

# The Documentary Delay

Papyri, Oral Memory, and the Evidential Cost of Late Gospel Composition

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

ORCID: 0009-0009-3725-8682

Revised August 2026

## Central claim

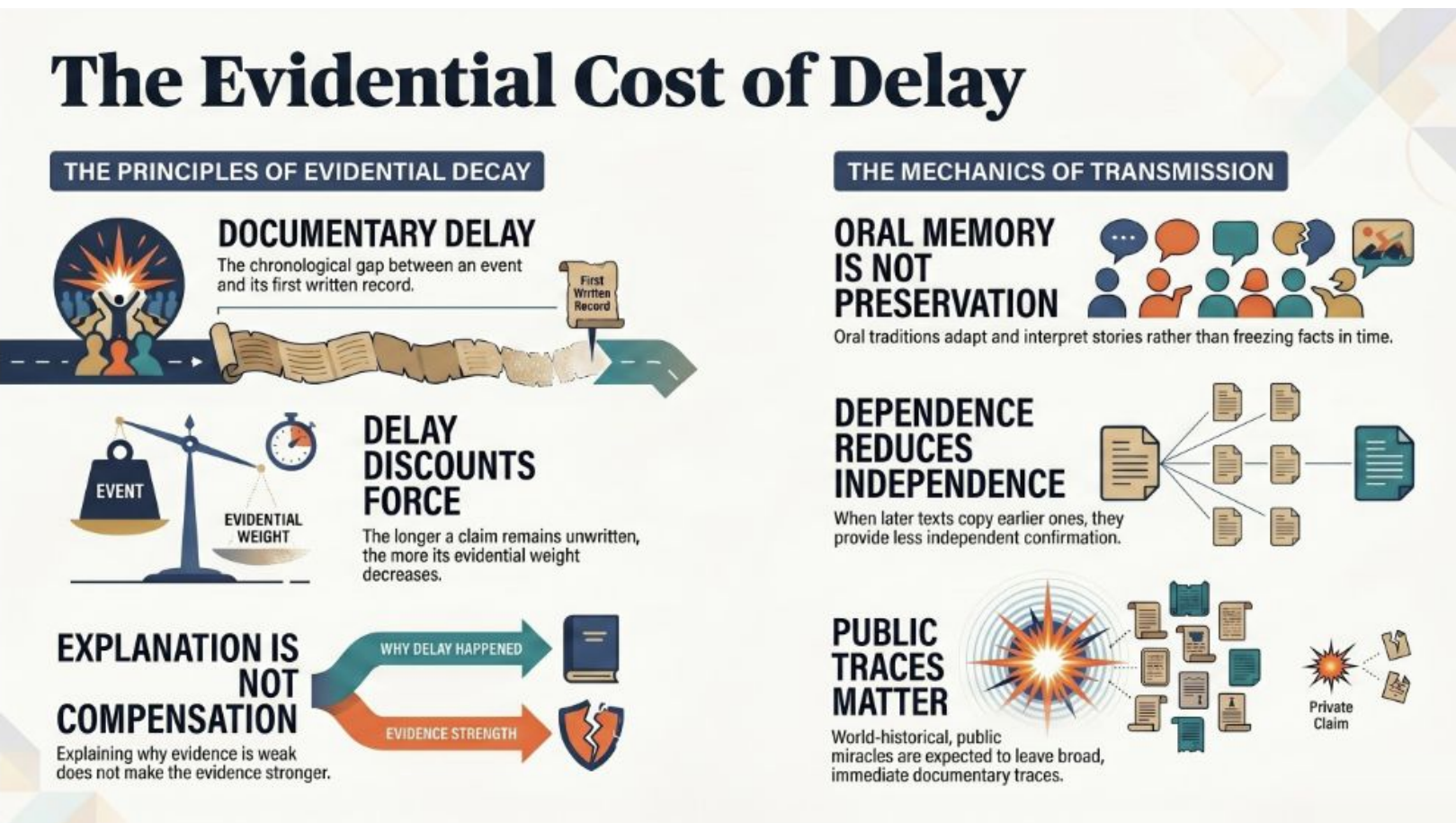
Material scarcity and oral culture can explain why immediate narratives did not survive, but explanation is not evidential compensation. The record strongly supports early resurrection belief; it supplies less public confidence for later extraordinary narrative details because temporal distance, literary dependence, communal memory, and theological shaping reduce independent control. The conclusion does not show that the resurrection is false, that oral memory is generally unreliable, or that late sources are worthless.

## Preview: The documentary ladder

| Events claimed                                                                    | Early written layer                                                                                                       | Narrative layer                                                                                                                                   | Bounded result                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jesus' death and resurrection-related events, conventionally placed around 30 CE. | Paul's letters in the 50s, including an earlier received tradition: strong evidence that resurrection belief began early. | Surviving narrative Gospels, conventionally dated later and partly literarily related: richer event-level detail with fewer independent controls. | Historical explanations can make the pattern understandable; they do not by themselves make its later details strongly discriminating evidence. |

*The dates are working ranges, not fixed points. The paper compares levels of public historical support; it does not infer falsity from lateness alone.*

## Visual preview:



*Read the image from left to right. The first panel names the gap between an alleged event and surviving narrative fixation. The next five panels identify possible costs: temporal distance can reduce direct control; explaining a delay does not restore the evidence that earlier independent records would have supplied; oral memory can preserve stable cores while also selecting and reshaping details; literary dependence means agreement is not automatically independent confirmation; and highly public events create stronger expectations of surviving traces than minor private events. These are graded historical cautions, not automatic reliability penalties. The image maps questions the argument must answer; it does not prove that any Gospel claim is false.*

### Abstract

Apologetic discussions of Gospel dating often answer concerns about delay by invoking papyrus cost, limited literacy, oral culture, persecution, ancient biography, or expectation of Jesus' return. These factors can help explain why immediate narrative records did not survive. They do not settle the evidential question: how strongly does the record we possess discriminate specific extraordinary event claims from a live alternative involving early sincere belief, oral proclamation, communal memory, scriptural interpretation, and later literary composition?

This paper separates three claims too often treated as one: that Jesus was crucified, that resurrection belief and proclamation arose early, and that later canonical narrative details accurately report extraordinary events at high resolution. Paul's letters in the 50s and the tradition reported in 1 Corinthians 15 are important evidence for the second claim. They are not, by themselves, independent narrative depositions for every later empty-tomb, appearance, angelic, or public-portent detail. The surviving narrative Gospels add substantial information, but conventional dating ranges place them later than the alleged events, and major solutions to the Synoptic Problem treat much of their material as literarily related.

The argument does not apply a mechanical rule that later means worse. Instead, it asks four graded questions about proximity, independent control, transmission, and expected public traces. Oral transmission can preserve characteristic memories, and proposals involving eyewitness control deserve serious consideration. Yet those possibilities must be shown to secure the particular detail at issue; they cannot be assumed from the mere existence of an oral culture. Likewise, lost earlier documents are possible, but possible lost support cannot carry the public weight of extant evidence.

The result is bounded. The actual record strongly supports an early movement convinced that Jesus had been raised. It provides less public event-level confidence for later extraordinary details when delay, dependence, and theological shaping remain underconstrained. Explanations of delay may lower our surprise at the record. They do not, without further discriminating evidence, remove its comparative cost or establish a revelatory Christian God-concept over an ordinary religious-transmission comparator.

**Keywords:** Gospel composition; oral tradition; social memory; resurrection; source dependence; public evidence; Christian apologetics

## 1 The Question Is Evidential, Not Merely Chronological

The bare fact that a document is late does not make it false. Historians routinely extract reliable information from sources written long after an event. Nor does early composition guarantee accuracy: a near witness can be mistaken, partisan, dependent, or deceptive. Time matters only through more specific questions. Did later reporting retain contact with witnesses? Was a claim repeated in a stable form? Can sources be shown to be independent? Did literary or theological aims select and shape the report? What traces would the alleged event normally be expected to leave?

The target of this paper is therefore narrow. It is the public apologetic inference that later canonical narrative details provide *strong historical confirmation* of specified extraordinary resurrection-related events and, through them, a revelatory Christian God-concept. A public inference is one whose premises and comparison can be assessed by people who do not already accept Christian revelation. The target is not Christian faith as a whole, personal religious experience, or every historical use of the Gospels.

The live comparator is also narrow. It holds that early followers sincerely came to believe Jesus was raised and proclaimed that conviction; traditions were remembered, performed, interpreted through scripture, and adapted to new settings; writers later composed theological narratives from inherited oral and written materials. The comparator does not require fraud. It does not deny Jesus' existence or crucifixion, and it can include grief experiences, visions, remembered teachings, an unknown tomb history, and genuine historical cores. Its point is methodological: later narrative detail cannot be treated as strong confirmation merely because the only alternative considered is wholesale invention.

Three propositions must consequently remain distinct:

1. Jesus was crucified around 30 CE.
2. Resurrection belief and proclamation arose early among his followers.
3. Specific later narrative details—for example, particular tomb scenes, angelic messages, physical encounters, synchronized appearances, or public portents—occurred substantially as narrated.

Evidence for one proposition may raise the credibility of another, but they are not identical. The early tradition in 1 Corinthians 15 is important evidence for proposition 2 and contains appearance claims. It does not reproduce the later Gospel narratives, specify an empty tomb discovery, or independently confirm each detail those narratives contain. A disciplined historical case should state which rung of the ladder its evidence reaches.

#### **The documentary-delay principle**

Delay is not a mechanical reliability discount. It is a prompt to inspect the controls that operated during the interval. When specific extraordinary details reach us through later, partly dependent, and theologically shaped narratives without independently established controls for those details, their public evidential force is lower than it would be under earlier, independent, publicly checkable documentation. Explaining why the stronger documentation is absent does not recreate it.

## **2 The Record We Actually Have**

The material history of ancient books corrects modern expectations. Producing and copying texts required materials, trained labor, patrons, readers, and distribution networks. Early Christians inhabited a world in which texts often functioned through oral performance, and the surviving manuscripts are only a fraction of what once existed (Gamble 1995; Bagnall 2009; Hurtado 2006). It would be anachronistic to demand video, stenographic transcripts, or universal literacy.

Yet the opposite mistake is possible: invoking those conditions so generally that no documentary pattern could count against a strong historical claim. Ancient people did write letters, contracts, histories, biographies, inscriptions, petitions, and religious works. Christians themselves wrote and circulated letters within a few decades of Jesus' death. Material constraints affect expected volume and survival; they do not make the difference between early independent testimony and later related narrative evidentially irrelevant.

Table 1 displays a working chronology. Dates of ancient texts are debated, and ranges overlap. The point is not that a precise year settles reliability. It is that each layer supports a different set of conclusions and carries different controls (Brown 1997).

Table 1: A documentary ladder: what each surviving layer most directly supports.

| Layer                   | Working range                              | What it strongly supports                                                                   | What it does not establish by itself                                                            |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Claimed events</b>   | Around 30 CE                               | The time to which later Christian testimony refers.                                         | No event is established merely by being placed on a timeline.                                   |
| <b>Pauline letters</b>  | 50s CE; some received formulas are earlier | Early, sincere, organized resurrection proclamation; named leaders and claimed appearances. | Every later tomb scene, dialogue, physical encounter, sequence, or public portent.              |
| <b>Mark</b>             | Roughly 65–75 CE                           | A connected passion-and-resurrection narrative circulating by the later first century.      | Independent confirmation from Matthew and Luke where they use Mark.                             |
| <b>Matthew and Luke</b> | Roughly 80–100 CE                          | Expanded narratives, distinctive traditions, and developed theological interpretation.      | That every agreement is independent or every distinctive episode has an early controlled chain. |
| <b>John</b>             | Roughly 90–110 CE                          | A further, distinctive narrative witness to developed Jesus tradition.                      | Automatic independence at every point or direct access to every narrated speech and scene.      |

The table does not reduce the Gospels to late fiction. It rejects an inflated arithmetic in which four canonical books automatically equal four independent eyewitness reports. All major solutions to the Synoptic Problem recognize substantial literary relationships among Mark, Matthew, and Luke; they dispute which sources were used and in what direction. Goodacre’s case that Luke knew Matthew is one live model, while two-source models posit Mark and Q (Goodacre 2002). On either model, verbal and structural agreement can arise from source use rather than separate access to an event.

This leaves a mixed record. There is early evidence for conviction and proclamation, later narrative specificity, partial dependence, and substantial uncertainty about the paths connecting particular details to particular witnesses. A responsible assessment should neither flatten this record into four identical reports nor dismiss it as worthless.

### 3 Four Questions That Delay Forces Into View

The phrase “the Gospels are late” is too crude to do useful work. Table 2 replaces it with four questions. Each asks about a different relation; none supplies an automatic verdict.

Table 2: Historical explanation and evidential force answer different questions.

| Question                               | What could answer it                                                                                  | Why it matters                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Was writing possible?</b>           | Material cost, literacy, persecution, patronage, and distribution.                                    | Establishes practical possibility or difficulty; it does not determine the reliability of what later survived.                   |
| <b>Was oral continuity plausible?</b>  | Repetition, communal performance, stable formulas, living witnesses, and correction.                  | Can support preservation of a stable core; the controls must be connected to the particular detail being defended.               |
| <b>How independent is the support?</b> | Distinct sources, identifiable chains, divergent access, and evidence against copying.                | Dependent agreement may preserve early material, but it does not multiply confirmation in the same way as independent agreement. |
| <b>What traces were expected?</b>      | Publicity, number of participants, duration, institutional relevance, and normal recording practices. | Absence is more telling when an event should have produced numerous, durable, and independent traces.                            |

The first question explains historical conditions. The next three assess evidential consequences. Confusing them produces the central error examined here. Suppose expensive materials and uneven

literacy make immediate narrative publication less likely. That may increase the probability of delay under the extraordinary-event hypothesis. It does not show that the later narrative is more expected under that hypothesis than under a comparator involving ordinary religious transmission. The explanation reduces surprise; it does not by itself favor one history over the other.

Likewise, the suggestion that early Christians expected an imminent return can explain a lower initial priority for long-form biography. But that explanation also concedes a period in which proclamation rather than stable narrative documentation carried the tradition. The concession may be historically reasonable. It still leaves the historian to ask what was preserved, by which controls, and with what independence.

#### 4 Oral Memory: Neither Tape Recorder nor Rumor Mill

Oral tradition is often described through two unhelpful extremes. In one, communal memory functions like a recording that retains words and scenes unchanged. In the other, a story passed orally becomes free invention. Research on oral history, social memory, and Jesus tradition supports neither picture. Communities can preserve characteristic sayings, plots, identities, and convictions while varying order, wording, emphasis, and interpretation (Vansina 1985; Assmann 2011; Rodríguez 2013; Kirk 2019).

The strongest preservation-friendly argument deserves more than a slogan. Byrskog places Gospel tradition in the setting of ancient oral history, Dunn emphasizes the remembered impact of Jesus, and Bauckham argues that named eyewitnesses and continuing personal links supplied controls within the tradition (Byrskog 2002; Dunn 2003; Bauckham 2017). On these views, the years before Gospel composition were not an anonymous telephone game. Repetition occurred within communities that cared about the material and sometimes remained connected to its originators.

That case changes the question; it does not end it. Four distinctions remain:

- **Stable center versus exact detail.** A community may preserve that Jesus taught about God's kingdom, was crucified, and was believed raised while allowing variation in who visited a tomb, what they saw, where appearances occurred, or how speeches were framed.
- **Communal control versus historical neutrality.** A community can correct deviations from its accepted tradition while the accepted tradition itself is organized by worship, scripture, identity, and theological meaning.
- **Possible eyewitness access versus demonstrated access.** The presence of living eyewitnesses does not show that each distinctive later detail was checked by them or that correction reached every community and author.
- **Sincerity versus event-level accuracy.** Sincere custodians can preserve a shared interpretation faithfully even when historians cannot recover the event behind every narrative element.

These points do not refute the eyewitness model. They state what the model must establish to carry strong public weight: a credible chain from a particular event through identified or well-controlled testimony to the particular textual detail under review. General facts about oral culture cannot supply that chain automatically.

The same calibration applies in the other direction. Variation is not proof of invention. Ancient authors could arrange material topically, compress events, paraphrase speech, and express meaning through literary form. The historical problem arises when an apologist asks later high-resolution detail to bear more weight than the available controls justify. Oral memory can be genuine evidence while leaving a wide confidence interval around exact sequence, wording, and extraordinary embellishment.

## 5 Dependence, Theology, and the Multiplication of Support

Literary dependence matters because confirmation is not counted by covers. If Matthew and Luke reproduce Mark, their agreement can show that Mark's narrative was authoritative and widely transmitted. It does not create three independent observations of the underlying event. Distinctive material may come from other sources or traditions, but its independence must be argued rather than inferred from its location in a different canonical book.

Theological purpose likewise does not make a source historically useless. All historical writing selects and interprets. The Gospels can sincerely present remembered material while arranging it to identify Jesus, fulfill scripture, instruct communities, and proclaim salvation. Allison's work on memory and imagination and Litwa's study of history-like presentation of extraordinary Mediterranean material illuminate different sides of this problem (Allison 2010; Litwa 2019). The relevant question is not whether theology contaminated an otherwise neutral report. It is whether a specific detail has support that remains discriminating after its literary and theological function is considered.

This is especially important when narratives become more detailed. Later specificity can reflect access to preserved information. It can also reflect clarification, harmonization, dramatic composition, scriptural patterning, apologetic response, or liturgical development. Historians decide among these possibilities case by case. The evidential mistake is to count specificity itself as if it were independent corroboration.

An honest case can therefore say two things at once: the Gospel writers may preserve valuable early tradition, and the route from an event around 30 CE to a distinctive scene written decades later is not fully visible. The first statement blocks blanket skepticism. The second blocks overconfidence.

## 6 Expected Traces and Responsible Arguments from Silence

Arguments from silence are often weak. A text may omit an event because of genre, interest, space, ignorance, loss, or chance. Ancient survival is especially uneven. The absence of a record is evidence only when a record or other trace had a meaningful chance of existing, surviving, and being found.

That principle is graded. A private appearance to one person creates a lower expectation of independent public traces than a prolonged event witnessed by a crowd. A brief local occurrence creates a lower expectation than an event involving institutions, officials, or many identifiable participants. The more public, durable, consequential, and record-generating an alleged event, the more its documentary silence matters. This is an expected-trace argument, not the rule "unrecorded means false".

Matthew 27:51–53 provides a useful test case. Matthew alone narrates opened tombs and raised saints who later appeared to many in the holy city. Interpreters may read the scene literally, apocalyptically, symbolically, or as a mixture of history and theological imagery. If it is defended as a literal public event involving many raised persons and many appearances, the expectation of additional traces rises. The lack of surviving independent reference does not disprove it, but it is a real cost for a claim of high publicity. Reclassifying the passage as apocalyptic symbolism may reduce that cost, but it also gives up the passage as straightforward public confirmation.

The same reasoning must be applied cautiously to resurrection appearances. Paul's letters give early testimony to claimed appearances, and a historian should not ignore it. Yet Paul's compressed list does not tell us everything later narratives do. The early existence of a claim is evidence about when belief arose; it is not a signed deposition, cross-examination, or independent archive for each later scene. Allison's extended treatment of resurrection apologetics illustrates why the record supports serious historical argument while resisting both easy proof and easy dismissal (Allison 2021).

Lost writings complicate every inference. Earlier notes, collections, or narratives may once have existed. The Synoptic source debate itself includes hypothetical documents. But a possible lost source

has two different roles. It can make a historical pathway plausible; it cannot contribute the same public confirmation as an extant source whose date, content, independence, and transmission can be examined. We should not treat survival bias as proof that no earlier evidence existed, or treat imagined earlier evidence as if it were in hand.

## 7 Explanation Is Not Comparative Confirmation

Public evidence is contrastive: it favors one account over another when the observation is more expected on the first, given the same relevant background. Likelihood language makes the point visible without pretending that ancient-history probabilities can be measured exactly (Sober 2008). Let (H) be the specified extraordinary event claim, (C) the ordinary religious-transmission comparator, (R) the surviving record, and (K) shared background information. Then:

$$\text{LR}(R; H, C, K) = \frac{P(R | H, K)}{P(R | C, K)}.$$

*Plain-English annotation.* The numerator asks how expected the surviving record would be if the specified extraordinary event occurred. The denominator asks how expected the same record would be under the comparator. A result above 1 favors (H); a result below 1 favors (C). No numerical value is asserted here.

A papyrus explanation may raise  $P(R | H, K)$  by showing why genuine events might still yield late texts. But if the same material limits also operate under  $C$ , the explanation may raise the denominator as well. Showing that  $R$  is *possible* under  $H$  proves only that the numerator is not zero. It does not show that the ratio strongly favors  $H$ .

The distinction also clarifies the value of early resurrection belief. Let (B) mean that resurrection conviction and proclamation arose early:

$$P(B | H, K) > P(B | \text{no resurrection belief at all}, K).$$

*Plain-English annotation.* An early belief is unsurprising if the extraordinary event occurred and very surprising under an alternative that predicts no such belief. So early proclamation has evidential value against that weak alternative.

But the live comparator (C) already includes sincere early experiences and belief formation:

$$P(B | C, K) \text{ may also be substantial.}$$

*Plain-English annotation.* Once the comparison allows sincere visions, grief experiences, religious interpretation, and communal conviction, the existence of early belief does not by itself decide what caused the belief. The evidence remains important, but its force depends on the rival.

The point is not that (H) and (C) are equally likely. This paper does not calculate their overall probability. It says that a common apologetic move fails: historical explanations of documentary delay do not, without a discriminating feature, convert later narrative detail into strong public confirmation.

### The bounded verdict

The surviving record is stronger evidence for *early resurrection conviction* than for *every later extraordinary narrative detail*. The move from the first claim to the second requires additional controls: demonstrable independence, a credible chain to witnesses, stable transmission of the specific detail, or traces that are substantially more expected under the event claim than under the comparator.

## 8 Five Strong Replies

### **8.1 The ancient world should not be judged by modern standards**

Correct: modern reporting conventions are not the standard. The argument asks a comparative ancient question. Given the writing, memory, patronage, performance, and survival conditions that actually obtained, how much event-level confidence does this record support? Earlier independent testimony would still be stronger than later dependent testimony in an ancient setting. Rejecting anachronism does not erase that difference.

### **8.2 Oral communities could preserve tradition accurately**

They could, and sometimes did. The relevant question is not whether oral preservation was possible in general. It is which features were stabilized, what kinds of variation were permitted, who could correct them, and whether those controls connect to the detail under review. Dunn, Byrskog, Bauckham, Kirk, and Rodríguez supply serious resources for answering those questions (Dunn 2003; Byrskog 2002; Bauckham 2017; Kirk 2019; Rodríguez 2013). The reply succeeds when it establishes a particular controlled chain, not when “oral culture” substitutes for one.

### **8.3 Paul and the early creed close the gap**

They narrow an important gap. Paul’s letters show that resurrection proclamation did not originate with the late Gospels, and 1 Corinthians 15 reports received tradition. This is a major correction to any theory of very late invention. But the early material is comparatively compressed. It cannot independently authenticate narrative elements it does not state. The right conclusion is tiered: early belief is well supported; specific later scenes require their own assessment.

### **8.4 Earlier documents or testimony may have been lost**

Yes. The survival record is fragmentary, and dogmatic claims that no earlier writing existed go beyond the evidence (Bagnall 2009; Hurtado 2006). A lost source can explain how a detail might have reached a later author. Yet until its content and independence are recoverable, it cannot function as observed public evidence. Possibility should moderate a negative conclusion, not impersonate positive confirmation.

### **8.5 God was free to reveal through ordinary history**

This theological reply is possible. A Christian may hold that God values mediated testimony, human freedom, non-coercive revelation, or ecclesial tradition. The reply can explain why a perfect archive was not provided. It also changes the claim being defended. If ambiguity and ordinary transmission are part of the chosen method, the public historical evidence may be intentionally less decisive. A theological reason for accepting lower public clarity does not make the surviving evidence more discriminating.

## **9 A More Disciplined Apologetic Ledger**

A stronger historical apologetic would not pretend that every rung of the documentary ladder has equal support. It would record what a source establishes, what remains dependent on contested assumptions, and what would change the assessment. Table 3 gives a compact model.

Table 3: A claim-strength ledger for resurrection-related evidence.

| Claim                                                      | Present support                                                                   | Main vulnerability                                                                           | What would strengthen it                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Jesus was crucified</b>                                 | Early Christian testimony embedded in a broader first-century historical setting. | Details of the event and surrounding scenes still require source analysis.                   | Earlier independent administrative or eyewitness evidence.                                                |
| <b>Resurrection belief arose early</b>                     | Paul's letters, received tradition, named leaders, and rapid community formation. | Cause of the belief is underdetermined by its early date alone.                              | Independent, detailed, early testimony with clear access to the events.                                   |
| <b>The tomb was found empty</b>                            | Multiple later narrative presentations and a plausible first-century setting.     | Dependence, narrative development, and contested origin of the tradition.                    | Early independent attestation with an inspectable chain and contextual corroboration.                     |
| <b>Particular appearance scenes occurred as narrated</b>   | Rich canonical narratives and continuity with early appearance belief.            | Later specificity, variation, literary purpose, and uncertain independence.                  | Multiple early independent accounts agreeing on the relevant event-level features.                        |
| <b>Public portents occurred literally</b>                  | A canonical narrative such as Matthew 27:51–53.                                   | Singular attestation and high expected-trace burden if read as a public mass event.          | Independent contemporary traces proportionate to the claimed publicity.                                   |
| <b>A revelatory Christian God best explains the record</b> | A cumulative theological interpretation of the preceding claims.                  | The inference adds metaphysical assumptions and must beat live natural and religious rivals. | A stated comparator, discriminating predictions, controlled auxiliaries, and an account of anomaly costs. |

The ledger permits confidence without inflation. It also shows why “the evidence is not ideal” need not collapse into “there is no evidence”. The early proclamation is historically significant. The narrative traditions deserve case-by-case study. What the ledger rejects is an evidential shortcut from “the movement believed early” to “later extraordinary details are strongly publicly confirmed.”

A defender can rebut the paper constructively. Identify a particular detail, trace it to a genuinely independent early source or controlled eyewitness chain, explain why the feature is more expected if the event occurred than under the comparator, and show that the reasoning does not depend on assuming the revelation it is meant to establish. That would address the central premise rather than merely repeat that ancient conditions made delay possible.

## 10 Conclusion

The documentary delay is not a verdict delivered by a calendar. It is a cluster of historical questions about proximity, control, independence, shaping, and expected traces. Papyri, literacy, oral performance, persecution, and ancient literary conventions can answer why the record looks as it does. Their explanatory success does not restore the independent evidence that an earlier, more public documentary chain would have supplied.

The record supports different conclusions with different strength. Paul's letters and received tradition provide important evidence that resurrection conviction arose early. The surviving Gospels preserve serious historical material and cannot responsibly be dismissed because they are theological or later. At the same time, later specificity does not authenticate itself. Synoptic dependence limits the multiplication of witnesses; communal memory can preserve and reshape; theological composition can carry historical recollection and literary development together; highly public extraordinary events create stronger trace expectations.

The resulting conclusion is deliberately modest. The documentary pattern does not prove that Jesus was not raised. It does not show that oral memory failed, that eyewitnesses were absent, or that every distinctive Gospel scene is unhistorical. It lowers the public evidential ceiling for claims whose specific controls remain unestablished. An apologetic that acknowledges this cost is not weaker in method. It becomes clearer about what its evidence shows, what it leaves open, and where faith or further argument must do additional work.

## A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

This appendix states the central inference in symbolic form and then explains each part in ordinary language. The symbols make the structure visible; they do not manufacture certainty about disputed historical premises.

### A.1 Syllogistic reconstruction

1. **Premise 1.** If the later canonical narrative details, without additional independently established controls, strongly publicly confirm the specified extraordinary event over the live comparator, then those details contain at least one well-supported feature that is substantially more expected under the event claim after the principal vulnerabilities are considered.

*Annotation.* Strong public confirmation requires more than compatibility. The evidence needs a feature that helps separate the extraordinary-event account from the ordinary religious-transmission account.

2. **Premise 2.** For the later narrative details assessed in this paper, no such discriminating feature has been established after temporal distance, source dependence, oral and communal memory, theological shaping, expected traces, and uneven survival are considered.

*Annotation.* This premise does not declare the details false. It says the available controls do not yet give them the comparative force claimed by the targeted apologetic inference.

3. **Conclusion.** Therefore, those later narrative details, without additional independently established controls, do not strongly publicly confirm the specified extraordinary event over the live comparator.

*Annotation.* The conclusion limits the strength of one public inference. It does not deny the event claim, early resurrection belief, a minimal historical core, personal warrant, or theological coherence.

### A.2 Symbols

- $H$ : the specified extraordinary event claim occurred substantially as narrated.
- $C$ : the ordinary religious-transmission comparator described in Section 1.
- $N$ : the later canonical narrative details being offered as evidence.
- $K$ : shared background information about first-century writing, memory, communities, texts, and survival.
- $S_N$ :  $N$ , without additional independently established controls, strongly publicly confirms  $H$  over  $C$ .
- $X_N$ :  $N$  contains at least one well-supported feature that is substantially more expected under  $H$  than under  $C$ , after delay, dependence, theological shaping, and survival are considered.
- $P$ : probability notation used to compare how expected the evidence is under each account.

*Plain-English annotation.*  $H$  and  $C$  are competing explanations,  $N$  is the evidence under discussion, and  $K$  keeps the comparison fair by holding the same historical background on both sides.  $S_N$  is the strong apologetic conclusion.  $X_N$  is the discriminating feature that such a strong conclusion needs.  $P$  introduces no measured numbers; it only displays the comparison being claimed.

### A.3 Symbolic form

$$\text{P1. } S_N \rightarrow X_N$$

*Plain-English annotation.* Premise 1 says: if these later details strongly confirm the extraordinary event over the live comparator, then they must contain at least one well-supported feature that favors the event claim after the major vulnerabilities are considered. The arrow means “if-then”. This is a necessary-condition premise: strong public confirmation requires discrimination.

$$\text{P2. } \neg X_N$$

*Plain-English annotation.* Premise 2 says: for the later details assessed in this paper, that discriminating feature has not been established. The symbol “ $\neg$ ” means “not”. This premise does not say the details are false. It says their available support does not yet separate  $H$  strongly from  $C$  once temporal distance, source reuse, memory, theological purpose, and expected traces are included.

$$\text{C. } \therefore \neg S_N$$

*Plain-English annotation.* The conclusion says: therefore, those later narrative details, without additional independent controls, do not strongly publicly confirm  $H$  over  $C$ . The symbol “ $\therefore$ ” means “therefore”. The conclusion denies a strong evidential inference; it does not deny  $H$  itself.

The form is *modus tollens*:

$$(S_N \rightarrow X_N), \quad \neg X_N \quad \therefore \quad \neg S_N.$$

*Plain-English annotation.* Modus tollens is a valid rule: if  $S_N$  would require  $X_N$ , and  $X_N$  is absent, then  $S_N$  cannot be claimed. A simple analogy is: if the library is open, its doors are unlocked; the doors are not unlocked; therefore the library is not open.

Validity does not guarantee that every premise is true. It guarantees that if P1 and P2 are true, the conclusion follows. P1 expresses the paper’s public-evidence standard. P2 is the historically contestable premise and bears most of the argumentative load. Sections 2–6 support P2 by distinguishing early belief from later detail, tracing literary dependence, assessing oral controls, and applying expected-trace reasoning.

#### A.4 The likelihood bridge

The deductive core can be connected to the contrastive model:

$$X_N \Rightarrow \frac{P(N \mid H, K)}{P(N \mid C, K)} \gg 1.$$

*Plain-English annotation.* The double arrow here means “would provide a strong reason for”. If  $X_N$  is a genuinely discriminating feature, the observed narrative evidence should be much more expected under  $H$  than under  $C$ . The sign “ $\gg 1$ ” means “well above 1”, not a measured number.

The papyrus reply establishes, at most, a possibility claim:

$$P(N \mid H, K) > 0.$$

*Plain-English annotation.* This says that late narratives are possible even if  $H$  is true. It blocks the claim that documentary delay logically contradicts the event claim. But a nonzero numerator does not tell us whether the same record is equally or more expected under  $C$ .

The missing step would be:

$$P(N \mid H, K) \gg P(N \mid C, K).$$

*Plain-English annotation.* This says the surviving details are much more expected if the extraordinary event occurred than under ordinary religious transmission. The explanations surveyed in the paper do not establish this comparison merely by showing that the delay was culturally understandable.

#### A.5 Exactly how the argument can be challenged

A critic of the paper has at least four direct routes:

1. **Reject P1.** Argue that strong public confirmation does not require a feature that discriminates  $H$  from a live comparator. This would require an alternative account of confirmation.
2. **Refute P2.** Identify a specific feature in  $N$ , show why it is well supported, and show why it is substantially more expected under  $H$  than under  $C$ .
3. **Add controls.** Establish an early independent source, a credible eyewitness chain, or a transmission practice tied to the exact detail. Because  $S_N$  is explicitly limited to evidence “without additional controls”, new controls can change the conclusion.
4. **Lower or change the claim.** Defend early resurrection belief, a minimal historical core, personal warrant, or theological coherence rather than strong public confirmation of later event-level detail. The formal conclusion does not target those claims.

These rebuttal routes show the argument’s limits. The logic is valid, but the historical assessment remains open to better evidence and better source arguments. The paper’s burden is not to prove  $\neg H$ . Its burden is to explain why a common route from documentary possibility to strong public confirmation does not succeed.

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