

Summary Evaluation of
Thomas Sherlock, *Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*
(N.p.: Public Domain, c. 1729).

Shawn Nelson

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Important Background on Thomas Woolston

Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus by Thomas Sherlock is a fictional book written around 1729. To understand this story, it's important to know who Thomas Woolston was. Woolston (1669-1733) was a real person who lived during the height of the English Deism movement. He was an Anglican minister who questioned the miracles found in the gospels.¹ He especially questioned the miracle of Christ's resurrection. After publishing his beliefs, he was arrested. His case went to trial and he was sentenced to a year in prison and ordered to pay a fine.² This real event becomes the basis for the opening of the book.

Mock Trial Storyline

Sherlock's hypothetical story begins with some men who liked having conversations about different topics. One day, they began to talk about the real-life trial and sentencing of Thomas Woolston (again, it's important to understand the intro above). The men in the story began to question whether it was appropriate for the law to carry on such trials. One of them sided with Woolston and the deists and felt like he could build a strong case against the resurrection. Another person said he would gladly take up the challenge of defending it. A third person offered to be the judge. When the day came to begin the mock trial, they were surprised to see a crowd of people had shown up (word had gotten out!). So, they took some people from the crowd and formed a jury. They were now prepared to conduct a full-blown trial!

The trial proceeded. The question was whether the apostles were guilty of giving false evidence in the case of the resurrection of Jesus. "Mr. A," who was the prosecuting attorney, argued that yes, they did give false evidence, and therefore Jesus did not resurrect. "Mr. B," who was the defending attorney, argued that the apostles reported what they had really witnessed;

¹ For examples of Woolston's denial of miracles in the gospels, see William Baird, *History of New Testament Research: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 45-48. Woolston never made it out of prison because he could not pay his fine.

² *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, IL: *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2016), s.v. "Woolston, Thomas."

Jesus resurrection really did happen. The presentation of arguments and responses followed a standard court proceeding, with each side taking turns debating back and forth.

After both sides were finished, the judge asked for a verdict from the jury. The jury, however, was overwhelmed and asked the judge to help them review the arguments (p. 49). The judge provided a review, added some insight as to which points were valid, and asked the jury again what their verdict was. “Not guilty” was the reply (p. 66).

Making Sense of a Difficult Book

One of my challenges with the book is that it was difficult to follow at times. Others, like William Lane Craig, have given an outline.³ And even the judge in the story provides an outline (pp. 49-66). But I find these outlines don’t seem to capture all the great arguments. So, I think it would be helpful to give my own outline of the general flow of the major arguments. I’ve tried my best to summarize the key arguments between the two attorneys below. See Table 1 for a briefer list of the arguments. Remember, Mr. A is the prosecuting attorney who is trying to prove the evangelists were fraudsters and the resurrection did *not* happen. Mr. B is the defending attorney who is trying to prove the evangelists were sincere and that Christ’s resurrection *did* happen.

Mr. A Opens – Mixed Arguments

Mr. A opens the trial.

First, he argues that people simply believe in the resurrection because their parents believed it. People presume the resurrection was *founded* on good evidence. But there is no evidence. People tend to follow the religion of the culture they are born into. Children believe what their fathers, grandfathers, and ancestors before them believed and have passed down to them (p. 6). The resurrection has been believed for such a long time that nobody questions it anymore (p. 8).

³ William Lane Craig, “The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective,” Reasonable Faith, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/the-problem-of-miracles-a-historical-and-philosophical-perspective/>.

Second, there are many false religions which claim to have divine inspiration (e.g., Islam). “There has hardly been an instance of a false religion in the world, but it has also afforded a like instance to this before us. Have they not all pretended to inspiration?” (p. 7) Christianity is no different.

Third, it won’t help to show that the apostles were enthusiastic because people enthusiastically embrace false beliefs all the time. Mr. A points to the followers of Thomas Emes (the French prophets) who enthusiastically thought their leader would rise from the dead.⁴ Enthusiasm does not prove a belief to be true.

Fourth, there are missing Jewish books that prove Jesus’ resurrection did not happen.

Fifth, Jesus was able to deceive people like a magician. The people were superstitious and weak, and Jesus took advantage of this. His disciples, being duped, thought Jesus was a miracle-worker when he was doing nothing more than what a magician does today.

Sixth, Jesus began to teach a dying messiah when he realized he couldn’t escape death.

Mr. B responded to the opening arguments as follows.

There is no evidence for the previous three points; all are from Mr. A’s imagination. “You have had a scheme laid before you, but not one bit of evidence to support any part of it.” (p. 11)

The comparison between Christianity and Islam fails because Islam was advanced by the sword. In Islam if you did *not* believe then you died. In Christianity, if you *did* believe, then you died. “And will you pretend these cases to be alike?” (p. 8)

Mr. B responded to the claim that there are missing Jewish books in this way. If they are lost, how does Mr. A know (1) they were lost and (2) what they contained (fraud)? This is not proof, but a wish for proof.⁵

⁴ Lionel Laborie, “French Prophets,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (May 9, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.109707>, 3-6.

⁵ This remark is later added by the judge on p. 50.

Having addressed some of the Mr. A's arguments, he now adds some counter arguments.

Mr. B – Fraud is Very Unlikely

If Jesus were a fraudster or imposter (i.e., he willfully was deceiving people), then why didn't he take advantage of the common beliefs of the people? If he were a fraudster, he would have built on the beliefs of the people, not teach against them! For example, the people expected a *victorious prince*... Jesus said they were mistaken! They upheld the tradition of the elders... Jesus taught their traditions were just *rules of men*! They thought God could only be worshipped in *Jerusalem*... Jesus taught God could be worshipped everywhere. As an imposter, he could have avoided so many difficulties if he just went along with their beliefs. "Surely an imposter cannot possibly take a worse method, than to set up in opposition to all the prejudices and prophecies of the country." (p. 13)

Next, Jesus could have seized the kingdom if that were his goal. The people were ready to crown him as king when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (Luke 19:36-40). It would have been his moment to take control if that were his agenda. Or at least he could have leveraged the devotion of the people to avoid death. But that was not his goal. This proves he was no fraudster.

And what did the disciples gain from a false story? One could argue that they did it for the power and authority that came from the Catholic church. But that was hundreds of years after their lifetime! The apostles reward from fabricating the resurrection story would have been extreme difficulty, suffering and death. They could not have been motivated by that.

Mr. A – The Disciples Stole the Body

Mr. A went on to present the story of what he thought happened at the tomb. The disciples, he said, came at night and stole Jesus' body. They stole it while after the Roman guards fell asleep.

In reply, Mr. B said this is not likely for several reasons. First, this would be an exceedingly difficult task for anybody! The stone covering the entrance of the tomb was exceptionally large and heavy. It would need to be moved, and this would require many people! It would also take multiple people to lift and move the body of Jesus. This would all have to be

done silently “by men walking on tip-toes to prevent discovery” (p. 23). Second, the disciples were not bold, clever, and courageous. To think they could/would come up against trained and armed Roman soldiers with such a clever and risky plot! On the contrary, they rightly fled and feared for their lives when their hopes for Messiah Jesus were dashed. Third, it doesn't make sense for them to try to steal the body. These were devout Jews who believed in the Old Testament prophets—and would they fulfill the prophecies by fraud? What did they want the body for anyway? “Did they expect to make a King of the dead body?” (p. 23) Finally, the claim is that the disciples were able to steal the body because the Roman guards fell asleep. But how did the guards know what happened if they were asleep? What made them think the body was stolen at all? (p. 22) This is not evidence. What person has ever been allowed to admit evidence into a court case that they thought happened while they were asleep? (p. 22)

Mr. A – Jesus’ Third-Day Prophecy Was False

At one point, Mr. A argued that the chief priests and a crowd were going to gather around Jesus’ tomb to see what would happen to his body on the third day. Therefore, he argued, the disciples had to act fast—but they stole the body at night one day too early. Sunday morning’s broken seal becomes a witness against Jesus’ claim because it shows they stole the body *before* the third day. This, he said, shows that Jesus’ prediction about rising the third day was false (i.e., it was all a sham).

However, Mr. B went on to show that Jesus did rise on the third day based on normal Jewish convention. In Jewish culture, ‘after three days’ means inclusive days (p. 25). This can be seen in circumcision on the eighth day for children (not after but anytime on the eighth day).

Mr. B – Drawing Attention to Facts Mr. A Has Admitted

At another point, Mr. B drew the jury’s attention to what Mr. A had admitted to. In arguing his case, Mr. A had admitted to some facts: (1) Jesus died and (2) his body was put in the tomb. “He has proved beyond contradiction, that Christ died, and was laid in the sepulchre: for, without doubt, when the Jews sealed the stone, they took care to see that the body was there.” (p.

20) He also admitted (in the previous point) that Jesus' prediction of his resurrection was well known. It was not something that the disciples added afterwards.

Mr. B – Why Not Reveal the Fraud?

Mr. B asks a series of important questions. Why didn't anybody in a position of authority (who had access to the facts) reveal the fraud? Why, for example, didn't the Jewish leaders reveal it? They were desperately searching for something to accuse Jesus of so they could crucify him. They fabricated some charges against him (Matt. 26:59-61). But there was never any charge that he was a fraudster (p. 21). He had just raised Lazarus from the dead a few days before and they were greatly concerned about it. Why not accuse Jesus of fraud in that?

Why didn't the Jewish leaders accuse the disciples of fraud? We see the apostles in Acts repeatedly standing before the Jewish leaders and giving a defense. And what exactly was their defense? It was the resurrection. "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree." (p. 26) The leaders never responded with, "No way! That's not true! You're making it up!" Instead, they threatened them, beat them, whipped them and tried to get them to keep quiet—to stop spreading word about Jesus' resurrection. That would have been the perfect time for the leaders to directly charge the apostles with fraud, to put them on trial for stealing the body of Jesus, and to expose them to the people as imposters. (p. 26) The Jewish leaders would later go on to murder Christians. They even worked with Herod to put a top Christian leader to death (James). But not once did these leaders ever bring a "a charge against them of any fraud in the resurrection." (p. 26)

Why did the Jewish leaders take Gamaliel's advice if the resurrection were a fraud? Remember at one point that Gamaliel stood to the defense of the apostles. He said, "Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men..." (Acts 5:38, 39) Is this the way somebody talks who knows the body was stolen? Did all those 'in the know' of the fraud keep silent while Gamaliel convinced their peers to let the apostles continue?

Why didn't King Agrippa mention any fraud? Later in Acts, Paul appeared before King Agrippa. Paul makes it clear that he was on trial for belief in the resurrection of Jesus (and this is what all the commotion was about). It was certainly within King Agrippa's power to have access to the details of what happened with the Roman guards at the tomb. At no point did he ever tell Paul that Jesus did not rise from the dead, that he had evidence the disciples stole the body, that it was a sham. Instead, this man 'in the know' said to Paul at the end of his examination, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." (p. 26)

Mr. A – It is Suspicious that Jesus Did Not Appear to All

Mr. A said it sounds very suspicious that Jesus did not appear to all people but only to certain people after his resurrection. "We have it upon the confession of Peter, the ringleader of the apostles, that Christ appeared..." (p. 28) But Jesus did not appear to all the people. Why didn't he appear to the chief priests and the Jewish leaders? This sounds very suspicious! It's a convenient way to get a rumor started.

Mr. B responded with a few points. First, Jesus told the unbelieving Jewish people, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you... you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Matt. 23:37, 39) He was signifying the end of his mission to the Jewish people.⁶ Jesus was simply keeping his word—he didn't show himself alive to the unbelieving Jewish crowds.

Also, not all could reasonably be first-hand eyewitnesses. There had to be a point where Jesus stopped showing himself to people. Why doesn't Mr. A object that Jesus didn't show himself to Tiberius, King George, and all people throughout history? (p. 40)

Besides, there *were* many witnesses—upwards of one-hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15, 21, 22) and even five hundred (1 Cor. 15:6). "The Gentleman is mistaken, when he imagines that a few only were chosen to see Christ." (pp. 41, 42)

⁶ It is unclear if Sherlock believes that God's mission to the Jewish people is permanently over. As a premillennial dispensationalist, I hold that God is primarily working on the Gentiles today but will turn his program of salvation back to the Jewish people in the future.

Mr. A – We Cannot Trust the Evidence of the Witnesses

Mr. A wants to show that the first witnesses were unreliable. He starts with the first witnesses which are angels, moves to the women, and then to the two disciples traveling on the road to Emmaus.

The first problem, he says, is with the angels. “The angels appeared like men... so they are really men.” (p. 29) Since the testimony is that they looked like men, they must be men! Why should we think that they were angels?

Next, we cannot trust the women’s testimony because they are “poor silly women.” (p. 29) We need “unexceptionable witnesses” and these “silly” women were filled with superstitions.

Finally, it wasn’t really Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They were walking with somebody for quite some time. It wasn’t until the end of their journey that they thought it was Jesus. But on the road when Jesus reasoned with them, “they knew him not. So far therefore they are witnesses that it was not he.” (p. 29)

Mr. B responds by saying there is nothing unusual in the account of the road to Emmaus. They weren’t expecting to see Jesus because they thought he was dead. He came up and walked alongside them (Luke 24:15) and it is likely they weren’t getting a full view of each other as they walked. It was getting dark (evening; Luke 24:29). When a light was brought in for supper, that’s when they finally recognized Jesus. Mr. B illustrates this with a story of a man who dropped in on his sister in Paris, spent a day with her, and only at the end did she realize it was him (pp. 35, 36).

Mr. A – They Hallucinated Jesus

Mr. A says the disciples merely hallucinated Jesus (but he was not really raised). Therefore, there is no objective evidence that can be considered in the case because it was all in their minds. He gives the following as evidence. First, Jesus could disappear. As soon as the two on the road to Emmaus realized it was Jesus, the text says that Jesus vanished (Luke 24:31). Only ghosts (or hallucinations!) vanish.

Second, the New Testament says Jesus could pass through walls. In Luke, it says that when the doors were shut, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst (Luke 24:36). This shows that there was no real physical body because a physical body cannot pass through a wall. They hallucinated him.

Finally, Jesus was said to have the same open wounds. In the account with doubting Thomas, the doubter is invited to “thrust [his] hand into his side.” (John 20:25) This would mean that Jesus’ side wound was still open. Are we really expected to believe that God would raise Jesus with a gaping hole in his side? This must be a hallucination.

In answer to all these, Mr. B says that Jesus gave much evidence that he was not a ghost or apparition but had a real body of “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39). His body could be “seen, felt, and handled by many persons.” (p. 34) They were even able to grab his feet. He was not an apparition or hallucination. As far as the other points about him passing through walls or disappearing, they are misunderstandings about the texts. The passage from the road to Emmaus does not say Jesus vanished like a ghost. Jesus moved into view (of the light perhaps) and they saw him. When he moved out of view, he was no longer visible. “Try the experiment now; do but put out the candles, we shall all disappear.” (p. 36) Lastly, the Doubting Thomas passage does not say Jesus wounds were still open. Disbelieving Thomas is using a figure of speech. In his unbelief, he said he refused to believe unless he could “thrust [his] hand into his side” (John 20:25). So when Jesus reveals himself later, these are the words his Master repeats back to him. “The words of Christ are manifestly a severe reproach to him for his infidelity.” (p. 38)

Mr. A – Miracles Are Impossible

Mr. A finally gets to the root of all his objections: anti-supernaturalism.⁷ He plainly says that miracles are impossible. No rational person should believe in them. Nature provides us “uniform and regular method of her operations” (p. 30). In other words, things are governed and

⁷Anti-supernaturalism is at the heart of deism. And Mr. A was arguing from a deist’s perspective.

operate by natural law. Miracles are contrary to the regular method of natural law. Therefore, they are impossible.

At this, Mr. B responds that we cannot reject empirical evidence in a court of law simply because it goes against what we think is normal (or probable). Just because something is improbable doesn't mean it didn't happen. He gives an example of a man who lives in a warm climate who has never seen frozen water. He might reject the report about ice because "this is improbable, contrary to the usual course of nature, and impossible according to his notion of things." (p. 31) But evidence is not based on probability but facts. And sometimes those facts go outside our knowledge of "the course of nature." We can even be prejudiced like the man who rejected belief in ice.

Resurrection is not out of the realm of possibility with God. It's true that it is not natural for people to rise from the dead. "For a dead man to rise to life again, is contrary to the course of nature. And certainly it is contrary to the uniform and settled course of things." (p. 33) But God can act *supernaturally* or from *beyond* nature (which he created). Cannot the very one who created first-life give life to Jesus' body and raise him from the dead? "The same power which gave life to senseless matter at first, and set all the springs and movements a-going at the beginning, can restore life to dead body." (p. 34)

Mr. B – Sincerity of the Apostles

Mr. B closes by drawing the attention of the jury to the sincerity of the disciples. It's true that many sincere people have followed false religions. Many have even denied proven facts right down to their grave "with the rope around their necks." (p. 47) But you have to consider what the apostles would gain for knowingly committing fraud and perpetrating a lie. "If you question their sincerity, they lived miserably, and died miserably, for the sake of this truth." (p. 43)

Comments from the Judge

While reviewing the case for the jury, the judge agreed with Mr. B on the point of the apostle's sincerity. He added that "voluntary sufferings for the truth, is at least a proof of

sincerity” (p. 65). Therefore, “The sufferings of the apostles for the truth of the resurrection, is a full and unexceptionable proof.” (p. 65) In addition, he added that all the disciples had to do to escape death is simply keep silent (i.e., stop preaching that Jesus rose from the dead). “Criminals deny the truth in hopes of saving their lives; the apostles willingly parted with their lives, rather than deny the truth.” (p. 66)

Verdict of the Jury

The trial concluded with the verdict of the jury:

Judge. What say you? Are the apostles guilty of giving false evidence in the case of the resurrection of Jesus, or not guilty?

Foreman. Not guilty. (p. 66)

Personal Opinions

Here are some of my concluding thoughts about this book.

It is difficult to read. If I had not been required to read this book for a class, I likely would have stopped after the first ten minutes. 18th century English is difficult to read. For example, “the people strewed his way with boughs and flowers, and were all at his devotion...” (p. 15) I kept thinking as I read it that it would be great if somebody were to modernize the text for today’s readers. It deserves to be read because it is a good book. However, I have to confess that the archaic English made it a bit challenging for me to follow at times.

Formatting problems. The book is in the public domain. I read from a copy that I downloaded on Kindle which appeared to be mostly text with no formatting. I’m used to visual cues like headers and italics (like shown in this paper) to help me read. But there was no such formatting—just paragraph divisions. I wish there were better visual divisions between “Mr. A” and “Mr. B.” I really had to pay attention to not miss these words at the start of some paragraphs because it would become difficult to follow who was talking. One time, I even found “Mr. B”

hidden inside the middle of a long paragraph—it is a good thing I caught that so I could change attorneys in my mind!⁸

Typos. I came across some typos which made me wonder how polished the book was when it was released. I figured they weren't in the original and maybe crept into the conversion from a public domain text file to Kindle. For example, “Now, what were the powers received by the apostles? *Where* [should be *were*] they not the powers of wisdom and courage... (p. 44, emphasis mine) There were other issues that might have been related to archaic English like “prayers in publick” (p. 14) and “part of their defence” (p. 26).

Did not like the ending. While I liked the book, I didn't like the ending. I felt the story should have simply ended after the wonderful defense by Mr. B. However, it ended by suggesting that the next topic to be debated was Lazarus' resurrection. I don't see why this needed to be mentioned.

Conclusion

All in all, Sherlock's book is very good. It was difficult to read, but it was rewarding to see a clever response to the Woolston drama of the 18th century English Deism movement. I hope that my summary of the arguments in the book presented here might help others understand and value this older apologetic work.

⁸ See p. 31: “...if we believe theirs. Mr. B. My Lord, in answering...”

Table 1. Brief list of the major arguments

<p>Charge: The apostles are guilty of giving false evidence in the case of the resurrection of Jesus.</p> <p>Mr. A is prosecuting attorney. Mr. B is defending attorney.</p> <p>A – People simply believe in Jesus’ resurrection because their parents believed it. A – There are many false religions which claim to have divine inspiration (e.g., Islam). A – People enthusiastically embrace false beliefs all the time. A – There are missing Jewish books that prove his resurrection did not happen. A – Jesus was able to deceive people like a magician. A – Jesus began to teach a dying messiah when he realized he couldn’t escape death.</p> <p>B – No evidence for previous three points – all imagination. B – Fraud is very unlikely. B – A fraudster would not set himself up against the beliefs of the people. B – Jesus could have seized the kingdom (or avoided death) – if that were his goal. B – What did the disciples gain from a false story?</p> <p>A – The disciples stole Jesus’ body. B – Not probable that disciples plotted against Roman guard. B – Plot goes against character of disciples. B – Why would they steal body? What good is a dead body to the disciples? B – The disciples dashed hopes contradicts a plot to steal Jesus’ body. A – The disciples were able to steal the body because the guards fell asleep. B – How did the guards know what happened if they were asleep? B – The disciples would have woken up the guards.</p> <p>A – Jesus’ prophecy about rising the third day was false because the disciples stole the body one day too early. B – Jesus did rise the third day based on Jewish convention.</p> <p>B – So A. agrees to facts: (1) Jesus died and (2) was put in tomb. B – A. also admits that Jesus’ prediction of his resurrection was well known.</p> <p>B – Why didn’t rulers/leaders reveal the fraud? B – Why didn’t the Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of fraud? B – Why didn’t the Jewish leaders accuse the disciples of fraud? B – Why did the Jewish leaders take Gamaliel’s advice if resurrection were a fraud? B – Why didn’t King Agrippa mention any fraud?</p> <p>A – It sounds very suspicious that Jesus did not appear to all people but to select people after his resurrection. B – Jesus told the Jewish leaders they would see him no more. B – Why not require Jesus show himself to Tiberius, King George, all people in history?</p>
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B – There were, in fact, many witnesses (upwards of 120, even 500).

A – We cannot trust the evidence of the witnesses.

A – The angels appeared like men... so they really were men.

A – Cannot trust the women's testimony because they were "poor silly women."

A – It wasn't really Jesus on road to Emmaus.

A – The disciples merely had hallucinations of Jesus (but he was not really raised).

A – The disciples said Jesus could disappear.

A – The disciples said his body could pass through walls.

A – His body still had the same open wounds.

B – The text does not say these things.

A – Miracles are impossible. No rational person should believe in them.

B – We cannot reject evidence in a court of law regardless of how improbable.

B – Jesus' resurrection is not out of realm of possibility with God.

B – Sincerity of the disciples.

Jury conclusion: "Not guilty."

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