of Easter belief. They do not carry equal weight as independent observations of a bodily event. Group appearances, empty-tomb narratives, and bodily language deserve separate analysis, but the surviving form of each remains mediated by interpretation and transmission. No single mechanism has been shown to generate every detail; no such showing is needed to defeat an inference from sincerity alone.

The warranted conclusion is therefore bounded. A bodily resurrection remains one candidate explanation for Christian conviction. A family of sincere-belief pathways remains another. Because sincerity is substantially expected under both once experiences are interpreted as encounters, sincerity cannot decide between them. The public case must identify evidence that reaches past conviction to its cause and is appreciably more expected if a corpse returned to life. Until that comparative burden is met, honest belief is historically significant without being historical proof.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The notation below makes the paper’s central comparison explicit. No advanced mathematics is needed. Each formula is first stated in symbols and then translated into ordinary language. The symbols keep two questions separate: *Can a hypothesis explain the evidence?* and *Does it explain the evidence better than its competitor?* The appendix is a map of evidential roles, not a numerical simulation or a claim that psychology operates deterministically.

A.1 Plain-language inference

- P1.** If sincerity is to establish bodily resurrection over the sincere-belief family, sincerity must be appreciably more expected under bodily resurrection than under that family.
- P2.** Once an experience is interpreted as an encounter with the risen Jesus, bodily resurrection and sincere-belief pathways both make earnest proclamation and costly commitment intelligible.
- P3.** The surviving sincerity evidence does not independently exclude the expectation, bereavement, reinterpretation, and social-transmission mechanisms comprising the sincere-belief family.

Conclusion. Sincerity and costly commitment, considered by themselves, do not establish bodily resurrection over the sincere-belief family.

Why the conclusion follows. Evidence distinguishes two explanations only when it fits one better than the other. A wet sidewalk, for example, is evidence that water reached the pavement. It does not distinguish rain from a sprinkler if both would readily produce a wet sidewalk. In the same way, sincere commitment shows that early Christians believed. If both bodily resurrection and a non-fraud pathway can readily lead to that commitment, sincerity alone cannot identify which cause produced it. This is a valid *failure-of-discrimination* argument: the evidence may establish a fact about belief while failing to select the cause of that belief.

What remains historically open. Premise 1 is a general rule about comparative evidence. Premises 2 and 3 are historical and empirical: they depend on how plausible the two pathways are and what the surviving sources contain. Those premises could be challenged by independent evidence showing that sincere commitment is much harder to produce under the non-fraud pathway. The conclusion is therefore limited. It states what sincerity establishes *by itself*; it does not state that bodily resurrection is false.

A.2 Symbols

The following definitions fix the notation used in the symbolic form. A hypothesis is an explanation being tested. The vertical bar in a probability expression means “assuming that”; it does not mean that the assumption has already been proved.

- H_R : the bodily-resurrection hypothesis: Jesus returned bodily from death. This is the event explanation under examination.
- H_S : the sincere-belief comparison family: one or more non-fraud processes produced experiences and interpretations that became resurrection conviction. The processes may combine in different proportions.
- O : the total surviving record being compared, including early formulas, narratives, reported appearances, proclamation, and conduct.
- S : the portion of O bearing most directly on sincerity and costly commitment. Separating S from O prevents evidence of conviction from being confused with the whole historical case.
- X : strong expectation and identity investment before Jesus’ death. Greater investment can make failed expectation more difficult to absorb.
- D : Jesus’ disconfirming death. It is the loss that conflicts with the followers’ hopes and therefore calls for explanation.
- C : cognitive-dissonance pressure: the strain created when an important commitment conflicts with events. It can motivate abandonment, revision, or reinforcement.
- B : a bereavement-type or visionary experience. It supplies a possible non-fraud source of a perceived encounter but does not determine how that experience will be interpreted.
- Q : scriptural reinterpretation and postdiction. These processes can supply a story in which the death and reported experiences acquire new meaning.

- M : social memory and communal transmission. Conversation, teaching, and repeated formulas can stabilize, align, or elaborate shared claims.
- T : a stabilized resurrection tradition. It is the communal belief-and-report state that eventually contributes to the record O .
- P : the probability or expectedness operator. It asks how well an assumption leads us to expect an item of evidence; it does not report a measured ancient frequency.
- $|$: “given” or “assuming”. Thus $P(S | H_R)$ asks how expected sincerity would be *if* bodily resurrection were assumed.
- Λ_S : the likelihood ratio for sincerity. It compares how well H_R and H_S predict the same evidence S .
- $\wedge$: “and”; both connected conditions obtain.
- $\rightsquigarrow$: can causally contribute to or make more likely. It does not mean logical entailment, inevitability, or a complete chronology.
- $\times$: multiply. In the final equation, the evidence changes the starting comparison by multiplying it by the record’s comparative force.

A.3 The sincerity likelihood ratio

The first formula asks a narrow question: does sincerity favor bodily resurrection over a sincere-belief pathway?

$$\Lambda_S = \frac{P(S | H_R)}{P(S | H_S)}. \quad (1)$$

Read the numerator first. $P(S | H_R)$ asks: if Jesus returned bodily from death, how expected would sincere proclamation and costly commitment be? The expression does *not* ask how likely resurrection is after observing sincerity. That reversed question would be written $P(H_R | S)$. Conditional probability has a direction, and reversing the terms changes the question.

Then read the denominator. $P(S | H_S)$ asks: if followers had powerful experiences that they honestly interpreted as encounters, and those interpretations were reinforced and transmitted, how expected would the same sincerity be? A high value in the denominator matters because an alternative explanation receives credit for evidence it also predicts.

Finally compare the two. Dividing the numerator by the denominator gives three possible readings:

- If $\Lambda_S > 1$, sincerity favors H_R to some degree because sincerity is more expected under bodily resurrection.
- If $\Lambda_S = 1$, sincerity is neutral between H_R and H_S because both predict it equally well.
- If $\Lambda_S < 1$, sincerity favors H_S because it is more expected under the sincere-belief family.

The formula does not need invented numbers to expose the logical burden. Saying “sincere commitment would make sense if resurrection occurred” addresses only the numerator. The comparative argument is incomplete until the denominator is also examined. The paper’s claim is modest: the surviving evidence does not justify treating the denominator as negligible, so sincerity alone has not been shown to supply a large advantage for H_R .

A.4 The process family, with feedback

The next formulas unpack the denominator by showing how a non-fraud pathway could produce a stable tradition. They describe possible causal contributions, not a fixed sequence through which every follower must have passed.

$$(X \wedge D) \rightsquigarrow C, \quad (2)$$

$$\{C, B, Q, M\} \rightsquigarrow T, \quad (3)$$

$$T \rightsquigarrow O, \quad T \rightsquigarrow M \rightsquigarrow T. \quad (4)$$

Equation 2: expectation meets defeat. The parentheses group two conditions. $X \wedge D$ means that strong prior investment and Jesus’ death occur together. The wavy arrow then says that this combination can contribute to C , the pressure to resolve a serious conflict between expectation and event. It does not say that dissonance was the only reaction or that every follower responded in the same way.

Equation 3: several routes can feed one tradition. The braces group four possible contributors: dissonance pressure C , bereavement-type experience B , scriptural reinterpretation Q , and social transmission M . The arrow

to T says that one or more of these can help produce a stable resurrection tradition. The formula allows different histories: one person might report a powerful experience; another might be persuaded by scripture and trusted testimony; a community might then develop shared language for both.

Equation 4: the process need not be one-way. $T \rightsquigarrow O$ says that a stable tradition helps produce the writings and reports that survive. The second chain, $T \rightsquigarrow M \rightsquigarrow T$, describes feedback. Once a tradition exists, it guides later conversation, teaching, expectation, and memory; those social processes can then strengthen or reshape the tradition. A later agreement can therefore reflect both an earlier experience and the community's later handling of it.

What this map does and does not show. The map shows that honest conviction has a coherent non-fraud route. It does not prove that this route occurred, assign a diagnosis to any named follower, explain the empty tomb, or claim that all reported appearances arose in the same way. Its role is narrower: it prevents sincerity from being treated as evidence that only H_R could produce.

A.5 The total comparison

Sincerity is only one part of the evidence. The final formula shows how the entire record would have to be compared:

$$\frac{P(H_R | O)}{P(H_S | O)} = \frac{P(H_R)}{P(H_S)} \times \frac{P(O | H_R)}{P(O | H_S)}. \quad (5)$$

Left side: the comparison after the evidence. $P(H_R | O)$ is the credibility of bodily resurrection after considering the total record O . $P(H_S | O)$ is the corresponding credibility of the sincere-belief family. Dividing the first by the second gives their *posterior odds*—their relative standing after the evidence is considered. The word “odds” here means a ratio, not a wager.

First ratio on the right: the starting comparison. $P(H_R)/P(H_S)$ gives the *prior odds*: the relative standing of the two explanations before adding the record currently under review. The formula does not tell us what those starting values must be. It shows that the historical evidence does not enter a blank slate; it updates a starting comparison.

Second ratio on the right: what the whole record favors. $P(O | H_R)/P(O | H_S)$ asks how much better the total record is predicted by bodily resurrection than by the sincere-belief family. This is the total-record likelihood ratio. Like the sincerity ratio, a value above one favors H_R , a value of one is neutral, and a value below one favors H_S .

Why the multiplication sign appears. The posterior comparison equals the starting comparison multiplied by the evidence's comparative force. Evidence favorable to H_R raises its relative standing; neutral evidence leaves the starting comparison unchanged; evidence favorable to H_S lowers the relative standing of H_R . This equation is bookkeeping: it prevents a favorable conclusion from appearing unless both the starting assumptions and the evidential comparison are made visible.

Why S cannot simply be counted again. Sincerity evidence S is already part of the total record O . Proclamation, transformation, and willingness to suffer may all flow from the same conviction. Treating each downstream result as a fully independent observation of the initiating event would exaggerate the evidence. The relevant quantity is therefore the expectedness of the *joint* record: the items considered together with their causal and source relationships.

A non-numerical worked reading. The logic can be followed in four steps:

1. Observe that early Christians proclaimed resurrection sincerely and sometimes accepted serious costs.
2. Use that observation to reduce the plausibility of conscious fraud.
3. Ask whether the same sincerity is also expected if powerful experiences were honestly interpreted and socially stabilized. If it is, sincerity has little power to choose between H_R and H_S .
4. Turn to the remaining record—especially event-proximate, independent evidence—and ask whether it is appreciably more expected under H_R than under H_S .

Equation 5 does not say that H_R and H_S exhaust every possibility, and it supplies no numerical probabilities. A companion analysis examines the wider accounting problem (Stilwell 2026b). The present paper's contribution is to give the denominator a concrete non-fraud process family. That is enough to show why honest conviction cannot be used as a shortcut from testimony to bodily event, while leaving the truth of bodily resurrection open to further evidence.

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