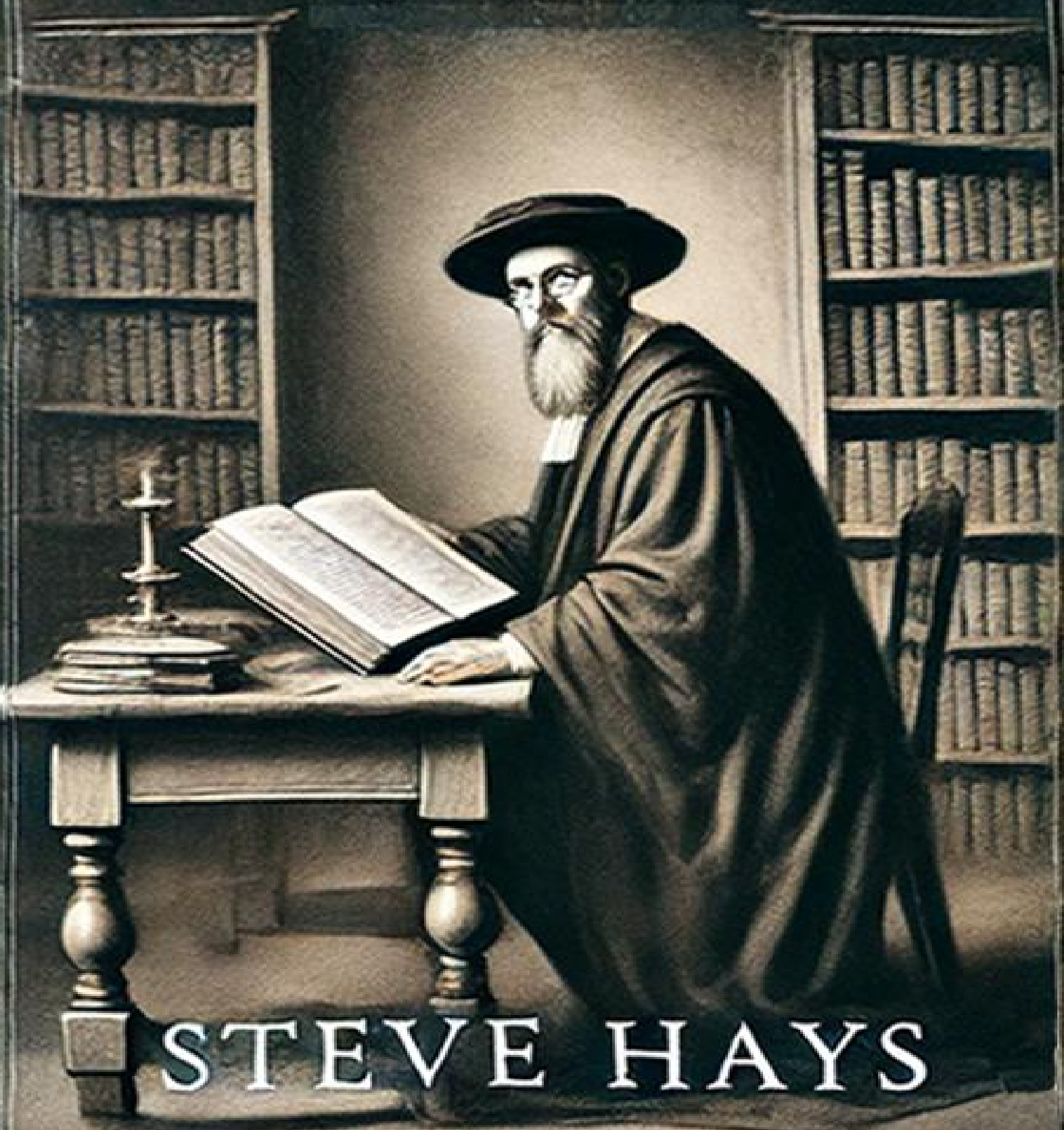
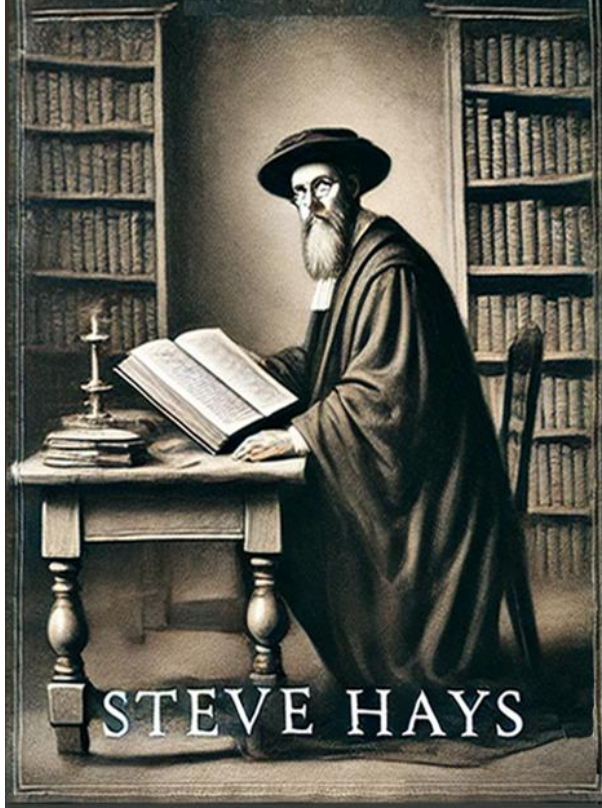


# INERRANCY



STEVE HAYS

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# Inerrancy

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# I. The Concept of Inerrancy

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## An ostensive definition of inerrancy

Definitions of inerrancy typically take the form of abstract definitions. While there's a necessary place for abstract definitions of inerrancy, their generality makes them fact-free vacuities. But traditional inerrantists have specific examples in mind, so it's useful to supplement or complement abstract definitions with ostensive definitions to avoid vacuity. For instance:

- 1.** The historical narratives of Scripture (e.g. the Pentateuch; Gospels) are factually accurate. They record real events. Moreover, they describe real events in ways that would be recognizable if you could step into a time machine and go back to the scenes they narrate.
- 2.** The moral and theological teaching of Scripture is true. Scripture doesn't command evil. Scripture doesn't misrepresent the true nature of God.
- 3.** The prophecies of Scripture are genuinely and accurately predictive. They were delivered prior to the fulfillment, rather than "prophecies" after the fact. In addition, the predictions have been or will be realized.

## Pathways to inerrancy

How can a Christian make a case for the inerrancy of Scripture? I'd like to sketch some apologetic strategies.

**1.** Before doing that, permit me to draw a some preliminary distinctions:

**i)** What makes something true may be different from how we prove it true. Suppose I see a sign that a pet owner posted about their missing dog. It has a description. Let's say it's a border collie. Now, it can't be a collie unless it's a dog, and it can't be a dog unless it's a mammal. Suppose I saw missing the dog, and I notify the owner. However, I don't need to first prove that the animal is a mammal, then prove that the mammal is a dog, to be justified in believing that I saw a border collie fitting that description. So the logical or ontological order in which something must be the case needn't mirror the order in which we prove that it's true. A multi-staged argument may be artificial in that regard.

**ii)** By the same token, we can believe something for different reasons than the reasons we give to justify our belief. Or there may be some overlap.

For instance, I may believe that a certain high school once existed, even though the location is now a vacant lot, because I attended that school when I was a teenager. That may be all I know, but that's all I need to know. And it would be reasonable for a second party to accept my testimony.

On the other hand, I could prove the existence of the high school by producing photographs or public records. I don't

need that kind of evidence for me to know or be justified in my belief. But were I proving it to someone else, who didn't have my firsthand knowledge, I might resort to corroborative evidence for his sake.

**iii)** By the same token, a person might believe in Christianity for very personal reasons. Maybe he has firsthand experience of a Christian miracle or answered prayer to Jesus. Or a trusted friend or family member relayed to him an experience in kind.

When, however, we make a case for Christianity, we generally confine ourselves to publicly available evidence, since an outsider isn't privy to our personal experience. Hence, I may have greater warrant for my faith than the evidence I adduce in mounting an argument for Christianity, because I'm confining myself to kinds of evidence accessible to outsiders. Even though I'm using probabilistic arguments, that doesn't necessarily mean the basis for my own belief is reducible to the evidence I present to persuade others.

**2.** The inerrancy of Scripture is logically grounded in the inspiration of Scripture.

**3.** Apropos (2), the argument from prophecy is an argument for divine inspiration. And that's a paradigm of Biblical inspiration. I've discussed how we can justifiably extrapolate from the prophetic paradigm to the inspiration of Scripture in general:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/plenary-verbal-inspiration.html>

And Michael Kruger comes at the same issue from a different angle:



<https://michaeljkruger.com/did-the-gospel-authors-think-they-were-writing-scripture/>

**4.** Likewise, we can argue for and from the the general historical reliability of the Gospels. That, in turn, ratifies the inspiration of the OT via the testimony of Jesus. And the OT is a paradigm of inspiration that applies perforce to the NT (see above).

At this stage of the argument, an apologist is not assuming the inspiration or infallibility of the Gospels. Rather, that will be the conclusion of his argument.

Keep in mind that this is a logical strategy. A stepwise argument. It doesn't mean the apologist is in a state of suspense regarding the outcome of his argument. He isn't waiting to find out what the answer will be. He believes in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture going in. So this is just a way of formulating the argument incrementally. We leave the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture in abeyance until we reach the conclusion for the sake of argument.

**5.** Apropos (4), the Gospels give redundant testimony regarding the person and work of Christ. So the conclusion doesn't turn on any particular verse. No single passage is crucial to the conclusion. The Gospels could be fallible, but even if (ex hypothesi) they contain mistakes, there's a wide margin for error giving redundancy and multiple attestation.

**6.** Apropos (5), if the Gospels bear witness to Jesus as God Incarnate, and if Jesus bears witness to the historicity and inspiration of the OT, then we can derive the inerrancy of Scripture through a chain of inference: general reliability of the Gospels>identity of Jesus>dominical attestation.

Notice that I'm not inferring inerrancy directly from general historical reliability. Rather, the argument is indirect. If it's demonstrable that the Gospels are generally historically reliable, then that affords a reliable account of who Jesus is and what he thought of the OT. That in turn validates the OT. And that in turn validates the NT, inasmuch as the NT is a continuation and completion of the OT paradigm.

**7.** On a related note is the argument from miracles. If the NT is a trustworthy account regarding the miracles of Jesus and the apostles, then that authenticates the divine mission of the messenger.

**8.** There are multiple lines of evidence for the historical reliability of the NT:

### **i) UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCES**

Suppose a biographer interviews friends and relatives of the person whose life he's narrating. What one informant says will often overlap with what another informant says. Not only is that multiple attestation, but in some cases what one informant says will fill in gaps left by what another informant says. So you have independent, interlocking lines of evidence. And that phenomenon has been documented in the Gospels and the record of Paul:

Lydia McGrew, **HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW: UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCES IN THE GOSPELS AND ACTS** (DeWard, 2017)

### **ii) ARCHEOLOGICAL CORROBORATION**

The Gospels often correspond with extrabiblical evidence for what was going on at that time and place. Some critics

attempt to dismiss this by saying that's consistent with historical fiction, where a narrator will sprinkle his account with enough realistic details to give it an air of verisimilitude.

However, that objection is at cross-purposes with another objection critics raise: namely, their claim that Gospels were written by narrators far removed from the time and place of the events they purport to record. But the critic can't have it both ways. Either the narrators were out of touch with time and place of Jesus, in which case they'd be too ignorant to write good historical fiction—or else they were conversant with the facts on the ground, in which case you can't chalk up the corroborative evidence to the artifice of historical fiction.

On a related note is the historicity of Acts. Because the historical purview of Acts is more cosmopolitan than the provincial focus of the Gospels, it intersects with more 1C history. As a result, the Book of Acts enjoys greater historical corroboration. Yet the author of Acts was the same person as the author of Luke's Gospel. That goes to show that Luke is a conscientious historian with many informants.

Monographs that collate this kind of evidence include:

Paul Barnett, **FINDING THE HISTORICAL JESUS** (Eerdmans, 2009)

Richard Bauckham, **JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES** (Eerdmans, 2nd ed., 2017)

Craig Blomberg, **THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** (B&H Academic, 2016)

Craig A. Evans, **JESUS AND HIS WORLD: THE ARCHEOLOGICAL Evidence** (WJK, 2012)

Colin Hemer, **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN THE SETTING OF HELLENISTIC HISTORY** (Eisenbrauns, 1990)

Craig Keener, **ACTS: A EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY, 4 VOLS.** (Baker Academic, 2012-2015)

Stanley Porter, **JOHN, HIS GOSPEL, AND JESUS** (Eerdmans, 2016)

Bruce. W. Winter, **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN ITS FIRST CENTURY SETTING, VOLS. 1-4** (Eerdmans)

9. Another line of evidence is the traditional authorship of the Gospels. That includes both internal and external lines of evidence;

**i)** Patristic testimony.

**ii)** Textual evidence for the originality or extreme antiquity of the titles (e.g. Martin Hengel, Richard Bauckham).

**iii)** By process of elimination, the narrator of John's Gospel is an eyewitness disciple—in all probability the Apostle John.

**iv)** If Mark was a younger contemporary of Jesus, as well as a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), then it's likely that his

account is based in part on firsthand observation.

**10.** Assuming that Matthew and Luke make use of Mark, that gives us an opportunity to check on how they handle source material. By comparing Matthew and Luke with Mark, we can see that Matthew and Luke are quite conservative in their use of Mark. Very faithful to their source. So that's a good reason to think they are trustworthy when they supplement Mark with independent sources of information.

## Perspectives on inspiration

How we model inspiration depends on other aspects of our theology. Let's consider a Reformed paradigm:

Calvinism affirms predestination and meticulous providence. Everything happens because God planned it to happen that way. But there are different ways in which God can implement his plan. God orchestrates events to create apostles, prophets, and Bible writers. Providential preparation includes their social conditioning and formative influences.

God operates in the human subconscious (e.g. Isa 10:5-11) as well as physical events. God doesn't bypass the personality of a prophet or Bible writer, for he created their personality. God is like a luthier and violinist all in one. He makes the instrument, then plays it (so to speak). It has the properties he gave it.

## Defining inerrancy

**i)** As the inerrancy wars reheat, let's revisit our definitions. Let's begin with a few definitions:

*Inerrancy will then mean that at no point in what was originally given were the biblical writers allowed to make statements or endorse viewpoints which are not in conformity with objective truth. This applies at any level at which they make pronouncements (Roger Nicole).*

*Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences (Paul Feinberg).*

*Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives (Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy).*

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**ii)** These definitions are fine as far as they go. However, they contain an implicit loophole.

For instance, suppose a commentator on Acts says the Ascension never happened. Does that deny the inerrancy of Scripture? Depends on how he defends his interpretation.

If he says Luke affirms or teaches the reality of the Ascension, based on his antiquated cosmology, but we now know that couldn't happen, then his interpretation denies the inerrancy of Scripture.

If, however, he says Luke never intended to affirm the reality of the Ascension, that this was never meant to be more than a theological metaphor, then his interpretation is consistent with the definition of inerrancy. He doesn't say what Luke claimed to be the case was mistaken. Rather, he says it was never a truth-claim in the first place.

So this reflects a limitation concerning abstract definitions of inerrancy. There's only so much you can pack into a definition.

**iii)** But oftentimes, Christians use "inerrancy" more broadly, as shorthand for the kinds of things critics or unbelievers deny. In this broader sense, when we say Scripture is inerrant, we mean that when Scripture says something has happened (history) or will happen (prophecy), that's a fact. That corresponds to an objective state of affairs.

Or when Scripture says something is right or wrong, that's true. Or when Scripture quotes someone, he really said it.

Usually, "inerrancy" is getting at matters of historicity, factuality, or miraculosity. However, that's something you



can't really capture in an abstract definition, because it alludes to a large number of specific examples or kinds of things.

This means inerrancy is not enough. A definition of inerrancy needs to be supplemented by a list of doctrines or events. In other words, you also need a creed or statement of faith to specify some key details. To fill the blanks. Show how the definition plays out at a concrete level.

Finally, even at that level, there's only so much you can put into a statement of faith. It's a summary of doctrine.

**iv)** In addition to creeds, members of a Christian community must operate in good faith. This includes an unwritten understanding and acceptance.

Take the statement of faith at Dallas Theological Seminary. From what I can tell, if a DTS prof. were to say the oracles of Daniel were prophecy ex eventu, that wouldn't violate the statement of faith.

Since, however, DTS is the flagship of dispensational seminaries, since DTS was founded by prophecy teachers, treating the oracles of Daniel as prophecy ex eventu would clearly be out-of-bounds. That violates the unwritten understanding of the DTS community. A DTS prof could only get away with that if, at some point, DTS liberalizes. Abandons its original vision.

## Is inerrancy, at best, a secondary doctrine?

I'm going to comment on a recent statement by Mike Licona:

Third, the truth of Christianity is grounded in the historicity of Jesus' resurrection rather than the inerrancy of the Bible. If Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity would still be true even if it were the case that some things in the Bible are not. In fact, because Jesus rose, Christianity was true in the period before any of the New Testament literature was written. So, how could an error in the Gospels nullify the truth of Christianity? This is not to say the Bible contains errors. It is to say that, since the truth of the Christian gospel does not hang on every word in the Bible being correct, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is, at the very most, a secondary doctrine.

This position is only an echo of that articulated in 1893 by B. B. Warfield, regarded as the father of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy:

Let it not be said that thus we found the whole Christian system upon the doctrine of plenary inspiration. We found the whole Christian system on the doctrine of plenary inspiration as little as we found it upon the doctrine of angelic existences. Were there no such thing as inspiration, Christianity would be true, and all its essential doctrines would be credibly witnessed to us in the generally trustworthy reports of the teaching of our Lord and of His authoritative agents in founding the Church, preserved in the writings of the apostles and their first followers,

and in the historical witness of the living Church. Inspiration is not the most fundamental of Christian doctrines, nor even the first thing we prove about the Scriptures. It is the last and crowning fact as to the Scriptures. These we first prove authentic, historically credible, generally trustworthy, before we prove them inspired. And the proof of their authenticity, credibility, general trustworthiness would give us a firm basis for Christianity prior to any knowledge on our part of their inspiration, and apart indeed from the existence of inspiration. Warfield, "**THE REAL PROBLEM OF INSPIRATION.**"

<http://www.risenjesus.com/chicagos-muddy-waters>

i) I disagree with Warfield's methodology, for reasons I'll come to momentarily. But I'd also note that Warfield is using a different argument than Licona. Warfield didn't say:

Even though the Bible claims to be plenary inspired, if the self-witness of Scripture were proven false, Christianity would still be true.

Warfield is speaking hypothetically. This is even clearer from a similar statement he made:

We may say that without a Bible we might have had Christ and all that he stands for to our souls. Let us not say that this might not have been possible. But neither let us forget that, in point of fact, it is to the Bible that we owe it that we know Christ and are found in

him. "The Inspiration of the Bible," in **REVELATION AND INSPIRATION**, 72.

So Warfield is discussing a counterfactual scenario in which the Bible doesn't claim to be plenary inspired in the first place. A counterfactual scenario in which there is no Bible. A possible world where Christianity is not a revealed religion. Where the knowledge of Christianity solely depends on collective memory.

That wouldn't be the same religion. It would be significantly similar to Christianity inasmuch as many of the key events would be the same, but it would be significantly dissimilar as well.

That is very different from Licona's argument that if, in the real world, Scripture was found to be errant *in spite of* Scripture's self-witness to the contrary, Christianity would still be true. Even if Licona's argument is a good argument, it's not the same argument as Warfield's. It's not the same position.

**ii)** It's true that inspiration and the Resurrection are two causally independent events. In that sense, the truth of the Resurrection is not contingent on the truth or falsity of inspiration. Hypothetically speaking, you could have many of the same redemptive events with or without an inspired record.

That, however, doesn't mean Christianity would still be true. Rather, that would mean Christianity is partially true.

For instance, imagine OT Judaism without the prophets. Imagine Judaism without Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, &c. You could still have many of the same events. The

calling of Abraham could still be true. The Exodus could still be true. And so on and so forth. However, OT Judaism without the prophets would not be the same religion.

**iii)** In addition, Licona is erecting a false dichotomy between divine words and divine works. But when God raised up prophets, that's a divine event. Sending prophets to Israel is something God does as well as something God says. So we can't neatly separate the works of God from the words of God.

**iv)** To take another example: in Isa 40-48, one factor distinguishing the true God from false gods is that Yahweh says he's going to do something, then does it. Predictive prophecy is a fundamental element of OT theism. God does what he says he will do. God says what he will do before he does it.

If, however, God simply did things without announcing his intentions in advance, you'd only have half the religion. There's far more to Biblical theism than what God does. God is a God who foretells his actions, then fulfills what he foretells. Among other things, inspiration points to a God who knows and controls the future. God gives a word (to or through a prophet), then acts on his word. That's an essential component of Biblical theism. A God who makes promises, then makes good on his promises.

**v)** What about Warfield's argument? In addition to what Licona quoted, Warfield deploys variations on this same argument. For instance:

Inspiration, in its more exact sense, cannot come into the discussion until theism, the reality of revelation, the divine origin and character of the religion which they present, and the general trustworthiness of their

presentation of it, have been already established. It is the crowing attribute of these sacred books, and is inconceivable and would not be affirmed if they were not previously believed to be the trustworthy records of a divinely given religion. **SELECTED SHORTER WRITINGS**, 2:632.

But certainly, before we draw it from the Scriptures, we must assure ourselves that there is a knowledge of God in the Scriptures. And, before we do that, we must assure ourselves that there is a knowledge of God in the world. And, before we do that, we must assure ourselves that a knowledge of God is possible for man. And before we do that, we must assure ourselves that there is a God to know. Thus, we inevitably work back to first principles. **SELECTED SHORTER WRITINGS**, 2:98.

In other words, Warfield is proposing a stepwise proof, in which one thing presupposes another, like a logical syllogism. But even if we grant his methodology, it doesn't follow from this that the order in which you prove something parallels the order of importance.

Suppose we said, the resurrection of Christ presupposes the death of Christ, and the death of Christ presupposes the birth of Christ. Therefore, the Resurrection "is, at the very most, a secondary doctrine."

Likewise, the NT presupposes the OT. Does it follow that the NT is, at best, of secondary importance to the Christian faith?

Even if you use a linear proof, the order in which you prove something is not a ranking system. It's not an argument in

descending order of importance, where what is prior is more essential or fundamental than what is posterior in the logical or causal sequence.

**vi)** Moreover, is Warfield's argument the only proper way to arrive at the conclusion? Must we always begin with first principles?

Take a comparison: when I observe seagulls, I know a large body of water is nearby. Suppose I'm driving to the coast, but I'm lost. If, however, I begin to notice seagulls in the direction I'm driving, whereas there were no seagulls for miles behind, I can reasonably infer that I'm approaching the coast. I'm getting close to the ocean.

But suppose I'm Warfield. Suppose I say:

In proving my proximity to the beach, seagulls are not the first thing I appeal to. For seagulls can't exist unless seagulls come from eggs. And seagulls can't make coastal waters their habitat unless there's an ocean in the first place. Therefore, I must first prove the existence of the sea, then prove that seagulls come from eggs, before I can appeal to sightings of seagulls as evidence for the nearby ocean.

That's clearly backwards. And that's because the order of knowing reverses the order of being.

You don't have to begin with first principles. You don't have to begin with causes. You can begin with effects. The Bible is the effect of divine agency: revelation, inspiration, and historical causation. So it's not illicit to reason back from Scripture, as a starting-point, to its ultimate cause.

**vii)** How did most Jews and Christians come to believe in the scriptures? Not through Warfield's argument. For Jewish and Christian believers who were raised in the faith, in many cases they can't remember a time when they didn't believe in the God of prophets. Their religious experience is a package.

If, moreover, the God of Scripture exists, then these aren't separable elements in reality, even if they are logically separable. So why demand that we must take it apart and rearrange it in Warfield's schematic fashion?

In fact, Warfield falls back on intuition when he's writing for a popular audience. He knows his methodology won't work for the average layman. Take his essay on the deity of Christ (from **THE FUNDAMENTALS**):

A man recognizes on sight the face of his friend, or his own handwriting. Ask him how he knows this face to be that of his friend, or his handwriting to be his own, and he may be dumb [i.e. speechless], or, seeking to reply, may babble nonsense. Yet his recognition rests on solid grounds, though he lacks analytical skill to isolate and state these grounds. We believe in God and freedom and immortality on good grounds, though we may not be able to satisfactorily analyze these grounds. No true conviction exists without adequate rational grounding in evidence. So, if we are solidly assured of the deity of Christ, it will be on adequate grounds, appealing to the reason. But it may well be on grounds not analyzed, perhaps not analyzable, by us, so as to exhibit themselves in the forms of formal logic.

We do not need to wait to analyze the grounds of our convictions before they operate to produce convictions, any more than we need to wait to analyze our food



before it nourishes us. The Christian's conviction of the deity of his Lord does not depend for its soundness on the Christian's ability convincingly to state the grounds of his conviction. The evidence he offers for it may be wholly inadequate, while the evidence on which it rests may be absolutely compelling.

## Faith without a floor

**1.** I typically avoid debating apologetic method, not because I think it's unimportant, but in part because it's usually an onramp without an offramp. Both sides just keep going in circles. Likewise, having worked out my own methodology years ago, I prefer to act on that rather than talk about it. However, I make the occasional exception.

Evidentialist apologists have made, and continue to make, tremendous contributions to Christian apologetics. Contributions which can be shamelessly appropriated by presuppositional apologetics!

That said, a fundamental objection I have to evidentialism is that it has no theological floor. Because everything is based on prima facie evidence, everything is up for grabs. And that's not just hypothetical.

- If Gen 1 appears to be unscientific, then the evidentialist reinterprets it as fiction or legend.
- If the ages of the antediluvians appear to be naturally unrealistic, the evidentialist reinterprets them as symbolic or legendary.
- If Noah's flood appears to be unscientific, the evidentialist reinterprets that as fiction or legend.
- If the Exodus lacks independent corroboration, the evidentialist reinterprets that as fiction or legend.
- If the new temple in Ezekiel appears to be a disappointed expectation, the evidentialist interprets that as prophetic

failure.

- If the Book of Daniel appears to be unhistorical, the evidentialist reinterprets that as fiction or prophecy after the fact.
- If some end-of-the-world prophecies in the Gospels appear to be wrong, the evidentialist lowers his Christology.

These are just samples. The list could be multiplied.

**2.** Now in fairness, reexamining traditional interpretations is not unique to evidentialists. Christians in general feel some pressure for our understanding of Scripture and our understanding of the world to match.

But in the case of evidentialism, there's a pattern—indeed a policy—of abandoning one outpost after another. Nothing is nonnegotiable. The border keeps contracting. Christian theology fades away, piece-by-piece.

**3.** An evidentialist might counter, so is your position that we should continue believing despite the evidence? We should simply ignore the evidence?

Well, I don't think Christianity suffers from a lack of evidence. Quite the contrary.

But the problem with the evidentialist is their failure to appreciate that the Christian faith is a unit. You can't keep moving the landmarks. What you believe isn't Christianity. A Christian faith without a floor isn't a Christian alternative.

Christian faith requires a baseline commitment. It demands personal tenacity. It's what you're supposed to live by, die by, or die for.

Of course, evidentialists range along a continuum. But it's like the moving walkway at airports. You may get off before you reach the end, but stepping on the autowalk signifies consent to go the whole way.

Or, to vary the metaphor, it's like getting married, where bride and groom both make allowance for an open marriage. They may not actually have extramarital affairs, but they're prepared to. They've given themselves permission. That's understood by both of them going into the wedding ceremony.

## Color-coded Bible

My post

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/11/faith-without-floor.html>

provoked a conversation in the combox which I'm posting separately because it offers a high-level comparison and contrast between the respective positions:

### LYDIA MCGREW

I would say that evidentialism per se doesn't tell us anything about any of those *specific* things. If we imagine an evidentialist who is convinced of the most conservative position on all of those specific things, and thinks he has extremely strong evidence for them, then there is no reason to talk about a "floor" at all anymore, unless we assume that he's just missing some significant piece of evidence right now.

I would put the marriage analogy a little differently: Suppose that I say that I believe that my husband exists based upon evidence, not as a presupposition.

And suppose someone says, "Well, then, you could in theory become convinced that your husband doesn't exist? So it could go that low, there's no floor?"

How would one answer this? Presumably one would say, "Well, that's a crazy scenario. Are we imagining that I get some almost unimaginably bizarre influx of new evidence in which I become rationally convinced that my husband is

really a robot inserted into our country by space aliens, or what?"

In other words, there are tons of things that we are so over-justified in believing *by evidence* that we can only envisage becoming convinced that they are false if we make up the wildest of future evidential scenarios, which we'd have to be crazy to lose sleep over.

Does that mean that we are "presuppositionalists" about those things? No, of course not. It means that our evidence is so mountainous and overwhelming that we have, by *evidential* means, a kind of "practical certainty" about them so that we would have to rip up huge amounts of our other justified beliefs (in this case, our justified confidence that space alien robots are not successfully impersonating humans over many decades, etc.) in order to change our minds about them.

In that trivial sense one can say that there is "no floor" on whether, in principle, one could abandon such a belief, as long as it isn't something known a priori.  $1 + 1 = 2$  is more justified than "I have a hand" or "My husband is not a robot." But that's not an argument against being an evidentialist about such propositions.

### STEVE

A problem I have with that response is that while I used some picturesque metaphors to illustrate the principle, my primary examples aren't hypothetical, much less farfetched hypotheticals, but real-life examples, and not exceptional but commonplace. Lots of folks who used to be conservative Christians but over time the content of their faith atrophies along the pattern I describe. It's not so much that the

bottom fell out of their faith, but that their faith had no bottom to begin with.

### LYDIA MCGREW

Sure, but presumably presupps don't have *particular* positions on all of those things as part of their "floor." At least I wouldn't imagine that they do. There's nothing about being a presupp per se that means you have to have one particular position on the ages of the patriarchs or Noah's flood. I can easily imagine presupps disagreeing among themselves about those issues.

Nor is there anything especially friendly to "myth or legend" in the evidentialist position.

I can easily imagine a presupp who takes a more "liberal" position on those particular issues than an evidentialist. Or I can imagine a presupp. and an evidentialist having exactly the same set of things where they draw a line and say, "No, I'm not going to change my mind on that."

The meta-level positions don't really tell us where someone's "floor" is going to fall. I have a really strong position on the historical Adam. I can easily imagine a presupp. who would be more friendly than I am to theistic evolution for the body of man.

In practice, I suspect that both presupps and evidentialists have as their practical "floor" those things that they tacitly or explicitly believe are extremely strongly justified by the data, including the data of Scripture. The reason that a particular position on the deity of Christ is a non-negotiable is (in no small measure) because we all recognize that it is over-justified by the Scriptural data as a tenet of

Christianity. But that's not the case on, e.g., a local vs. a universal flood.

I would instance here Paul Moser as a guy who is a sort of rabid neo-Barthian and hates evidentialism with the passion of a thousand burning suns. I'd be willing to bet a sum of money that his positions are *far* more liberal on all of those issues than mine and that he has a lower "floor" than mine on other issues as well.

### STEVE

To generalize, presuppers have a more theological orientation whereas evidentialists have a more historical orientation. By that I mean, evidentialists approach the Bible as historians—in contrast to presuppers who approach the Bible as a religious document (as well as a historical document), so that, as a matter of principle, presuppers treat Christian theology and Bible narratives as a unit—rather than an assemblage of separable parts, to be individually reaffirmed or discarded. (Which doesn't mean presuppers, or at least the most intelligent representatives, are unconcerned with the value of corroborative evidence, where available.)

As long as we're toying with hypotheticals, here's another hypothetical way to frame the difference between presuppers and evidentialists:

**i)** Suppose the Book of Esther made demonstrably false historical claims. An evidentialist might say that just means we should dispense with inerrancy. The Book of Esther might still be a historically useful witness to an especially trying time in Jewish history, but it's not infallible. It's comparable to 1 Maccabees.



By contrast, a presupper might say in that case it's not that Scripture is fallible, but that Esther isn't Scripture. Scripture wasn't mistaken; rather, the canonization of Esther was mistaken. We don't dispense with inerrancy but with errant books.

**ii)** Put another way, presuppers accept or reject books as a unit rather than accepting or rejecting parts of (the same) books.

**iii)** That's because presuppers regard Scripture as a religious document (as well as a historical document). A supernatural rather than naturalistic product.

**iv)** BTW, this isn't a uniquely presuppositional approach to the Bible. I also approach the Koran, the Book of Mormon, and the **ARCANA CŒLESTIA** (to cite three representative examples) as religious documents. They purportedly originate in supernatural encounters, and that's how I evaluate them (although historical analysis is certainly pertinent, where possible). As such, I accept or reject them as a unit. I don't affirm parts of them while discarding other parts. Rather, I accept or reject them in toto.

Of course, the Koran does have some incidental historical and autobiographical value regarding the life and times of Muhammad. It's worthless on Bible history, but does shed light on a particular period in Middle Eastern history.

To illustrate the contrast from different, but related examples, here are some more comparisons:

**i)** As a presupper, I don't approach the Koran the same way I approach the Jewish Wars by Josephus. Josephus wrote a

historical account, not a religious document. It doesn't claim to be Scripture or divine revelation.

I can accept or reject parts of the Jewish Wars, if some parts are of dubious historicity.

By contrast, the Koran is first and foremost a revelatory claimant. Considered on those terms, it reject it in toto.

**ii)** Considered as a canonical candidate, I reject 1 Maccabees in toto. That's if I judge it on Catholic grounds.

**iii)** However, 1 Maccabees isn't a Catholic document. It was appropriated by the Catholic church, but it didn't originate in Catholicism. It's a pre-Catholic, pre-Christian document. A historical document about the Maccabean revolt. It doesn't claim to be Scripture. So at that level, I can accept parts of it and reject parts of it, if some parts are of dubious historicity.

**iv)** Consider the scribal/apocryphal additions to Daniel, Mark, and John. I don't accept some parts of Daniel, Mark, and John while rejecting other parts. Rather, I don't regard the apocryphal additions to Daniel, or the scribal interpolations to Mark and John (the Long Ending of Mark, the Pericope Adulterae) to be parts of those books in the first place. They're not original to Daniel, Mark, and John.

**v)** This is not to deny that the same document can be both historical and religious. But if a document puts itself forward as a candidate for Scripture, then I'll assess the status of the document on religious terms rather than historical terms. Of course, if the revelatory claimant makes blatantly false historical claims, that doesn't help its case!

## LYDIA MCGREW

What I'm pushing back against here is the to my mind mistaken view that evidentialism says, "Never come to a strong conclusion about anything" or "always hold a lower-than-really-high probability for all religious propositions." There is nothing about evidentialism that says that. That's maybe a caricature that arises understandably from statements like, "Always follow the evidence," but my point is that you can follow the evidence and thereby come to an extremely high confidence in a proposition such that you don't envisage changing your mind on it ever. It's not like evidentialism puts some kind of artificial "ceiling" on the degree of confidence you can have in any religious proposition, like you have to hang around in a state of semi-uncertainty about the deity of Christ (or whatever) all your life so that you can prove to yourself that you're open-minded and ready to follow the evidence. I forget if it's GK Chesterton who has that famous quotation about how open-mindedness is fine so long as it doesn't prevent us from closing our minds upon the truth when we find it. An evidentialist can say "amen" to that at least as loudly as a presuppositionalist.

## STEVE

There's the question of what motivates a reinterpretation. For instance, the reason people question or outright deny the longevity of the antediluvians is because they think that's unrealistic. Whereas a presupper would say it's realistic because that's attested in Scripture.

Now, I agree with you that one can postulate hypothetical scenarios which create untenable dilemmas for presuppers. But like hypothetical moral dilemmas, that ultimately becomes a question of divine providence in real life. Will God allow believers to be confronted with untenable

intellectual dilemmas? That also depends on how much control we think God has over world history. So the debate spills over into other theological commitments.

### LYDIA MCGREW

Is it your position that presuppositionalism *per se* contains a position on the meaning of the ages of the antediluvians? Because I would bet there are presuppers who would disagree with you on that.

I was under the impression that presuppositionalism had various issues where various interpretations of Scripture's literalness was allowed in a generally evidential manner just as it is for evidentialists, not that presuppositionalism *per se* is committed to a more literal hermeneutic.

For example, I think there are presupp OECs as well as presupp YECs.

(I'm inclined to take the ages of the antediluvians as literal, btw.)

Maybe we should distinguish presuppers from "people who take some non-evidentialist approach to apologetics." Perhaps one wouldn't say William Lane Craig is a presupper. See my comment below. He's not an evidentialist, though. But evidently the "internal witness of the Holy Spirit" isn't telling him that Genesis 1-11 are not "mytho-history," even though the IWHS is telling him that the Bible as a whole is true!

So it's not just hypothetical but actual for someone to have a commitment, even what that person characterizes as a whole-book, non-evidentialist commitment, to the truth of the Bible as Scripture, and to reinterpret segments as non-

historical in fairly radical ways just as you are bringing up here, even more so than a given evidentialist (like me) does. Again, this isn't just a hypothetical scenario.

### STEVE

**i)** When I contrast presupposers with evidentialists, that doesn't mean I'm exempting classical apologists (e.g. Craig) from the contrast. I'm just using evidentialism as a representative point of contrast.

**ii)** Especially among the laity, some Christians appeal to the IWHS as a hermeneutical shortcut. The Holy Spirit gives Spirit-filled Christians the correct interpretation of Scripture.

However, that's just folk theology. The Bible itself never makes that promise. It's convenient for lay Christians who don't have access to academic Bible commentaries or the aptitude to process them. But the appeal is misguided.

**iii)** In terms of historical theology, the IWHS wasn't used as a hermeneutical shortcut but to undergird the assurance of salvation and/or conviction that the Bible is the word of God.

On the one hand, the principle has some value, possibly indispensable, because most Christians lack the aptitude to justify their faith through rigorous argumentation, so they must have an alternate mode of access to ground their faith. For a fairly sophisticated formulation of the IWHS:

<https://www.proginosko.com/2017/01/the-internal-testimony-of-the-holy-spirit/>

**iv)** However, the IWHS, if valid as a general principle, is too coarse-grained to function as a criterion for the canonical

candidates (or textual criticism).

We might compare it to the argument from miracles, which eliminates conventional naturalism, and creates a presumption in favor of Christianity compared to non-Christian religions (because miracles cluster around Christianity), but is too indiscriminate to eliminate intra-Christian rivals.

**v)** In principle, the IWHS isn't the only epistemological paradigm that could perform the role assigned to it. An alternative might be a providential paradigm where God instills Christian faith by arranging for people to be exposed to good religious conditioning, as well as miracles, special providences, or answered prayers.

**vi)** The IWHS could be expanded into the argument from religious experience.

**vii)** As you know, "reinterpreting" the Bible is sometimes a euphemism for "the Bible got it wrong", but it would be controversial to say that, so a reinterpretation is more politic.

**viii)** As I said before, the primary issue isn't reinterpretation per se, but what motivates reinterpretation. If I question or reject a traditional interpretation, I didn't personally change my mind. That interpretation was around long before I was born. Every new Christian generation must assess traditional interpretations. Christians in different times and places may find themselves in different epistemic situations. A cliché example is geocentrism.

**ix)** Moreover, it's not always a case of revising the interpretation under pressure from factual challenges. For

instance, biblical archeology may provide new evidence that invites an alternative interpretation.

x) My primary target is an approach to Scripture like the Jesus Seminar. A color-coded Bible in which we go through the Bible rating various statement as probably true, probably false, definitely false.

And that also happens under the guise of "reinterpretation," where reinterpreting a passage of Scripture is functionally equivalent to saying it's wrong. The revised interpretation is a face-saving device.

This dovetails with your criticism of token inerrancy, where lip-service is paid to inerrancy but the affirmation is vacuous because it strips historicity out of inerrancy. Inerrancy becomes an empty suit.

### LYDIA MCGREW

Just thought of this: Bill Craig has critiqued evidentialism and doesn't consider himself an evidentialist, and he's out there saying that Gen. 1-11 is "mytho-history." I don't know if you just think WLC is an outlier or something, but he really is an example of someone who both a) has distanced himself explicitly from evidentialism (I guess he'd be more of a Plantingian in certain ways) and b) has engaged in reinterpretation in exactly the way you are talking about and, I would say, for the same motives, though perhaps he would dispute the motive claim.

I don't really think he's all that unusual among non-evidentialists and anti-evidentialists. But perhaps you're just making generalizations about presuppositionalists more narrowly conceived and saying that those in that group are more inclined to stick with a more literal hermeneutic and

not to engage in reinterpretation based on outside evidence or judgements of probability than self-styled evidentialists.



# The hermeneutics of inerrancy

## 1. APOLOGETIC SHORTCUTS

Atheists constantly attack the Bible. They allege that Scripture is riddled with errors and contradictions. They constantly recycle the same stock objections.

Now, some of these passages require individualized treatment, but in many cases, atheists raise the same *kinds* of objections, so it's unnecessary to address each and every objection separately. Rather, we can debunk the false assumptions that underlie similar *kinds* of objections. Many objections to the inerrancy and historicity of the Bible fall under some general categories. Therefore, a Christian apologist can take some shortcuts by noting these rules of thumb. Although I've discussed all these principles at one time or another, there's some value in collecting them in one post. I'm probably overlooking some categories, because I've written so much about it.

## 2. DOUBLE STANDARD?

Atheists contend that Christians are guilty of special pleading when they interpret the Bible to save face. However, none of my principles are distinctive to inerrancy. Rather, these pertain to hermeneutics in general. Many atheists (e.g. Bart Ehrman) are poor readers. Their approach represents a maladroit way to read historical narratives or law codes generally, whether inspired or uninspired.

When we encounter difficulties in an uninspired text, we make allowance for error. That's the primary difference between the Christian interpretation of Scripture and uninspired writings. But even in the case of uninspired writers, there's no general presumption that the writer was mistaken. Sometimes he was. But sometimes the reader is mistaken. And that's more likely when we read ancient writings.

### **3. BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE**

Human communication usually requires the reader/listener to read between the lines. Much is left unstated. The writer/speaker takes a shared body of common knowledge for granted. But some of that is lost when we read an ancient document.

To take a comparison, there are tropes and conventions associated with certain cinematic genres. Science fiction conventions include time travel and travel to a parallel universe. Horror films include conventions about werewolves and vampires. The audience is expected to be familiar with these conventions, so that no exposition or explanation is required. If a viewer is new to the genre, he will find the plot inscrutable. It won't make any sense to him. Yet that's not because the plot is flawed. It may make flawless sense if you understand the conventions of the genre. If you have the requisite background knowledge. The same issue applies when reading an ancient text.

### **4. METHODOLOGICAL ATHEISM**

Atheists accuse Christians of a double standard. We credit supernatural explanations in Scripture but we operate like methodological naturalists when it comes to explaining

phenomena outside of Scripture. Now, there may be some hardline cessationists who are guilty of this, but speaking for myself, my position isn't compartmentalized. I accept naturalistic explanations when I have no reason to think there's anything about the phenomenon that makes a naturalistic explanation inadequate or implausible. However, I believe there's phenomena in the modern world that invite a supernatural explanation. So I'm consistent in that regard.

Moreover, that goes back to a biblical distinction miracle and ordinary providence. The natural world operates much like a machine. But that draws attention to exceptions.

## 5. PHOTOGRAPHIC REALISM

Many atheists have an unreasonable notion of what constitutes accurate reportage. They imagine that in order to be accurate, a report must be like audiotape or videotape. But in many cases that isn't even possible. The written medium is different than seeing something happen. You're translating an experience from one mode of information to a different mode of information. When we see something, that's very dense. That has lots of incidental, extraneous detail.

Moreover, we see and hear things in chronological order. We read and write in a certain order. But images aren't linear in the way writing is. So some adjustments are necessary when translating observation to writing. It's selective and it's going to rearrange things to some degree.

As I define it, what makes a report accurate is that if I could step into the time machine and go back to the event, there'd be a recognizable correspondence between the

report and the event. "Ah, so here's where Jesus said this and did that!"

I'd expect some differences. The sequence might be different. The account might simplify the incident by filtering out extraneous details. But by comparing the account to the event, I could identify the same event, speech, or statement.

## 6. ANACHRONISM

It's natural for a modern reader to use his own cultural understanding as the frame of reference when he reads a text. But that carries the danger of imposing an alien filter onto the text. For instance, when we read the flood account, it's natural to unconsciously interpret the description in light of modern geography and biogeography. But the original audience didn't have that frame of reference. Their historical horizon was the Middle East. So a modern reader needs to guard against recontextualizing an ancient document to mean something it didn't refer to.

## 7. VISIONARY REVELATION

In Scripture, much or most prophecy originates in visionary revelation. The seer then provides a verbal description of what he saw. Sometimes he may provide an interpretation of what he saw, but often all the reader has to work with is the verbal description.

Images aren't propositions. Strictly speaking, an image of the future isn't a truth-claim. A future-oriented image isn't true or false, but suggestive. That's further complicated by the fact that some revelatory dreams and visions are allegorical.

So the relation between prophecy and truth is often at one or more steps removed from truth or falsehood. It depends on correspondence between what was seen and future events. Is there a specific recognizable match?

## 8. TYPOLOGY

According to Scripture, God prearranges history so that some things in the past symbolically prefigure some things in the future. And it may involve a one-to-many relation, similar to how different actors can play the same role. There may be a definitive realization, but along the way there are things that exemplify that principle. History is repetitious. The same kinds of events recur.

## 9. SYNOPTIC/RESUMPTION-EXPANSION

That's a compositional technique in Hebrew narration:

*A Hebrew author will at times tell the whole story in brief form (synopsis), then repeat the story (resumption), adding greater detail (expansion). Mark Futato, "Because It Had Rained: A Study of Gen 2:5-7 with Implications for Gen 2:4-25 and Gen 1:1—2:3," WTJ 60.1 (Spring 1998) 12; cf. Herbert Chanan Brichto, Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics:*

## ***Tales of the Prophets (Oxford 1992), 13-19.***

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Examples include the relationship between Gen 1-2, the number of paired animals in the flood account (Gen 6-7), and the extent/success of the Conquest (Joshua; Judges). That's not a contradiction. Rather, the narrator makes a general statement, then qualifies that later on with greater specification.

### **10. NUMBERS**

**i)** Some numbers are probably transcriptional errors. Numbers are easy to miscopy

**ii)** Scripture uses round numbers

**iii)** Scripture uses symbolic numbers (numerology)

**iv)** Some numbers may be hyperbolic

**v)** Some numbers may be stock numbers

Some numbers may be stock numbers. A narrator will use a stock number if he doesn't know the actual figure. It's a way of saying "this was big!"

**vi)** Idiomatic numbers

There's the "problem of large numbers" in the OT. Some of these are puzzling to modern readers. They seem unrealistic. Yet, presumably, they made sense to the original audience. So some OT numbers may be idiomatic, but modern readers have lost the key.

## 11. QUOTATIONS

- i) Some quotes paraphrase or summarize what was originally said.
- ii) Some quotes are composite quotes or general allusions.
- iii) Some quotes are verbally accurate reproductions of inaccurate statements.

According to plenary verbal inspiration, Biblical narrators are inerrant. In addition, some speakers in biblical narratives are inerrant (e.g. prophets, apostles). However, the Bible also quotes uninspired speakers. If a figure in a biblical narrative makes an erroneous statement, it's not erroneous for the narrator to quote what he said. Historians, biographers, and journalists quote what people say even if what they say is nonsense.

## 12. FALLACY OF NEGATIVE PROOF

- i) As one philosopher defines it:

*The fallacy of the negative proof is an attempt to sustain a factual proposition merely by negative evidence. It occurs whenever a historian declares that "there is no evidence that X is the case," and then proceeds to affirm or assume that not-X is the case...evidence must*

*always be affirmative. Negative evidence is a contradiction in terms — it is no evidence at all. The nonexistence of an object is established not by nonexistent evidence but by affirmative evidence of the fact that it did not, or could not exist.*

**David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (Harper & Row 1970), 47,62.**

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**ii)** That's somewhat overstated. There are times when the argument from silence is compelling. It is true, though, that many "skeptics" of the Bible act as though lack of evidence is automatically tantamount to counterevidence. But lack of evidence is not equivalent to positive evidence to the contrary.

**iii)** Moreover, the argument from silence can't simply be asserted or assumed. Rather, that's only sound when there's a reasonable expectation that if something was the case, there'd be an extant record.

**iv)** This also goes to a critical distinction between hits and misses. Given the random, unrepresentative nature of the surviving evidence, it's unsurprising that we lack corroborative evidence for many incidents in Scripture if Scripture is historical but quite surprising that we have so much corroborative evidence if Scripture is unhistorical.

Many atheists have a completely unreasonable expectation regarding what kinds of physical evidence should survive at



this distance from events. There's a lot of corroborative evidence for Scripture, but it's sometimes indirect. And that's true for ancient records generally.

### 13. LAW CODES

Atheists draw attention to apparent discrepancies between different editions of the law code in the Pentateuch. But there are some basic problems with that comparison:

**i)** There's a certain fluidity to the law codes. When Moses was still alive, the law code could be amended.

Circumstances arose in the wilderness wandering that raised new questions, calling for new answers (e.g. Num 27).

**ii)** Likewise, although there's a lot of overlap and repetition between the law codes in Exodus and Deuteronomy, life in the Sinai desert makes different demands than life in the Promised Land, so some adjustments are to be expected.

**iii)** Finally, there's evidence of occasional editorial updating in the Pentateuchal law codes.

The upshot is that the Mosaic law wasn't entirely static. There's some development within the Mosaic law. It wasn't frozen in time when first delivered.

### 14. GRAMMAR AND SPELLING

**i)** To my knowledge, there's no reason to think Greek and Hebrew grammar and spelling were standardized in Bible times. You didn't have the reference works we take for granted today.

ii) Moreover, grammar and spelling are irrelevant to inerrancy inasmuch as grammar and spelling are social conventions rather than true or false propositions.

## 15. COMPOSITE SPEECHES

Some speeches in Scripture may be composite speeches. I think the Sermon on the Mount is a good candidate. That's too much to absorb at one sitting. I assume Jesus said some of those things on that occasion, and Matthew combined it with other things Jesus said on other occasions.

## 16. NARRATIVE COMPRESSION

In biblical narratives, as well as historical writing generally, the coverage is selective. To a careless reader, this may foster the impression that one thing happened right after another, but that's a naive way of reading historical narratives.

A narrator may have different reasons to simplify an event. For instance, he has limited space on a scroll, so he has to pace himself so that he won't run out of space before he finishes the story. Many ancient books didn't survive because they were too long. They were written on multiple scrolls, and that was too much of a chore for scribes to copy and store.

## 17. THEMATIC NARRATION

Many historical accounts aren't purely narrative. They contain laws, speeches, dialogues, parables, &c. Because they combine different genres, that interrupts the narrative flow. The question is where to put the non-narrative material. For instance, a narrator might collate related

speeches or parables because that makes them easier to reference or remember. The sequence isn't consistently chronological, but that's not a mistake. Rather, that's a logical editorial decision.

## 18. ORAL HISTORY

If Matthew, Mark, and John are eyewitness memoirs, then the sequence may derive to some extent, not on the order in which things happened, but the order in which the observer remembers them. If they're dictating their recollections to a scribe, then the sequence will reflect the order in which they remember events. I'd add that John's many parenthetical asides are characteristic of oral history.

## 19. VERBAL VARIATION

It's natural for an eyewitness to paraphrase himself. When he recounts the same incident on different occasions, the wording varies. That's not an indication that the account was redacted. Rather, spontaneous verbal variation is typical of how observers retell firsthand anecdotes.

In addition, the spoken word is more redundant than the written word. So even when they're recounting the same anecdote on the same occasion, they will say the same thing in more than one way.

## 20. NAMES

In a polyglot culture like the Roman Empire and the ancient Near East, sometimes the same person went by more than one name. Sometimes the same locality had more than one name. That can be confusing, but it's not a contradiction. Likewise, place names change. Many places are forgotten.

And some names may be miscopied. But where we have corroboration, it's striking how biblical proper names and place names match the period.

## Inerrancy is the enemy!

As is well-known, there are believers who lose their faith in Christianity when they lose their faith in biblical inerrancy. As a result, there's an increasing number of apologists—with W. L. Craig as the ringleader—who regard inerrancy as expendable—a "house of cards". By the same token, they regard inerrancy as a stumbling block to conversion. On that view, inerrancy should be permanently bracketed.

But there's a flip side to this. A paradox that hasn't received the same attention. There are believers who'd lose their faith in Christianity if inerrancy is true. Their faith requires a fallible Bible because there's too much in Scripture they find intolerable. They disagree with many biblical teachings, viz. exclusivism, eternal punishment, spanking, "slavery," "misogyny," "homophobia," "genocide," &c. Inerrancy poses a threat to their faith, not if it's false, but if it's true. There are things in the Bible they're just not prepared to accept, and biblical fallibility gives them the elbow room they require to avoid a hard choice. Not because the offending teachings might be wrong, but because their truth is incompatible with a progressive worldview. So they can't afford for Scripture to be too true. Ultimately, they need a different religion than biblical theism, and biblical fallibility gives them the loophole to have a designer religion.

Of course, a religion that conveniently changes whenever you change your beliefs can't be objectively true. It becomes a mirror rather than a guidepost. It takes its lead from you, not vice versa.

## Inspiration, evidentialism, and harmonization

**1.** Lydia McGrew posted a critique of how Michael Licona approaches the issue of Gospel harmonization. I posted a response. She commented on my response.

It's challenging to find an entry point into this discussion, because it's so complicated. There's the specific question of Michael Licona's position.

Then there's the question of how inerrantist Bible scholars harmonize the Gospels. I have in mind representative scholars like Poythress, Stein, Block, and Blomberg—although Blomberg is less reliable than he used to be. Of late he's been exploring loopholes.

**2.** Then there's Lydia's own position regarding what's a permissible or impermissible harmonization. That's illustrated by stock examples, viz. was Jesus crucified on Passover?, the anointing of Jesus, the temple cleansing, the centurion's servant, cursing the fig tree, raising Jairus's daughter.

I have a problem with her set-up. She draws a number of significant conceptual distinctions. She deploys her distinctions to say there's a crucial difference between Matthew doing X with Mark and Matthew doing Y with Mark. X is acceptable but Y is not. Same thing with John doing something to Mark, or Luke doing something to Mark.

But that's too abstract and premature. It attempts to predetermine what they could or couldn't do before we even crack open the pages of Scripture to see what in fact they did. That's the wrong starting-point.

For me, we need to begin by looking at what they actually did. What's the most plausible interpretation?

**3.** Lydia uses evidentialism as a frame of reference, in contrast to Licona's position. That's an old debate, and there are different ways to block this out.

**i)** Historically, Aquinas represents a tradition in which you stress the role of proof. Certain beliefs are demonstrable. Knowledge or scientia is grounded in what you can prove.

But for Aquinas, that high standard already begins to break down at the very point where you'd like it to hold. Although the truths of natural revelation are said to be demonstrable, the "mysteries of faith" are strictly indemonstrable.

**ii)** Writers like Thomas Reid, Bishop Butler, and John Locke represent a different tradition, a different paradigm. They lower the bar. For them, it's not about proving Christianity, but the rationality of Christian faith. Providing reasonable grounds for faith, rather than demonstrative arguments. To recast this in modern terms, what kind of evidence is necessary for justified or warranted belief.

**iii)** Writers like Calvin and Owen represent yet another tradition or paradigm. For them, it's not primarily about criteria or corroborative evidence, but self-authenticating Scripture and the witness of the Spirit.

**4.** Another way to block this out is to evoke Chisolm's distinction between methodism and particularism. I think Lydia's evidentialism is clearly in the methodist corner. On this view, you begin with criteria, which you use to sort out true religious claimants from false religious claimants. In one respect, this is a top-down approach. It begins with criteria rather than phenomena or experience.

By contrast, the approach of Calvin, Owen et al. represents particularism, by taking paradigm-cases (Scripture) and paradigm examples of religious experience (the witness of the Spirit) as the starting-point. That's a bottom-up approach in the sense that it begins with particular instances rather than general criteria. But in a different respect, it's a top-down approach by treating the Bible as the criterion. On this view, inspiration is a presupposition rather than a conclusion.

**5.** This goes to another distinction. Evidentialism tends to treat the Bible as a source of information about supernatural events, whereas writers like Calvin and Owen regard the Bible as a supernatural event in its own right. Are the Scriptures a supernatural product?

**6.** Let's begin with a crude version of evidentialism. Initially, we should approach the NT documents as primary source materials. Historical sources.

At this stage of the argument, we don't treat them as inspired sources. Rather, we assess them like we'd assess any ostensible historical testimony.

Using criteria which historians typically use, we judge the NT documents, or a subset thereof (e.g. Gospels, Acts, 1 Corinthians), to be generally reliable.

On that basis, we conclude that the Resurrection probably happened. If so, that has far-reaching implications. To some degree, that circles back around to retroactively validate other core historical events in the life of Christ.

One objection to this approach is that reported miracles greatly lower the likelihood that the account is true. By



definition, miracles are highly improbable events.

The McGrews are aware of this objection. So they supplement evidentialism with a case for miracles.

In addition, although a miracle presumes the existence of God, it doesn't presume belief in God. It isn't necessary to prove God's existence before you can credit the occurrence of a miracle.

Lydia can correct me if that's inaccurate.

**7.** How should we assess these competing paradigms? Are they contradictory or complementary?

Apologetics, especially offensive apologetics, is undeniably methodist. It uses criteria and rules of evidence to broker religious claims and historical claims. To be persuasive, to avoid begging the question, it seeks common ground in methods and assumptions which Christians and reasonable unbelievers share in common.

This also has some value in defensive apologetics. Believers can benefit from having evidence they can point to, and reasons they can give.

**8.** However, evidentialism has weaknesses:

**i)** There's a circular relationship between your criteria and your worldview. What you think is possible or probable is contingent on the kind of world you think we inhabit. Whether a rule of evidence is reasonable or unreasonable is contingent on what you think reality is like. They need to match up.

**ii)** Most Christians, at most times and places, lack the intellectual aptitude or access to corroborative evidence to make a philosophically solid case for what they believe. But if, in fact, Christianity is true, that means the truth of Christianity must be accessible at a different level.

This doesn't necessarily mean reason and evidence are dispensable. It might still be important to say that, at least in principle, the Christian faith is rationally defensible. Moreover, that some Christians have risen to the challenge.

**iii)** Another problem is that I don't see where inspiration figures in Lydia's position. If the Bible is inerrant (or infallible), that's the result of plenary, verbal inspiration. If the Bible is fallible, that's because it's uninspired, or intermittently inspired.

I don't see where inspiration has a role to play in evidentialism. Where does it come into the argument? Where does it ever merge with the traffic? I don't see a logical place for inspiration to break into the flow of argument.

## **9.** What about the alternative?

**i)** On the face of it, it might seem like the position of Calvin, Owen et al. is special pleading. An ad hoc position to preempt appeal to ecclesiastical authority.

Another complication is the relationship between self-authenticating Scripture and the witness of the Spirit. Are these two different principles? How do they interact?

**ii)** I don't think Calvin's appeal is just a makeshift apologetic maneuver. He describes self-authenticating Scripture and

the witness of the Spirit in very autobiographical terms, as if that's how he did, in fact, experience Scripture.

**iii)** We should treat things the way they are. If the Bible is the word of God, then that's how it ought to be treated. It should not be treated as something it is not. Something less or lesser than what it truly is.

**iv)** I'd say there are affinities between Calvin's epistemology and Newman's illative sense and Polanyi's tacit knowledge. It's not an idiosyncratic position, but reflects a model of knowledge that's more subliminal.

Take voice recognition. For most of us, that's intuitive. We simply recognize the person on the other end of the receiver. It's not something we could prove.

On the other hand, that's not purely subjective. Every voice has a distinctive timbre. That's subject to scientific analysis.

On this view, regeneration restores our native ability to perceive religious truth. It doesn't add new evidence, or add a new faculty. Rather, it repairs a natural faculty.

**10.** But even if the Bible is self-authenticating, where do we break into that charmed circle? After all, there are rival revelatory claimants.

**i)** It depends. If you experience the Bible in a certain way, then it's direct. An immediate, veridical experience.

Moreover, this isn't just subjective, for many Christians have the same experience. So you have that intersubjectival confirmation.

Even sensory perception has an ineluctably private dimension. I don't know what's going on in your mind when you see a tree. I can't tap into your experience. I can't tap into your mental state.

We can compare notes. You can tell me what you perceive, and I can tell you what I perceive. Same thing with intellectual apprehension.

**ii)** However, this doesn't preclude appeal to external evidence. These are not in tension. It can be complemented by theistic proofs, the argument from prophecy, the argument from miracles, answered prayer, historical evidence, &c.

## Plenary verbal inspiration

I'm going to examine a potential objection to the plenary verbal inspiration of Scripture. According to this objection, prooftexts for the verbal inspiration of Scripture describe the way God inspired OT seers or prophets in distinction to false prophets. A true prophet repeats the words God spoke to him. He's like a stenographer or mouthpiece.

Mind you, proponents of this view regard dictation as a metaphor. But they think that's the effect of verbal inspiration. As if God dictated the message to a scribe.

But according to the potential objection I'm examining, the theory of plenary verbal inspiration overextends that model. Not every Bible writer is a prophet in that sense. A prophet underwent an altered state of consciousness to receive divine revelations. But (so goes the argument) there's no reason to apply that particular model to a historical narrator or letter writer.

Let's evaluate that objection:

**i)** On the face of it, the objection is fairly self-contradictory. OT prophets were typically seers. They received revelatory dreams and visions. But these are not essentially or primarily verbal in nature.

Revelatory dreams and visions can include auditions. There can be a speaker (e.g. God, an angel) within the dream or vision whom the seer overhears, or who addresses the seer directly. But, at most, that's just a part of visionary revelation. It's mostly imagistic scenes.

Of course, this experience can be translated into verbal propositions. The seer describes what he saw. So, minimally, prophetic verbal inspiration would be a two-stage process. Even if it didn't originate in words, it resulted in words.

In that respect, what makes verbal inspiration verbally inspired isn't an altered state of consciousness. It's not as if the seer is still in a trance when he writes down what he saw.

**ii)** Apropos (i), there was more to prophecy than receiving the message. Prophecy was also about delivering the message. That's why God gives the prophet a message in the first place. And the prophet is not in a trance when he delivers the message.

Does inspiration only extend to the revelatory experience, but not the delivery? That would be counterproductive. Imagine Jeremiah saying, "To the best of my recollection, here's the gist of what God revealed to me."

**iii)** It isn't clear that a prophet has to be in an altered state to receive a message from God. Presumably, God could speak to him directly, in an audible voice.

**iv)** There's also the distinction between subjective and objective visions. If some theophanies or angelophanies are external phenomena, rather than a private psychological experience, then that doesn't require an altered state of consciousness.

**v)** In principle, a Bible author could write under inspiration without being aware of his inspiration at the time of writing. Inspiration could be a subliminal process, where God

subconsciously implants ideas and "hypnotically" suggests the choice of words.

**vi)** In the organic theory of inspiration, especially with a strong doctrine of providence, inspiration doesn't require a special state of mind. God can prearrange all the variables so that a Bible writer will naturally choose certain words to express correct beliefs.

**vii)** Moses was the paradigmatic prophet, yet he was not typically a recipient of visionary revelation (Num 12:6-8).

**viii)** Paul ascribes verbal inspiration to his teaching (e.g. 1 Cor 2:13; 1 Thes 2:13). Even though Paul was a seer, we need to distinguish between visionary revelation and verbal inspiration. Once again, it seems to be a two-stage process. His written word was ever bit as authoritative as his spoken word.

**ix)** When quoting the OT, the author of Hebrews attributes all statements directly to God, even though God wasn't the immediate speaker. That equivalence only makes sense given verbal inspiration.

**x)** Jesus, the apostles and/or NT writers proof-text their claims by appeal to OT books without regard to genre. So inspiration was not confined to the prophetic genre.

## Gospel harmonization

**1.** Gospel harmonization may sometimes seem to be an exercise in special pleading. Inerrantists indulge in face-saving harmonizations. Liberals say the real explanation is due to different Gospels using divergent, independent traditions.

**2.** However, there are problems with the liberal explanation even on its own terms. For one thing, the mainstream view of the Synoptic problem is that Matthew and Luke use Mark as a source. When that's the case, you can't chalk the differences up to independent divergent traditions. Moreover, this isn't a conservative view of the Synoptic problem. Rather, most NT scholars all along the theological spectrum think Matthew and Luke are indebted to Mark.

**3.** Apropos (ii), scholars often use redaction criticism to account for Synoptic variants. But on that explanation, the difference isn't due to independent divergent traditions, but editorial activity, such as audience adaptation or narrative strategy.

**4.** Among other things, William F. Buckley was a novelist. He once said that in every novel he wrote he included one major coincidence. Although a coincidence is unlikely, unlikely events happen in real life, so it would be unrealistic if nothing unlikely, nothing coincidental, happened in his plots.

By the same token, it's unlikely that Jesus was anointed twice. But that doesn't mean it didn't happen. Indeed, that doesn't mean there's a presumption against it.



It's not special pleading to think the Lukan anointing is a different event from a somewhat similar event reported in Matthew, Mark, and John. That would be a striking coincidence, but that sort of thing happens in real life.

**5.** I think it's a worthwhile exercise to produce a chronological life of Christ based on the Gospels. However, I don't view the four Gospels as raw material for reconstructing the life of Christ. These aren't packages which were meant to be torn apart. These were written to be read as integral wholes.

The notion of going behind the text to determine what really happened is invidious. Since, moreover, the Gospels are generally our only source of information, there are inherent limits to harmonization. We can't automatically use one Gospel as the benchmark that controls the direction of harmonization. If we have different accounts of the same event, we can't necessarily say which one tells when or where it really took place, while the other represents a topical rearrangement. Sometimes there are narrative clues, but sometimes not. And it doesn't bother me if we can't always sort this out.

**6.** My general position is different from both Licona's and Lydia's. On the one hand, I don't think Licona is a terribly competent exponent of the position he's promoting. And I don't like how he frames the issue, in terms of Roman bioi as a standard of comparison. In addition, his whole approach is rather flippant.

That said, there's an a priori character to Lydia's position, in terms of how she defines historicity. Essentially dictating to the Gospel authors how they are allowed to narrate history. I don't agree with Lydia's stipulative criteria. Ironically,

Lydia's evidentialism is quite presuppositional in its own way.

We need to accept Biblical history as it comes to us. Moreover, the reason the issue of Gospel harmonization crops up in the first place is because we do have variant accounts in the Gospels. It isn't based on comparing the Gospels to Roman bioi.

The very examples that provoke these debates give us reason to make allowance for certain narrative strategies. Furthermore, we have OT counterparts. We have "synoptic" OT accounts. Parallel reports with variants.

**7.** Lydia raises a valid question regarding the presence or absence of narrative clues that would indicate to the reader when the sequence is topical rather than chronological, when there's narrative compression, &c. That's a valid question, especially in reference to Licona's position.

**i)** One clue involves parallel accounts. That, in itself, supplies a frame of reference. Comparing and contrasting Biblical accounts of the same events. That clues the reader to take these differences into consideration. The very phenomena that give rise to this discussion provides a backdrop.

**ii)** But there's also the question of what a reader was entitled to expect. Is it reasonable for a 1C reader to presume the sequence is chronological unless there's some literary notice to the contrary? Is it reasonable for a 1C reader to presume the record is unabbreviated unless there's some literary notice to the contrary? I don't think so.

**8.** To judge by Lydia's discussion of Licona's video presentation (which I haven't watched), there appear to be some similarities between what he is saying and evangelical NT scholars say. In that respect it's not out in left field.

Take the cleansing of the temple. Both Keener, in his commentary on John (1:518), and Block, in his recent commentary on Mark (291n498), think this was a single event, which John transposes. Likewise, both Craig Blomberg, in **THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS** (2nd ed., 216ff.), and Vern Poythress, in **INERRANCY AND THE GOSPELS** (133ff.), regard that a legitimate interpretive option.

Likewise, in reference to the healing of the centurion's son, the explanation that Luke is more detailed, that it was emissaries who spoke on behalf of the centurion, whereas Matthew, through narrative compression, collapses that distinction, is a standard evangelical harmonization. That's defended by scholars like Bock ("Precision and Accuracy"), Blomberg (ibid. 176), and Poythress (ibid. 17ff.). That's the function of spokesmen. And 1C readers would be expected to share that cultural preunderstanding.

I'm not using that as an argument from authority. The fact that I can cite conservative scholars who take that position doesn't make it correct. But I wonder how conversant Lydia is with the landscape of evangelical Biblical scholarship.

Again, it's a good thing to have folks from a different discipline interact with Biblical scholarship. Biblical scholarship can become ingrown and hidebound. It's useful to have a fresh perspective.

**9.** Regarding the withering of the fig tree, we need to distinguish between what Matthew actually says and what a reader imagines. It's natural for readers to form mental images of what they read. And I think that's a good practice.

So a reader might visualize the fig tree shriveling up right before the disciples' eyes in a matter of moments. That, however, is not what Matthew says. We need to differentiate how we picture the event from how Matthew depicts the event. Matthew's description is much vaguer.

**10.** Lydia says:

*The difficulty is that apparently this same anointing, which John appears to place on the Saturday before the triumphal entry, is quite explicitly stated to have happened two days before the Passover in Mark 14, and Mark is extremely chronological in his telling of the events of Passion Week.*

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**i)** Assuming these are chronologically discordant accounts (of the same event), it would be a case of temporal transposition. I think Matthew, Mark, and John refer to the same event. Luke's anointing account refers to a different event.

**ii)** Since John's account seems to be more firmly grounded in the setting, his would be the chronologically accurate

version, while Matthew and Mark transposed it for thematic reasons—unless they didn't know when it actually happened. Events can be related in different ways.

**iii)** However, as one scholar observes:

*The dinner during which Jesus was anointed (Jn 12:2-8) occurred in all probability on Saturday evening...It would be a mistake to conclude from Mt 26:2 ('after two days comes the Passover') and its parallel in Mk 14:1, that Jesus was anointed instead on Tuesday evening...For whereas the chronological marker of Jn 12:1 ('six days before...') is directly related to the anointing (12:2-8), that of Mt 26:2 ('after two days') is directly related to the plot to kill Jesus (26:3-5) and neither Mt 26:6-13 nor Mk 14:3-9 expressly relates the anointing to its context in chronological terms. K. Chamblin, Matthew: A Mentor Commentary (CFP 2010), 2:1270.*

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**11.** Lydia says:

*For example, if John knowingly shifted Jesus' cleansing of the Temple by three years to the beginning of his ministry (which would seem to be precisely the sort of thing Licona means by "displacement") and no such cleansing took place then, that is a \_serious\_ failure of historical reliability, and frankly, if you or Licona or anybody else defines "reliability" differently, you can just have your concept, and I'll stick with mine.*

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But that confounds narrative sequence with chronological sequence. In the Synoptics, the cleansing of the temple is firmly grounded in the narrative setting. By contrast, it doesn't have those chronological connectives in John. It isn't linked to what precedes it or follows it. So readers don't have to right to presume that it must have taken place at that juncture. The narrative itself doesn't make that claim.

**12.** Lydia says:

*The question is just whether Jairus already knew, and said at the outset, that his daughter was dead, or whether*

## *he said that she was on the point of dying.*

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**i)** For starters, the notion that Matthew's account on the incident reflects narrative compression is a standard evangelical harmonization. That's not just Licona.

**ii)** In addition, we need to distinguish between direct and indirect discourse. Between what the narrator says and what he quotes a character saying.

Inerrancy doesn't not entail that whatever a character says is true. Inerrancy primarily refers to the narrator.

Inerrancy doesn't mean Jairus is inerrant in how he expressed himself. Jairus wasn't speaking under divine inspiration.

This, in turn, raises the question of how a narrator should quote a speaker. There's a paradoxical sense in which, if someone makes an inaccurate statement, an accurate quote may preserve the inaccuracy. If you're quoting someone, you're not necessarily endorsing what they say. Rather, you're simply reporting what they said. If they made an inaccurate statement, that's what you report.

On the other hand, there might be occasions where, out of charity, a narrator will correct an incorrect statement when quoting a person based on what the person intended to say. Sometimes it's clear what a speaker meant to say, even if he misspoke or expressed himself poorly.

So, when quoting a character, there are occasions when it would be appropriate for the narrator to improve on the original statement. It's not a verbatim quote. Rather, it's what the speaker meant to say, but failed to say. A narrator might clarify what he meant by restating it. That's an editorial judgment call.



## Police videos and Gospel harmonization

The issue of Gospel harmonization is sometimes cast in terms of photographic realism. In that regard, videos of police shootings are a useful way to illustrate the strengths and limitations of that paradigm.

Sometimes a police video shows you all you need to know about the shooting. It shows you enough to judge whether the policeman was in the right or in the wrong. Whether the suspect was offending party or the offended party.

But police videos can be misleading. They may not show enough. Take an off-duty cop shooting an armed civilian. All the camera depicts is two armed men in plain clothes. You can't tell from that who's the good guy and who's the bad guy. The civilian might be a schoolyard sniper.

Sometimes this is a spatial limitation. They may show the action of the policeman rather than the suspect, or the action of the suspect rather than the policeman, rather than showing their interaction. They may show the incident from the policeman's angle, or from the suspect's angle, but not both.

Was the suspect charging the policeman when he was shot, or did the policeman shoot him in the back? And what was the alleged crime?

Sometimes this is a temporal limitation. The video begins too late to give context. It fails to show what led up to the shooting. What did the suspect do or what did the policeman do before the cameras started rolling? A traffic violation? A mugging?

Take a car chase. The police are in hot pursuit. Is this a joy ride? A child abduction? A fleeing bank robber?

Moreover, even if you have complete footage, there are things a camera can't show that may be crucial to the interpretation of the actions.

Did the suspect have a rap sheet? If so, what were his priors? Was he a violent career criminal? What did the dispatcher tell the police? Did they know what they were walking into? Sometimes police walk into an ambush.

Conversely, does the policeman have history of complaints? Formal reprimands in his file? Out of court settlements? Did the police dept. cover up for past wrongdoing? Was the policeman a juvenile offender whose court records were sealed? Some police are crooks with badges (a la **SERPICO**).

Suppose the suspect brandishes a gun. What's his mental state? Is he psychotic? Is he high on drugs? Even if he's in a state of diminished responsibility, he's just as dangerous to the general public or the police.

Suppose the suspect brandishes a toy gun. But the police can't tell the difference from that distance. So they must make a snap judgment.

Did the suspect reach into his pocket? You can't tell if he has a gun in his pocket. And he can shoot straight through the pocket.

Situations like that are like pulling the ring of a grenade. Once you do that, the remaining options are limited.

The point of this extended illustration is that a verbal eyewitness be ambiguous or misleading without sufficient context. An account that simply describes what an observer could see or hear may be unintentionally deceptive, for the correct interpretation of the event requires additional information.

An interpretive account can be more accurate than a barebones description, because the reader may need supplementary information to understand what happened.

## Gospel Contradictions

This forthcoming book may or may not make a useful contribution to the subject:

<http://seanmcdowell.org/blog/new-research-on-gospel-contradictions-interview-with-mike-licona>

I'll comment on a few statements:

*I wasn't so much concerned about resolving them [contradictions], because I understood that if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true, regardless of any errors that might be present in the Bible.*

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That's a simplistic trope. For instance, if the Jesus of Moonies, Mormons, or the Watch Tower rose from the dead, would Christianity still be true?

*By carefully reading ancient biographies written around the same time as the Gospels and comparing how they tell the same stories differently, I began to recognize that some of the differences resulted from compositional devices.*

*Then when I went to the Gospels, I could see that the authors were probably employing the same compositional devices as other ancient biographers; specifically Plutarch.*

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**i)** Certainly it's important to classify the Gospels as historical rather than fictional. But beyond that, I doubt the unquestioned assumption that they belong to a conventional genre, or that they are modeled on literary exemplars.

For instance, when a person writes their autobiography, they simply write down what they remember, and especially what things they want to share with the reader. Their autobiography isn't self-consciously modeled on conventions of the genre, or literary exemplars. Rather, they are simply writing about their own life and interests.

Likewise, when a historian writes a biography, he usually says something about the subject's parents or grandparents, then narrates his childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, then his career, retirement, and death. He may also write about his private life as well as his public life.

This isn't because the genre dictates that coverage, but because human lives have a stereotypical cycle, and because readers are interested in certain things about the subject.

**ii)** Even assuming that the Gospel writers had literary precedent in mind, what about OT biographies about

Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon?

*This is one of many examples I could cite where the Gospel authors employ various compositional devices that resulted in differences. In some cases we may not be able to know what actually occurred. But we have enough to get a general idea of what happened. And I'm fine with that, although ten years ago it would have made me feel a little uneasy because I assumed the Gospel authors would have been committed to writing with the same precision we moderns have.*

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Licona speaks as if he's breaking new ground. Filling a neglected niche. Yet scholars like Robert Stein, Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, and Verlyn Poythress have already produced excellent material on the historicity and inerrancy of the Gospels. Licona appears to suffer from tunnel vision. Had he never bothered to read these scholars? Even now it sounds as if his research failed to include them.

## An anatomy of apostasy

**i)** Many apostates make a common mistake. And it's an elementary mistake.

Typically, they were raised in a Bible-believing church. Then they took high school biology, or college Biology 101, or read a book by Richard Dawkins or Jerry Coyne. That sort of thing. And they lose their faith.

The rudimentary mistake is to compare two things that operate at different levels. They are comparing the Bible to science, or comparing theology to science. But these aren't directly comparable. There's an obvious sense in which a few pages of Scripture are no match for hundreds of pages of textbook evolutionary biology. Scripture wasn't designed to engage the issue at that level. Same thing with systematic theology.

The proper comparison would be to read two or more science books from opposing viewpoints. Those operate on the same plane. They address the same issues, at the same level of detail or technicality. They adduce prima facie scientific evidence for their respective positions. That's the relevant level of direct comparison and contrast.

**ii)** It's also striking that apostates like this are often so lopsided. Having dipped into the evolutionary literature, they refuse to read the opposing literature. They have no intellectual patience for the other side of the argument.

**iii)** In addition, they cut evolutionary theory lots of slack while they cut creationism no slack. They make many allowances for evolutionary theory. They don't let the difficulties in evolutionary theory faze them. They have faith

that if we're just patient, if we wait it out, these challenges will be resolved. Or, if not, that in principle, they must be consistent with evolution. But they don't show the same deference to creationism.

**iv)** They ask questions until they arrive at evolution. They come to rest with evolution. At that point they stop asking questions. Evolution is unquestionable. They no longer feel the need to keep posing pesky questions and demanding answers. At best, all questions and answers must now take place within the evolutionary paradigm. Ironically, that's the mirror image of many creationists, whom they disdain.



## Preformationism

From time to time I've read "scholars" opine that people in OT times (or primitive people generally) didn't think the mother made a constitutive contribution in procreation. She was just an incubator. Sometimes they describe it like preformationism, where the man injects homunculi into the woman.

Now, for all I know, there were ancient people who thought in those terms. However, I'm skeptical about imputing that to ancient people or primitive people in general. It doesn't require a knowledge of modern embryology to sense holes in that theory. The evidence available to prescientific people made that theory dubious.

**i)** You don't have to be terribly observant to notice that family resemblance isn't confined to fathers and their offspring. Kids bear a resemblance to the mother as well as the father. Sometimes kids resemble one parent more than another.

I imagine that this even functioned as a prescientific maternity or paternity test. If, however, the mother was thought to make no positive contribution to the constitution of the child, why would it look like her at all?

Jews were very concerned with maternity, paternity, and heredity (i.e. legitimate heirs). So that's something they'd pay attention to.

**ii)** If men were thought to make the sole constitutive contribution in procreation, how could they beget females as well as males? Wouldn't you expect them to beget a version of themselves, what was most like them, if they

alone made the constitutive contribution in sexual reproduction? After their kind (i.e. male=male)?

**iii)** Babies don't look like miniature adults. In addition, primitive people had the sad experience of miscarriage. And preemies look even less like miniature adults.

**iv)** Finally, if ancient people ate bird eggs, that would acquaint them with stages of gestation. They'd find wild eggs at different stages of gestation. And the domestication of chickens antedates OT times.

If they drew analogies between that and human pregnancy, it's inconsistent with preformationism.

I'm not suggesting that everyone wondered about these things. But the ancient world had its share of attentive, inquisitive people.

## Swapping used cars

You have people who convert from Christianity to atheism, or (what often amounts to the same thing) from creationism to evolution, or Calvinism to freewill theism, or Evangelicalism to Catholicism, or inerrancy to "progressive Christianity." Supposedly they do this because they discover difficulties in their original position.

However, the result of their conversation is to exchange one set of difficulties for another. They are very impatient with their former position. They cut it no slack.

They make excuses and allowances for their newfound position that they refuse to make for their former position. They emphasize or overemphasize the difficulties of their former position while they underemphasize or deemphasize the difficulties of their new position. The psychology is peculiar.

Part of the reason is that they know—or think they know—the old better than they new. So they underestimate the difficulties of the new position. They were drawn to its superficial advantages. Only after they get deeper into it do the disadvantages become more prominent. But that then they're committed. It becomes a face-saving issue.

Positions like atheism, evolution, freewill theism, Catholicism, and "progressive Christianity" have enormous preexisting baggage. It's not like the convert has shed all the intellectual challenges by leaving his old position behind. Rather, he's inherited intellectual challenges that come with his new position. Yet, for some odd reason, the convert regards these difficulties as acceptable difficulties.

Although it seems counterintuitive, both true and false positions have intellectual difficulties. You might suppose, a priori, that the true position would avoid that. But due to human ignorance and the complexity of reality, even the true position can have significant (apparent) difficulties.

Given a choice, you might as well stick with the true position and defend the true position, for whatever position you take will be intellectually challenging.

## Living in the last days

One stock objection to the inerrancy of Scripture is the claim that Bible writers thought the world would end soon. I've addressed specific passages. But I'd like to address a general source of confusion.

Scripture often refers to the "last days" or "latter days." Christians are said to be living in the "last days." Taken out of context, that might suggest they taught the end of the world was just around the corner.

The "latter days" stands in implicit contrast to the "former days." Roughly speaking, the "former days" denotes the epoch between creation and the Messianic age, while the "latter days" (or last days) denotes the inter-adventual age.

The "last days" represents the final stage of redemptive history. There's nothing beyond that vis-a-vis redemptive history. This is where it ends. What lies beyond that is the palingenesis. Something very different.

It's like going on a journey, where you must change roads from time to time—from one highway or interstate to another. But you get to the point where you make your final turn. That's the last road. The final leg of the journey.

But to say we're in the final stage of redemptive history doesn't indicate how long that will be. It's not a statement of duration, but an epochal contrast between what came before (the former days) and what comes after (the consummation).

To take a comparison, suppose you were living in the former days. Suppose a prophet told you that you were living in

the former days. That, by itself, would give you no hint as to the duration of that period. Even on a young-earth-creationist timeframe, that was at least 4000 years in duration, and on an old-earth-creationist duration, far longer.

In addition, even if the end of the journey may still be far away for the church, it is close by for every Christian—given our mortality.

## A la carte Christianity

Michael Patton, who is president of Credo House Ministries, and the most active contributor to the Parchment & Pen blog, recently posted a deeply confused article:

<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2013/03/eight-issues-that-do-not-make-or-break-christianity/>

The article goes so wrong in so many ways that it's hard to summarize, but I'll try. I'm going to begin with some general observations, then shift to specifics:

### 1. TERMINOLOGY

i) In his post, and a related post, Michael uses the following terms interchangeably: "central," "foundational," "essential," "break."

Now in many discussions I don't object to using these terms as rough synonyms, but because of how Michael is setting up the contrast, it's important to distinguish them.

"Central," "foundational," and "break" are metaphors. As metaphors, these have different nuances. They build on different images.

For instance, the Resurrection is a "central" event and central doctrine in the Christian faith. But is it "foundational"?

A foundation underlies whatever rests on the foundation. A foundation supports what lies on top of the foundation.

In that sense, the Resurrection is a foundational event for the Ascension, Session, and return of Christ. A *precondition* for those subsequent events. The Resurrection must happen before those other events can happen.

On the other hand, the Resurrection is *not* foundational to the Incarnation or the Crucifixion. Rather, the Incarnation and Crucifixion are foundational to the Resurrection. Christ can't live again unless he died. And he can't die unless he was alive.

Likewise, the Resurrection is *not* foundational to the creation or the fall. Rather, those are foundational to the Resurrection. No creation, no fall, no Resurrection.

To vary the metaphor, the Resurrection is more of a *keystone* or (headstone quoin) event than a *foundational* event. In redemptive history, there's a series of divinely orchestrated events *leading up to* the Resurrection. Events which *culminate* in the Resurrection. They *underlie* the Resurrection.

If you remove the keystone, an arch or vault will collapse. If you remove a foundation, the building will collapse. But they collapse for different reasons. The keystone is a building block that locks the other building blocks in place.

The keystone is also a *central* building block. It has a weight-bearing function in relation to other building blocks on either side and lower down.

The keystone occupies the *apex*, whereas the foundation is at the *bottom*. The foundation supports everything above it.

To take another example, the Exodus is *central* to *Judaism* in a way that's *not* the case for *Christianity*. In Christianity,



the first and second advents of Christ are central.

Yet the Exodus is a *foundational* event for *Christianity* as well as Judaism. The Exodus is one of those defining events which reveals the identity, character, and purposes of God. The Exodus is a past event which establishes a precedent for future events. Redemptive history repeats itself in the sense that God has common purposes for history. Every decade, century, generation, is driven and unified by God's overarching purpose for world history.

Likewise, take the calling of Abraham. That event isn't *central* to the Christian faith. It's not the epicenter of our faith, from which everything else radiates out.

However, the calling of Abraham is surely a *foundational* event in redemptive history. By the same token, the calling of Abraham is an essential event in redemptive history. God does one thing in order to do another thing. The calling of Abraham is a precipitating cause of many other redemptive events down the line. If God hadn't called Abraham, you'd have an alternate future without Christianity. No Abraham, no Israel, no Christianity.

History has a causal flow. Later events are effects of earlier events.

Or take the relationship of the OT to the NT. The OT is not as *central* to Christian faith as the NT. However, the OT is *foundational* to the NT. The OT lays the groundwork for the NT.

Not only does the NT fulfill the OT, but the NT *must* fulfill the OT. The NT requires OT warrant. In that respect (among others), the OT is *essential* to Christianity. To be the true

Messiah, Jesus must match the Messianic job description laid out in the OT.

ii) I'm not quite sure how Michael is using the word "break." Is that shorthand for "make-or-break" and/or "deal-breaker"?

iii) Unlike "central" and "foundational," which are figurative adjectives, "essential" is abstract. Now one of Michael's criteria for distinguishing what's essential from what's inessential is to invoke alternate possibilities. If God might have or could have done something differently, then that makes it inessential.

But that criterion is remarkably confused. It's like saying that if there's a possible world with non-carbon-based organisms, then carbon is inessential to biological life on earth. Needless to say, in the world we actually inhabit, carbon is essential to life.

Likewise, the Bible would not be essential to Christianity *if*, in fact, God revealed Biblical truths by some other means. However, that hypothetical scenario hardly justifies the claim that the Bible is inessential *for us*. After all, we're not living in a parallel universe where God reveals Biblical truths by some other means. Christianity, as it actually exists, is dependent on Biblical revelation.

## 2. ESSENTIAL FOR WHAT?

Michael also equivocates on what it means for something to be essential or inessential. He oscillates between two fundamentally different referents:

i) Essential to be a *Christian*

## ii) Essential to *Christianity*

But these aren't interchangeable. Michael fails to distinguish what is essential for Christianity to be true from what is essential to be a true Christian. He fails to distinguish essential *beliefs* from essential *events* (or things or realities).

For instance, a young child can be saved without believing in the Trinity. But that doesn't mean the Trinity is inessential to Christianity.

The Trinity is essential to reality. God is a Trinity is every possible world. God is the ultimate reality. If God is Triune, then the Trinity is essential to reality.

However, a Christian with Down syndrome could exercise saving faith even if he lacks the mental competence to assent to the Trinity. In that qualified sense, belief in the Trinity is inessential.

Moreover, I'm saying that belief in the Trinity is inessential in *exceptional* circumstances. Young children or the retarded are *special* cases. We make allowance for their cognitive impairment.

To take another comparison, a Christian who becomes senile, or comes down with brain cancer, or suffers severe head trauma, may cease to believe in the person and work of Christ. Yet he doesn't lose his salvation, even though he can no longer exercise saving faith.

But that doesn't mean lack of faith in the person and work of Christ is *ordinarily* inessential to saving faith. That's not

the norm. *As a rule*, belief and trust in the person and work of Christ are essential to saving faith.

### 3. RELIGIOUS DUTIES

For some reason, Michael has usurped the right to tell people that they don't have to believe everything God says. Frankly, that's blasphemous. God is telling us we ought to believe something, while Michael is saying, "You don't really have to believe what God tells you to believe."

Imagine if Michael accompanied the prophet Jeremiah. God commands Jeremiah to deliver an oracle of judgment. As Jeremiah is speaking, Michael Patton stands behind Jeremiah, giving thumbs up or thumbs down depending on whether or not the oracle is essential to Christianity, or essential to saving faith.

I don't know how Michael worked himself into the mindset of imagining that he's entitled to give people permission not to believe anything in Scripture that's not "essential" or "central" or "foundational." Michael is suffering from extreme spiritual arrogance.

People have an absolute obligation to believe whatever God reveals. It's not Michael's place to make faith easier for them by waiving their duty to believe each and everything God has taught us. Michael doesn't have the authority to do that. If God wanted to make it easier for some people to believe, God didn't have to reveal those hard truths in the first place. That is God's call, not Michael's.

Now Michael might say we must distinguish between Scriptural teaching and our fallible interpretations of Scripture. The problem, though, is that by relegating

inspiration and inerrancy to nonessential or nonfoundational categories, Michael himself is erasing that distinction.

#### 4. NOMINAL FAITH

A large part of Christian faith is to take things on faith. To believe something on the authority of God's word. I didn't personally witness Bible history.

What does it say about the quality of someone's faith who only believes what he can see for himself? He doesn't have to trust God to believe what he can see for himself.

Take the wilderness generation. They were condemned to wander and die in the wilderness because they were faithless. They could never bring themselves to trust God. They had to live by sight every step of the way. That theme that looms large in the book of Hebrews, as a warning to the church.

Michael's a la carte Christianity reminds me of a scene from **BRIDESHEAD REVISITED**. Rex Mottram wants to marry Julia. But Julia is Roman Catholic. Rex must convert to Catholicism to marry Julia.

Problem is, Rex is irreligious. Rex only wants to know the *bare minimum* he must profess to marry Julia:

So Rex was sent to Farm Street to Father Mowbray, a priest renowned for his triumphs with obdurate catechumens. After the third interview he came to tea with Lady Marchmain.

"Well, how do you find my future son-in-law?"

“He’s the most difficult convert I have ever met.”

“Oh dear, I thought he was going to make it so easy.”

“That’s exactly it. I can’t get anywhere near him. He doesn’t seem to have the least intellectual curiosity or natural piety. Yesterday I asked him whether Our Lord had more than one nature. He said: ‘Just as many as you say, Father.’”

“Julia,” said Lady Marchmain, when the priest had gone, “are you sure that Rex isn’t doing this thing purely with the idea of pleasing us?”

“I don’t think it enters his head,” said Julia.

“He’s really sincere in his conversion?”

Next week the Jesuit came to tea again. It was the Easter holidays and Cordelia was there, too.

“Lady Marchmain,” he said. “You should have chosen one of the younger fathers for this task. I shall be dead long before Rex is a Catholic.”

“Oh dear, I thought it was going so well.”

“It was, in a sense. He was exceptionally docile, and he accepted everything I told him, remembered bits of it, asked no questions.”

Imagine filling our pews with church members who ask what’s *the very least* they have to believe to get by with. It’s a recipe for nominal Christians.

Now let's comment on some specifics:

*I have seen too many people who walk away from the faith due to their trust in some non-essential issue coming unglued.*

*Ironically, this is exactly what happens to many who study the Bible. Charles Darwin tells about how his faith was initially dislodged due to discrepancies in the Scriptures. Bart Ehrman goes in the same direction.*

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Why does Michael assume that's a bad thing? Why not view that as a winnowing process? It purifies the church to slough off nominal believers.

What's the value of an untested faith that fails the test when put to the test? A time-tested faith is real faith.

*There was nothing that obligated God to this form of revelation (or any form at all!). Christ could have come and lived a perfect life, gained representation, died on the cross, rose from the grave, and never had it recorded in the Scriptures. How would we know about the Gospel? I*

*don't know. Maybe angels, maybe word of mouth, maybe direct revelation, or maybe not at all. The point is that God did not have to inspire any books in order for him to be who he is and do what he did. The Bible does not make Christianity true; the Bible simply records true Christianity through inspired words and thoughts.*

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But by that logic, it's not merely the *inspiration* of Scripture that's inessential: Scripture itself is inessential. If God could have dispensed with Scripture altogether, then by Michael's reasoning, the Bible is not essential or central or foundational to the Christian faith.

*While I do believe a sustained argument can and should be made for the inclusion of these [Pastoral Epistles] in the canon, whether or not Paul wrote these letters does not affect the truthfulness of the Christian faith. While these letters are extremely valuable for issues of personal integrity and ecclesiology, the essence of the Christian faith remains intact without*



*them. This goes for 2 Peter as well – by far the most contested book in the New Testament. William Barclay, author of the Daily Bible Study Series (as far as I know, still the best selling commentary set of all time), did not accept Petrine authorship of Second Peter. While I disagree (like Calvin, I believe that Peter was behind the letter, though he did not directly write it) this did not in any way disqualify Barclay from being a Christian and a committed servant of God.*

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**i)** If you keep whittling down the Bible to the *bare essentials* (as Michael defines it), where do you stop? Does Michael think four gospels are essential? Or would one gospel suffice?

Does Michael think Christians aren't required to believe all four gospels as long as they believe in the Gospel of Mark? Would a one-book canon suffice?

And it doesn't stop there. Is everything in Mark's Gospel essential (as Michael defines it)? Or does Michael think Christians are only required to believe an essential core of Markan teaching?

Mark's gospel has lots of miracles. How many miracles do you have to believe in? Will one or two suffice?

What about the parables of Jesus? Can't we just pick out our favorites?

**ii)** Why does Michael think God inspired, collected, and preserved all these superfluous books of the Bible? Isn't that a stumbling block to faith?

*There are many people who spend an enormous amount of money holding seminars, building museums, and creating curricula attempting to educate people on the importance and evidence for a six-thousand (give or take) year-old earth.*

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Considering all the natural history museums around the world that indoctrinate viewers in Darwinism, why is Michael bothered by the existence of a single Creation Museum in Kentucky?

*There is simply no sustainable reason to believe that one's interpretation about the early chapters of Genesis determines his or her status before God.*

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**i)** Surely that's an overstatement. It depends, in part, on what motivates the denial. As long as exegetical

considerations are foremost, rejection of young-earth creationism doesn't cast doubt on their status before God. But if their denial is the reflexive response of an unbelieving mindset, then that does implicate their status before God.

**ii)** Also, when Michael refers to "the early chapters of Genesis," he's casting the net pretty wide. That's not just a question of chronology, but historicity. Does disbelieving Gen 2-3 have no bearing on your status before God? Isn't disbelief in God's word the effect of an unbelieving heart?

**iii)** Moreover, the early chapters of Genesis are "foundational" for redemptive history.

*Some believe that the entire earth was covered with water. Others believe it was a local flood, isolated in Mesopotamia. Some even believe that the whole event did not really take place and is not meant to be taken literally. These believe that the story itself is a polemic against other gods and other flood stories, essentially saying in a parabolic way that God is in charge, not your other gods. Whichever view one takes, this does not affect Christianity.*

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**i)** Again, it depends, in part, on what motives the interpretation. Is this primarily exegetical, or does it evince a lack of faith? Rank disbelief?

**ii)** And what about those who think the flood account is fictitious. Honestly, is that really a faithful attitude? Or is that driven by profound skepticism regarding God's action in the world?

Once again, consider the attitude of the wilderness generation, which is paradigmatic for apostates (Heb 3-4). Unbelievers typically find Biblical miracles incredible. They balk at the supernatural. They have a fundamentally secular, closed-system outlook. God, if there is a God, doesn't rupture the uniformity of nature. God, if there is a God, doesn't break natural laws. God, if there is a God, doesn't interrupt the causal continuum. Practical atheism.

***Unfortunately, many Christians believe that the theory of evolution is somehow an anti-Christian theory invented by Satan to destroy Christianity.***

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If evolution is false, and if there is a devil, then why is it out of bounds to consider evolution the devil's counter story to the true story? Writing over the true story? Isn't the devil the master counterfeiter?

## How did God inspire the Bible?

I'm going to comment on a post by Michael Bird:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2018/07/plenary-verbal-inspiration-and-its-problems/>

*It is common in evangelical theology to argue that the Holy Spirit's influence extends to the very choice of words used, but falls short of dictation. On this theory, each word used is exactly the one that God intended. Inspiration is not a matter of guidance or assistance, but something given, imparted, conveyed to biblical authors as "sacred penmen," and extending to the selection of words.[1] As such: "Each writer was guided so that his choice of words was also the choice of the Holy Spirit, thus making the product the Word of God as well as the word of man." [2] In support, it should be admitted that Jesus placed importance on the words and very minutia of scripture (Matt 5:18; John 10:35-36). Justin Martyr and Athenogoras described divine inspiration like the Spirit playing a musical instrument and among Protestants there has been a common analogy of authors as the Spirit's pen, in*

*one poem “Th’ inspired pens of his beloved disciples.” [3] Here inspiration is plenary and verbal.*

*Against plenary verbal inspiration theory, common as it is in evangelicalism, it does have a few shortfalls.*

*First, it is not all that clear exactly how it differs from dictation theory. While dictation theory and verbal theory are not strictly the same, the difference is one of degree rather than mode of inspiration. For instance, Millard Erickson suggests that the Holy Spirit directs the thoughts of the Scripture writers, but the direction is quite precise and extends to the very choice of words in the author’s vocabulary: “By creating the thought and stimulating the understanding of the Scripture writer, the Spirit will lead him in effect to use one particular word rather than another.” [4] I submit that directing an author’s mind to a specific word is merely dictation at a subconscious level.*

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The standard conservative paradigm places verbal plenary inspiration within the framework of the organic theory of inspiration. That was championed by Warfield. It's no coincidence that Warfield was a Calvinist who relies on a Reformed understanding of providence.

Putting it in modern parlance, the way God inspires the Gospel of Luke (to take one example) is to create a world with a particular history that includes St. Luke. God inspires the Gospel of Luke by picking a possible world or timeline in which St. Luke exists—along with all his contacts. A world with a particular past, leading up to St. Luke. Luke's Gospel is the outgrowth of that historical process. God inspires the Gospel of Luke by providentially creating St. Luke, with his nature and nurture.

If, instead, God wanted the Gospel of Andrew, he'd create a different world with a different history. For the most part, the doctrine of meticulous providence underpins the plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture—according to that paradigm. The authors use their own words, yet their choice of wording is divinely intended by a prior chain of causes. The whole package reflects divine planning every step of the way—like a novelist who creates a narrative with a particular plot, setting, and characters. Everything they think, say, and do is the end-result of their circumstances.

Now, you still have direct revelation. God causing Ezekiel to experience a series of referential mental images. However, even that can make use of Ezekiel's own imagination, a mind stocked with mental images of ancient Israel, &c.

This is very different from dictation, where the writer is just a stenographer. According to a dictation theory, content and wording are entirely separate from the personality of the "writer". Different "writers" would produce the identical text. According to the organic theory, by contrast, the text is not independent of the writer's personality. To the contrary, God produces the text indirectly by producing all the conditions that necessarily eventuate in that particular outcome. A historical process leading up to that foreintended product.

*Second, if we take 2 Pet 1:20–21 at face value, God inspires persons, not pages, by the direct agency of the Spirit. Verbal inspiration can too quickly jump from “God” to “Scripture” and bypass the all-important human subject in the process of inscripturating God’s Word. Scripture is indeed “God-breathed” as 2 Tim 3:16 claims, yet this should be taken to refer to the Spirit’s movement in the mind of human authors to spirate from them a divinely driven and humanly given written text.*

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But that's a strawman. Inspiring the text is shorthand for inspiring the writer. The text is inspired in the derivative sense that the text is the product of an inspired process. Cause and effect.

*Third, if God inspired “all” words of Scripture, we have to wonder whether he must have inspired the words of sources quoted in Scripture. For instance, portions of the Assumption of Moses and*



***1 Enoch (pseudepigraphical works) are quoted in Jude 9, 14-15. Paul also quoted the pagan author Aratus in his speech to the Areopagus (Acts 17:28). A whole chapter of the Bible, Daniel 4, was written by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, a life-long pagan. Verbal inspiration forces us into some peculiar positions, like saying that God inspires noncanonical and even pagan works when it comes to the use of sources since these are part of the “words” of Scripture.***

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In principle, Scripture may use uninspired sources. Indeed, Scripture often quotes uninspired speakers. The question is the role these play in the narrative. Likewise, when Scripture quotes an uninspired speaker, that's not necessarily endorsing what he says—any more than a journalist who quotes a politician automatically endorses what the politician said. Sometimes the speaker is a foil.

***Fourth, there are some very human parts of Scripture which are peculiar if we attribute them to verbal inspiration. It would also seem odd for God to inspire***

***Paul's anacoluthon in 1 Cor 1:15-16 with his forgetfulness and last moment remembrance of whom he actually baptized in Corinth. Did God make Paul forget whom he baptized?***

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According to predestination, God does make people remember or forget.

***Similarly, when Luke says that "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning," I think he really did carefully investigate things, and God was not putting words into his mouth (Luke 1:3). Did God inspire Luke to claim he had carefully investigated all things, or did God inspire Luke's mind to research about Jesus's life and the beginnings of the church to create the Lucan Gospel?***

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God, by his special providence, guided Luke's actions to yield the intended result.

***Fifth, a further factor we have to consider is that when New Testament***

*authors cited the Old Testament, they often did so in a way that was inexact or even different to the original Hebrew. Sometimes this is due to their reliance on the Septuagint rather than the original Hebrew, but on other occasions the citation is almost paraphrastic and resembles no extant version of the Old Testament text (e.g., Joel 2:28-32 = Acts 2:17-21; Ps 68:18 = Eph 4:8; Amos 9:11-12 = Acts 15:15-18) or else minor adjustments are made to the Old Testament text (e.g., Hab 2:4 = Rom 1:17). In citing the Old Testament, the New Testament authors were not so much concerned with reproducing the exact words of an autograph, but with conveying the meaning of the text, and they even felt the liberty at times to render the text more conducive to their interpretive and expository intentions.*

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The point is to reproduce the sense. As to whether they take liberties with the sense, that's contested.

*Sixth, another criticism of verbal inspiration, at the risk of sounding irreverent, is that if God inspired the all the words of Scripture in their Greek case, order, and syntactical construction, then in the book of Revelation, God needs some remedial training in Greek grammar. That is because the Greek of Revelation, highly Semitized and rough, is poor compared to the polished Greek of Luke and Hebrews.*

---

That's obtuse. Grammar is a social convention. It's not true or false.

*Seventh, the verbal inspiration theory suffers from an inadequate account of textual criticism and the composite composition of some biblical texts.*

*There are problems with assigning inspiration to the original autograph and no further.[5] To begin with, we don't have the autographs, we possess various manuscripts and citations of the Scriptures in their original languages, from which textual critics attempt to construct what the original text*

*might have been. However, there is no 100% guarantee that we have the exact text that was originally written. Now to be fair, I think we can have great confidence that our Bible's does substantially reflect what the biblical authors wrote, but a few lingering questions remain: How did Mark's Gospel end? Should the doxology in Romans be placed at Rom 14:23, or 15:33, or 16:23? Where did the story of the woman caught in adultery come from? As a result, text critics these days prefer to speak in terms of an Ausgangstext (i.e., the initial or earliest recoverable text) rather than an Autograph (i.e., the first copy of a biblical text), the former is an approximation of the latter.*

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It's like Bird is channeling Bart Ehrman. But inspiration was never meant to extend to history of the sacred text once it leaves the hands of the Bible writer or his scribe. That's an issue of ordinary providence.

*On top of that, our Bible is not always the representation of a single autograph composed by a single author, but represents a living text. In the case of the Book of Jeremiah, the received Hebrew text of Jeremiah is based on the twelfth*

century Masoretic text (MT), yet the Septuagintal version of Jeremiah (LXX, Greek translation), based on an underlying Hebrew Vorlage, is 2700 words or one-eighth shorter than MT Jeremiah. To make it even more complicated, textual fragments from the Dead Sea Scrolls offers support for LXX Jeremiah against MT Jeremiah in some instances and support for MT Jeremiah against LXX Jeremiah in other instances! It is probable that two different editions of Jeremiah were in circulation and are expressed in the LXX and MT. Textual scholars normally maintain that shorter readings are likely to be the more original, since the tendency of scribes was to add rather than excise texts, in which case, LXX Jeremiah and its underlying Hebrew Vorlage would have a better case to represent an original autograph. However, our critical editions of the Hebrew Bible and our English Bibles are based on the longer MT Jeremiah on the grounds that it

*represents not an original autograph but an original edition! So, when you're reading the Book of Jeremiah in your NIV or ESV, you're not reading a copy of the autograph, you're either reading an inspired edition, or reading an inspired linear development from an autograph.*  
*[6]*

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It's possible for a Bible writer to produce more than one edition of his own work.

*In addition, I would aver that inspiration covers a wider suite of human processes that are guided by divine providence. For instance, it is clear that certain books in the Bible have been composed and compiled over a period of time, like the Pentateuch, which is a collection of Mosaic traditions that were probably edited by a priestly circle sometime soon after the Babylonian exile.[7]*

*[7] For example, Moses did not write the account of his death and burial in Deuteronomy 34. There are also clear indications that many of the patriarchal narratives are told from the vantage point of those*

*who lived in the land of Israel in a much later time, like when Gen 14:14 declares that Abraham chased Lot's captors as far as Dan, even though the Israelite tribal area of Dan did not receive its name until after the Danites captured the territory during Israel's conquest of Canaan (see Josh 19:47; Jdgs 18:29). See William S. Lasor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, Old Testament Survey (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 6-9.*

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There's evidence that the Pentateuch underwent some editorial updating:

[http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/44/44-4/44-4-PP577-98\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/44/44-4/44-4-PP577-98_JETS.pdf)

That's entirely consistent with the bulk of the Pentateuch having been authored by Moses. Consider an annotated copy of Dante or Shakespeare.

*Then there are the Psalms, which is actually a collection of five books of Psalms with individual Psalms written by various authors, with each book having its own distinctive themes and literary history.*

---



There's a distinction between the composition of individual Psalms and the final collection. So what?

*Other writings, like Isaiah, probably emerged in three distinct phases as Isaiah's prophecy was remembered, reinterpreted, and re-inscribed over the course of the Assyrian (Isaiah 1-39), Babylonian (Isaiah 40-55), and Persian (Isaiah 56-66) periods.*

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That's a standard liberal theory.

*The Gospel of John includes the Evangelist's own conclusion (John 20:31), an epilogue subsequently attached (John 21:1-23)...*

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Which doesn't imply that the epilogue was written by someone other than John. He's allowed to have afterthoughts. Indeed, if he's dictating an oral history, that's to be expected.

*...and a final conclusion composed by the Gospel's editors (John 21:24-25).*

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It's not at all clear that that's by a different hand. But even if it was, that's a very brief editorial coda.

*I tend to be cautious about certain theories of biblical books having been stitched together from multiple sources – as is often proposed for 2 Corinthians and Philippians – but in general there are often good grounds for regarding some biblical books as a collective enterprise composed over some decades by an initial author and subsequent editors.[8] A high view of Scripture should embrace both the Holy Spirit's inspiration of authors as well as the Holy Spirit's sanctification of creaturely processes, including the composition, editing, transmission, and canonization of ancient texts, which gave us the Holy Scripture. Inspiration and sanctification must apply to the entire phenomenon of Scripture, not just the autographs.[9]*

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That's true up to a point. But Bird has a much more expansive notion of that process, which isn't the same principle.

*Eighth, related to the last point, we also have to consider the translatability of divine Scripture. If inspiration applies to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words in their autographs, then, in what sense are our subsequent translations – whether in English or Japanese – to be considered the inspired Word of God? [10] The verbal theory of inspiration becomes analogous to Islam where the Qur'an in Arabic and in Arabic alone is Allah's revelation through the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammed. Yet Christians have, since Irenaeus, always insisted on the translatability of God's word into many languages as God's word to that ethnic group, and not merely an image or translation of God's word.[11] Inspiration must encompass more than original words in their autographs, or else, our English Bible is a mere approximation of God's Word and not God's Word per se.*

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That's just obtuse. A translation can only be as reliable as the exemplar. That's the standard of comparison. It's a faithful translation in reference to the exemplar.

## Dichotomized faith

### LYDIA

Philosophers of science are well aware that a theory does not need to have answers to all anomalies in order to be well-supported and rationally accepted. We have ample, to my mind overwhelming, evidence, quite independent of our response to the question of the Canaanite slaughters, that God exists, that He is loving and all-good, that His goal is to redeem mankind, and that Jesus is God the Son who reveals the loving Father to us. That means that we can handle points where we do not know the answer while still retaining a robust confidence in the truth of Christianity. It is a brittle and irrational approach that says, "You must have an answer to everything or else your faith is vain and not founded on fact." Being an evidentialist, as I am, does not at all mean having to have all answers to all questions. On the contrary, it means viewing the totality of the evidence one has and trying, to the best of one's ability, to come to an intelligent and judicious conclusion. I believe that any fair-minded inquirer who investigates the evidence for Christianity will come to believe it to be true. This means believing that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the one true God and is a necessarily good and perfect God, worthy of all worship.

### HAYS

True, but misleading. I believe Lydia is open to denying that God issued those commands. She may also be also be open to denying the historicity of the war narratives. Or she may take the position that something like the war narratives happened but the narrator imputed that action to divine authorization, when in fact it didn't occur. There's a

fundamental difference between offering justifications for the record as it stands, and considering an explanation that justifies divine goodness by rejecting the record as it stands. The latter option drives a wedge between a God who acts and a God who speaks.

LYDIA

I acknowledge that difference, Steve. But what is quoted there from me is directed against those who would take those passages to undermine Christianity itself and treat that as a "game over" issue. Christianity can't be true, etc.

HAYS

But they're interrelated. The truth of the NT is inseparable from the truth of the OT. In addition, the truth of Christianity depends on its status as a revealed religion. If, however, the Bible is false in some respects, then God is not a God who is able or willing to communicate to humans.

LYDIA

I definitely take the author to be narrating historically. No fancy-dancy idea that the author was using an invisible metaphor or device or something. But I know that doesn't address all your concerns, Steve.

HAYS

Are you referring to authorial intent or whether his intentions succeed?

LYDIA

I'm referring to authorial intent.

HAYS

While the general principle is true that we don't need to have an answer for every objection if we have sufficient evidence for our position, the specific example is misleading, because it insinuates the lack of available justifications for OT holy war.

### LYDIA

Would you at least be willing to admit that the quotation could be of legitimate value to someone who is ambivalent and uncomfortable with the answers given to the passage? The hope is to shore up people's confidence in Christianity even if they are not wholly on board (whether rationally or even psychologically) with the most common responses. To prevent such people from having their rational confidence in Christianity as a whole eroded.

### HAYS

Lots of moving parts:

- 1.** There's the general epistemic principle, not even particular to Christianity, that if we have sufficient evidence for a belief, we're justified in holding that belief even though we may be at a loss to give satisfactory answers to some difficulties with that belief. That's certainly legitimate advice to give to a seeker or Christian who's struggling.
- 2.** Then there's the example you use to illustrate your principle. That depends, since there are at least two directions in which that can be taken:
  - i)** The OT holy war passages are true, but they raise moral/theodical questions for which there are no satisfactory answers.

I think that's a legitimate position (although I don't think they're morally imponderable).

**ii)** The problem is with the passages themselves. The solution is to concede that the passages are simply wrong. Nationalistic propaganda to rationalize the Conquest. They invoke divine sanction for something God did not in fact sanction.

That's not a proper response.

**3.** Hovering in the background are different approaches to Scripture. Some professing Christians approach Scripture as historians. They engage and evaluate Scripture as raw historical sources. They sift the sources. A doctrine of inspiration never figures in their approach.

**4.** Apropos (3), although some mileage can be gotten out of that approach, it fails to address the fact that Scripture is a theological document as well as a historical document. It makes claims about the nature of divine activity in the world. About a God who communicates to and through humans beings, of which Scripture itself is a product. So the revelatory status of Scripture is inseparable from biblical theism. The issue of inspiration can't be indefinitely bracketed.

**5.** Along the same lines, that approach treats some parts of Scripture as potentially expendable. According to the argument, the Gospels were written closer to the events than OT narratives. Or at least it's easier to make a case for that. Therefore, we have a graded commitment to Scripture, where the Gospels are indispensable in a way that OT narratives are not.



However, a basic problem with that approach is that the Gospels (and NT writings generally) ground many claims in OT history. So OT history and NT history are inextricably linked.

In the last few years, the McGrews have risen to prominence in Christian apologetics, and deservedly so. They've risen on the merits. They've made, and will continue to make, fine contributions to the kingdom.

My problem with their evidentialism is not so much what it produces, but what it omits. To judge by what I've read (maybe I missed something), the fundamental problem with their paradigm is the dichotomy that lies at the root of their paradigm. Here's one way to put it: is Scripture a witness to supernatural events—or is Scripture a supernatural witness?

There are two opposite ways to view Scripture. On the supernatural view, Scripture is God's word to man. God's self-revelation to humanity. God speaking to and through select individuals for his people.

On the naturalistic view, Scripture is a record of man deifying his views of God, morality, and the world. A provincial, culturebound projection of human ideas and prejudices in the name of God. Scripture is essentially the same as other holy books. It only attained an artificial prominence because it enjoyed more powerful patronage when it became the state religion of the Roman empire and its European successors.

From what I can tell, the McGrews view Bible writers as (at best) note-taking bystanders to supernatural events—rather than individuals who've been taken up into God's supernatural activity in the world. They don't seem to view

the Gospel writers as essentially different from Josephus or Tacitus, except in terms of content.

### LYDIA

One could view them as both-and. There is nothing about our evidentialist apologetics that requires one to take such a position. I emphasize the "witness to supernatural events" largely because that is what is required in an apologetic context.

And one could perhaps argue that the rather astonishing accuracy of the Gospel authors is some evidence that they were, in fact, receiving divine aid. I've never tried to make that argument, but it's a possible argument. I've certainly made a related, converse argument: If the Gospel authors are making things up all over the place, there is no longer any reason to hold the products of their work to be "given to us by God," any more than that of the apocryphal Gospels.

I think it's pretty important to distinguish what one conjectures so-and-so might or might not think about a whole set of issues from what is actually part of so-and-so's argument or apologetics. Treating the Gospels or other parts of the Bible as historical documents (rather than divinely inspired) as part of the \*argument\* for Christianity is just avoiding begging the question. It certainly doesn't follow that anyone who avoids begging the question in that way actually \*thinks that\* the books of the Bible are no more than historical documents.

### HAYS

I'm not conjecturing. In his talk at the Atheist Christian Book Club last March, Tim McGrew said: "I'm not committed to inerrancy...I don't think much rides on it for me...It may

be true, but it's a low stakes game. If the Gospels are historically reliable in the sense that Tacitus is historically reliable, then that's enough."

Likewise, you've been outspoken about your own position. For instance:

<https://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2014/08/no-magic-bullet-copans-insufficient.html>

So this isn't just an apologetic strategy that you and Tim take, but derives from your actual views of Scripture.

HAYS

Jonathan McLatchie, since you make extensive use of the argument from prophecy, if we're prepared to jettison the historicity and inspiration of the OT, where does that leave the argument from prophecy?

## Crossed wires

I'm going to comment on an article by Christian apologist Frank Turek:

<https://crossexamined.org/christianity-is-true-even-if-some-of-the-bible-isnt/>

I'm going to comment on the article in its own right as well as in relation to something else. Turek is a graduate of SES. In addition, he's an SES faculty member.

**1.** SES is where Norm Geisler holds court. Geisler is known for a number of things. In some circles he's known for his antipathy to Calvinism. But his signature issues are probably inerrancy and the Resurrection. Years ago he made a name for himself by attacking Robert Gundry's redaction critical view of the nativity accounts. In addition, he attacked Murray J. Harris on the Resurrection. More recently, he went after Mike Licona. Among other things, he said:

*Third, this text lists the same kind of evidence for the resurrection of these saints as is listed elsewhere for Jesus' resurrection: [1] the tombs were opened; [2] the tombs were empty; [3] the dead were raised; [4] there were physical appearances; [5] many people saw these resurrected saints (cf. Mt.27; 1 Cor. 15).*

*In brief, if this is not a physical resurrection, then neither was Jesus' resurrection (that preceded and prompted it) a physical resurrection. Or, conversely, if Jesus' resurrection was physical, then so was the resurrection of these saints in Matthew 27 a physical resurrection. Thus, denying the physical resurrection of these saints undermines belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus.*

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<http://normangeisler.com/a-second-open-letter-to-mike-licona-on-the-resurrection-of-the-saints-of-matthew-27/>

In addition, Geisler is behind this website:

<http://defendinginerrancy.com/>

If you click on "What's the Big Deal?", it says:

*Inerrancy is foundational to all other essential Christian doctrines. It is granted that some other doctrines (like the atoning death and bodily resurrection of Christ) are more essential to salvation. However, all soteriological (salvation-*

*related) doctrines derive their divine authority from the divinely authoritative Word of God. So, epistemologically (in a knowledge-related sense), the doctrine of the divine authority and inerrancy of Scripture is the fundamental of all the fundamentals. And if the fundamental of fundamentals is not fundamental, then what is fundamental? Fundamentally nothing! Thus, while one can be saved without believing in inerrancy, the doctrine of salvation has no divine authority apart from the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture.*

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<http://defendinginerrancy.com/why-is-inerrancy-important/>

For Geisler, inerrancy is the foundation that underlies all the other essential Christian doctrines. And he explicitly links inerrancy to the Resurrection.

Yet this is completely at odds with the position of Frank Turek. Geisler and Turek are operating with divergent paradigms. These can't both be right.

**2.** Now for Turek's article:

***Is Christianity true just because the inerrant Bible says it is? No. Christianity would still be true even if the Bible was never written.***

---

**i)** *It would?* To begin with, you can't have Christianity without Judaism. And you can't have Judaism without the Mosaic covenant, the Prophets, and the Psalter—among other things. Judaism has a documentary foundation.

**ii)** In addition, consider all those debates between Jesus and the Jewish establishment centering on appeals and counter-appeals to the OT. But if the Bible had never been written, those events in the life of Christ would never occur. Those events instantly become nonevents, like a time-traveler who erases the original timeline.

**iii)** The Gospel which the apostles and their coterie preached included appeal to the Resurrection as well as theological interpretation and validation from OT prophecy. But you wouldn't have that if the Bible was never written.

**iv)** Moreover, Biblical revelation is an event in its own right. The process of revelation, inspiration, and inscripturation are redemptive events. Furthermore, these are precipitating causes of other events.

Turek is proposing a radical alternate history. It wouldn't be Christianity, but a different religion with some overlap.

***Let me explain.***

*It's a common belief prevalent among some Christians today that what we know about Christianity depends on an inerrant Bible. Sure, we know that there are several non-Christian writers from the ancient world that make brief references to the first century events and the beliefs of the early Christians, corroborating what we read in the New Testament. We also know that there is an increasing number of archaeological findings that support characters and events in the Christian storyline.*

*But some of us erroneously think that Christian beliefs cannot be sustained unless the Bible is without error.*

---

Turek seems to be changing the subject from

**i) Christianity would still be true even if the Bible was never written**

to

**ii) Christianity would still be true even if the Bible was fallible or uninspired**



But those are hardly equivalent claims. And (i) is more radical than (ii).

***That would mean that the Christian faith is a house of cards ready to collapse if one verse or reference in the New Testament is discovered to be false.***

---

It's not so much inerrancy that (allegedly) makes it a "house of cards" but ostensible events in Bible history, whose occurrence is thrown in doubt if the historical record is fallible or uninspired.

Is Christianity a house of cards if the Exodus never happened? If Abraham never existed? If God never spoke to and through Isaiah? If God never made a covenant with David?

Assuming that makes Christianity a house of cards, what's the alternative? A Barthian view where you relocate those events in the unfalsifiable never-never land of suprahistory?

***Although I think are good reasons to believe in an inerrant Bible, inerrancy is an unnecessarily high standard by which to establish the central event in Christianity—the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (which we celebrate this Sunday). Christianity hinges on that***

***historical event. If Christ rose from the dead, then, game over, Christianity is true.***

---

Is the Christian faith so compartmentalized that one event all by itself makes Christianity true? What about the Incarnation or the Second Coming?

***On the other hand, if he didn't rise from the dead, then, as a first-century eyewitness by the name of Paul admitted, Christianity is false.***

---

No doubt. But the same thing could be said for other pivotal biblical events.

***But you don't need inerrant sources to establish that the Resurrection actually happened, or any other historical event for that matter. For example, if you found an error in the stat line of a football game, should you assume that every game, story and stat line in the newspaper was a complete fabrication? Then why do some people do that with***

***the New Testament? Why do they assume that unless every word of it is true, then most of it is false?***

---

It's true that fallible sources can establish the occurrence of an event with a high degree of probability.

***They assume that because they are confusing the fact of the Resurrection with the reports of the Resurrection. Conflicting reports of a historical event are evidence that the event actually occurred, not the reverse.***

---

Actually, conflicting reports are consistent with the occurrence or nonoccurrence of an event. It depends on the specifics.

***In other words, to return to our sports analogy, the only reason there is error in the stat line to begin with is because the game was actually played and someone tried to report on that game. Neither the stat line nor the error would exist unless the game had actually been played.***

## *After all, who reports on a game that didn't actually take place?*

---

But people *do* report nonevents. People do make stuff up. Do we really need to give examples?

*The same is true with the documents comprising the New Testament and the Resurrection. Even if one were to find an error or disagreement between the multiple accounts of the Resurrection story, the very fact that there are several eyewitness accounts shows that something dramatic actually happened in history—especially since the folks who wrote it down had everything to lose by proclaiming Jesus rose from the dead.*

---

Yes, that's reasonable—considered in isolation. However, there's more to the Resurrection than establishing the bare event. That's not a freestanding event. The redemptive significance of the Resurrection is contingent on what God intended for the Resurrection to accomplish. What was the purpose of the Resurrection? Unless we have a reliable theological interpretation of the Resurrection, it could mean anything—or nothing.

***That is, all of the New Testament reporters (except Luke) were observant Jews who would pay dearly for proclaiming the Resurrection.***

---

How does he know that? What's his source of information?  
The NT!

***So Christianity isn't true just because the Bible says it's true. Christianity is true because an event occurred.***

---

**i)** One event doesn't make Christianity true, in isolation to some other key events.

**ii)** Moreover, Christian essentials include the *teaching* of Christ as well as the Resurrection. But absent inspiration, do we even *have* the teaching of Christ? Or do we have a fallible translation of a fallible recollection of speeches and conversations, from one hearing? No doubt Jesus repeated himself, but much of his teaching is contained in unique, one-off events.

To take a comparison, how well do you remember last Sunday's sermon? What about the sermon two Sundays ago? A month ago? A year ago?

***True, we wouldn't know much about Christianity if the reports of the Resurrection had never been***

*written, but the Resurrection preceded the reports of it.*

*As my friend Andy Stanley asks, “Do you realize that there were thousands of Christians before a line of the New Testament was ever written?”*

---

**i)** And the OT preexisted Christianity.

**ii)** More to the point, we're not in the same epistemic position as 1C Christians, many of whom were eyewitnesses to the public ministry of Christ, or knew eyewitnesses. So the comparison rapidly breaks down.

*Paul was a Christian before he wrote a word of the New Testament.*

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I'm sorry, but that's just so dumb. As a prospective Bible writer, Paul embodies Scripture. He's living, walking Scripture.

*So was Matthew, John, James, Peter, etc. Why?*

---

How does Stanley know anything about Matthew, John, James, Peter, etc.?

*Because they had witnessed the  
resurrected Jesus.*

---

How does Stanley know that apart from the NT?

There's a distinction between metaphysics and epistemology. The Resurrection is ontologically independent of Scripture. However, once living memory expired, the Resurrection ceased to be epistemologically independent of Scripture.

## When you lose inerrancy, that's not all you lose

I recently had an exchange with chapter Director of the Reasonable Faith (W. L. Craig's outfit):

### TYSON

Dr. Craig's "web of theology" analogy aptly illustrates this notion. For example, Bart Ehrman's failure to make the distinction led him to reject Christianity altogether based on his inability to maintain inerrancy, which he held to be central to the faith.

### HAYS

1. The ease with which some younger-generation apologists demote inerrancy reflects a flawed apologetic paradigm. Inerrancy is grounded in the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration.

And that, in turn, is grounded in distinctive biblical theism. The God of Scripture is a God who speaks to and through chosen individuals. That differentiates the true God from the mute idol-gods of paganism. And that differentiates true prophets from false prophets.

Although the Bible is a historical document, it isn't *just* a historical document. In addition, the Bible is a religious document with a theology of inspiration, revelation, and providence. Just peeling away a historical layer is reductionistic and misrepresents the fundamental nature of Christianity as a revealed religion.

2. It also reflects an ill-conceived strategy regarding the alternatives. The motivation is that even if the Bible is



fallible, that doesn't justify apostasy, for a fallible but reliable Bible is an adequate fallback.

But the proper response isn't to ditch inerrancy; rather, the proper response is to take atheism off the table. Explain that naturalism is not a viable alternative. Naturalism sabotages reason, meaning, and morality.

TYSON

Hopefully you agree though that one can in principle ditch inerrancy without necessarily ditching faith in Christ for salvation. In other words, inerrancy is less than central to the Gospel, that the stakes of ditching inerrancy are lower than the stakes of ditching faith in Christ for salvation and rejecting inerrancy.

HAYS

No, I don't grant that. There's a distinction between saving faith and what is necessary for Christianity to be true. But we don't want to drive a wedge between them, do we?

TYSON

Or it's actually setting the bar for salvation where it should be and not letting things like the number of horses in Solomon's stalls be an impediment to and distraction from the Gospel of Christ. Hopefully though we can agree that there are such things as "peripheral matters of theology"... that not everything in Scripture is foundational and that there are things in the Bible that, if wrong or missing, would not destroy Christianity.

HAYS

But Scripture itself is foundational.

## TYSON

I'm not sure we're using "foundational" in the same sense. By "foundational" I mean that there are things in Scripture that, were they wrong or missing, would not destroy Christianity. For instance, Christianity does not rise or fall on Shamgar's killing of 600 Philistines with an oxgoad (Judges 3:31). Imagine we find out that Shamgar killed 30 men with a spear. Would you abandon Christianity because of the discrepancy? I should hope not.

## HAYS

**1.** That's a hopelessly atomistic view of the issue. It's like saying, because I can survive frostbitten toes, because I can survive an amputated toe, I can survive Antarctica in my tighty-whities. The question isn't whether the body can survive the loss of a toe, but what sustains the entire body, toes included.

If you jettison inerrancy, then you implicitly jettison the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture since it doesn't make a heap of sense to say a verbally plenary inspired text is fallible. So the question isn't whether Christianity can survive minor errors in the Bible, considered in isolation, but whether Christianity can survive without the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture. Whether that sustains the entire faith, just as oxygen sustains the entire body. The body can survive without certain appendages, but it can't survive without oxygen. If a toe dies from oxygen deprivation, the body can survive, but the body itself can't survive without oxygen. The issue isn't (hypothetical) compartmentalized errors, but what keeps the entire organism alive.

**2.** Dropping the metaphor, if you jettison plenary verbal inspiration, what's the prophetic status of Isaiah, Ezekiel,

Jeremiah, Daniel, Micah, &c.?

**3.** What makes the death/resurrection of Christ important? That's contingent on the theological significance of his death/resurrection. And that, in turn, is contingent on theological interpretation. Take how Paul and the author of Hebrews interpret the atonement of Christ. But if their letters are uninspired, what makes the death/resurrection of Christ special? The bare events of crucifixion and resurrection are ciphers.

**4.** What about biblical promises regarding eternal life? What's the value of uninspired promises regarding eternal life? Absent revelation, Bible writers have no more insight into the nature of the afterlife, if any, than Buddha.

**5.** Apropos (4), the historical reliability of a document depends on testimonial evidence. But the traits of a trustworthy eyewitness don't qualify him to know anything beyond what he can naturally perceive with the five senses. It doesn't go beyond the empirical. Doesn't give him foresight into the future, the afterlife, or insight regarding God's nature and intentions.

**6.** What about the teaching of Jesus? Is that essential to Christianity? Consider these speeches, debates, and dialogues:

Sabbath controversies (Mt 12:1–45)

Sabbath controversies (Lk 6)

Sabbath controversies (Lk 13-14)

Jesus and Nicodemus (Jn 3)

Jesus and the Samaritan women (Jn 4)

Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6)

Debating religious authorities/before Abraham was, I am (Jn 8)

Debating religious authorities/I and the Father are one (Jn 10)

Last Supper (Jn 13)

Upper Room Discourse (Jn 14-17)

That's just a sample. I think it's well established that people remember events better than words. And while they may sometimes remember the gist of what somebody said, that's not a detailed verbal recollection. Yet many of these pericopes involve extended speeches and conversations. Unique, one-time events. Not something the disciples heard repeatedly. But absent plenary verbal inspiration, these are, at best, uninspired translations of uninspired recollections. That's two big steps removed from what Jesus actually said. So we lose the teaching of Jesus.

BTW, many disputes in Christian theology and ethics turn on exactly how the statements of Jesus are worded in the Gospels. But if, at best, this is just a fallible translation of someone's fallible memory of what Jesus said, then the wording is unreliable.

## God has spoken

**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16).**

**1.** This is the locus classicus for the inspiration of Scripture, although that's misleading since the database for biblical inspiration is far broader than one traditional proof-text.

**2.** I've discussed "God-breathed" before. I think that's Paul's way of saying Scripture is equivalent to divine speech—the spoken word of God committed to writing. And that dovetails with OT exemplars of inspiration (i.e. "The word of the Lord came to X").

"Breath" is associated with speech, speaking, the spoken word. So what's breathed out by God is divine speech. That stresses the immediacy of Scripture as the very word of the living God.

So it could be paraphrased: "All Scripture is the word of God".

**3.** Syntactically, the statement can be rendered two different ways:

*i) All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*

*ii) Every Scripture which is breathed out by God is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*

According to (ii), Scripture falls into two different classes: inspired Scripture and uninspired Scripture. And only inspired Scripture is profitable for those things.

But it's inexplicable to suppose Paul is dichotomizing Scripture into two divergent subsets, inspired and uninspired, only one of which is profitable. On that view, what's the purpose of the uninspired Scripture? And what's the distinction between uninspired Scripture and uninspired writings generally?

Rather, Paul must mean that inspiration is a necessary condition for what makes a writing Scripture. Not a sufficient condition since not all inspired speech is committed to writing or preserved for posterity.

Put another way, Scripture has its source of origin in the process and product of inspiration. Not all inspired speech becomes Scripture, but all Scripture must be inspired. And that dovetails with OT models, which Paul undoubtedly has in mind.

**4.** Finally, there's the scope of Scripture. Minimally, Paul is alluding to the OT. However, some NT writings by then in circulation might also be in view.

And whether or not Paul has any NT writings in mind, they are implicitly covered by Paul's statement. The principle is the causal and logical relationship between inspiration and Scripture. If NT writings meet that condition, then they too are Scripture—just like the OT writings.

## Bulkheads

Lydia McGrew recently did a webinar, hosted by Jonathan McLatchie:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_9fUKdpPl6k&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9fUKdpPl6k&feature=youtu.be)

I agree with most of what she said. And I commend the presentation to others. But I'd like to comment on some other things.

During the Q/A session, she compared a courtroom witness who makes an innocent mistake (misremembering) to a witness who lies. Which witness would be more credible? That's a valid distinction.

She mentioned someone who felt the McGrews emphasis on the human characteristics of Scripture was incompatible with divine inspiration. I'd just point out that according to the organic theory of inspiration, championed by Warfield, which is the standard paradigm in Baptist and Presbyterian inerrantist circles, human characteristics are not incompatible with the plenary inspiration of Scripture.

She said she doesn't have worked out theory of inspiration. She approaches Scripture as a historian rather than theologian. Approaches Scripture as historical source material rather than a religious authority. Her methodology is inductive rather than a priori. The "nitty-gritty ground level". "What do we appear to have?"

This raises a number of familiar issues. It goes back to old debates over the proper starting point when we formulate a theory of inspiration. Do we begin with the "phenomena" of

Scripture? It also goes to methodological differences between evidential and presuppositional apologetics.

**1.** Let's put this in a larger context. Although some evidentialists affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, that's expendable to their theology because even if they discovered that Scripture was fallible, they have a safety net in the historical evidence and basic historical reliability of the Bible, especially the Gospels.

A pragmatic objection to rejecting the inerrancy of Scripture is that once you deny it, there's nothing to prevent free fall. So the question is whether they have a containment principle. One way some of them defend their position is to say the Bible doesn't rise or fall as a unit. Rather, some books have better evidence than others. They're independent of each other in that respect. Skepticism about the Pentateuch doesn't spill over into skepticism about the Gospels because the Pentateuch and the Gospels are not on an evidential par.

If we were using a metaphor to illustrate their orientation, we might use bulkheads. Sailors don't like to drown. As a result, they've designed vessels with bulkheads. The hull is subdivided into a series of watertight compartments so that even if the hull is punctured in one or more places, the entire hull doesn't fill with water. That contains the damage. If the hull is breached, the ship doesn't automatically sink.

Some evidentialists think their position is actually more stable than doctrinaire inerrantists. They regard commitment to inerrancy as a "house of cards". By contrast, they think they have a fallback position even if the Bible is shown to be erroneous in some respects.



**2.** What are we to make of that position? There's a sense in which it's preferable to have an alternative that stops short of instant apostasy if the Bible is perceived to be fallible. And in theory, it might be possible to treat books of the Bible on a case-by-case basis, depending on the particular evidence for each particular book. Kinda like a passenger train where if one car catches fire, it can be uncoupled from the other cars and left to burn without setting the entire train on fire.

**3.** There are, however, some serious problems with this kind of evidentialism. For one thing, many books of the Bible aren't that compartmentalized. Because the NT, including the Gospels, constantly appeals to OT validation, the veracity of the NT is inseparable from the veracity of the OT.

**4.** Although we can approach the Bible historically, we must also approach the Bible theologically because it claims to be a theological document as well as a historical record. The Bible doesn't simply make claims about historical events. It also makes claims about a revelatory God. A God of words as well as deeds. One of the defining features of the Judeo-Christian faith is the stress on God who speaks, in contrast to the dumb idol gods of paganism.

Not only does the God of biblical theism act in history, but he acts in people. He speaks to and through chosen agents. Which goes to another fundamental distinction: the difference between true and false prophecy. A false prophet isn't merely a prophet to makes false predictions. In principle and practice, a false prophet may make true predictions. What makes him a false prophet is that he presumes to speak on God's behalf without divine inspiration.

Even in the case of revelation that originates in dreams and visions, visionary revelation is converted into verbal revelation. That's why we have a record of visionary revelation. It had to be verbalized. Committed to writing. Adapted from a visual medium to a propositional medium.

**5.** Put another way, the Bible doesn't simply make claims people and events from a detached, third-person perspective. It also assumes a first-person perspective by making claims about itself. Not just what was said, but the divine speaker. It makes self-referential claims about the process of inspiration and revelation. That's essential to the identity of the Judeo-Christian faith as a revealed religion. A religion of the word. Revelatory words. Bible writers don't simply report facts, but report their religious experience, as instruments of divine disclosure. Conduits of divine communication. Depending on the genre, that's sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit. Sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.co.at/2014/06/plenary-verbal-inspiration.html>

It's misleading to say commitment to inerrancy is a priori rather than inductive. For what we "appear to have"—the "nitty-gritty ground level"—includes the revelatory self-ascription. That lies on the face of many biblical texts. And it is, by precedent, the presupposition of other texts.

Inerrancy is not an a priori posit, like philosophical stipulations and speculations about what is fitting or unfitting for God to say, do, or permit. Inerrancy is not, in the first instance, a deduction from a theological intuition about the nature of God and God's relation to the world. Rather, the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration is as much

a part of the testimonial evidence as the historical claims. Indeed, they are intertwined:

<https://frame-poythress.org/scripture-speaks-for-itself/>

**6.** Not only is presuppositionalism more theological than evidentialism, but it's more philosophical in the sense that it rejects the coherence of an atheistic alternative. That's a wall, not a door. Atheism is not an exit, but an optical illusion (as it were). That's a door jam painted on a wall. But there's nothing outside the reality of God's world. There's nowhere else to go.

**7.** Randal Rauser furnishes an instructive comparison. He rejects the inerrancy of Scripture. He has a face-saving position that he euphemistically dubs the "appropriation" model of inspiration. However, Rauser's primary frame of reference is philosophical theology rather than revelation. Yet there's nothing distinctively Christian about philosophical theology divorced from Biblical revelation. At best, a generic theism about truths of reason rather than truths of fact. Necessary universal truths rather than contingent historical particulars. That nicely illustrates the hazards of a religious orientation that's not grounded in biblical revelation.

## Moral intuition and cultural conditioning

I'm both a moral realist and a moral skeptic. That's because moral realism is a position on moral ontology whereas moral skepticism is a position on moral epistemology, so they're mutually consistent. I have a streak of moral skepticism because "moral intuition" is frequently a euphemism for cultural conditioning. If I were born at another time or place, my personal and social mores might be drastically different. And that's easy to document.

I don't think that's sufficient argument for moral or cultural relativism, but then, that's because I'm a Christian, so I have a standard of comparison. The challenge is how to differentiate culturally conditioning mores from intuitive objective norms.

Orthodox Christians use biblical revelation to evaluate candidates for moral intuition, but some "progressive Christians" like Randal Rauser appeal to alleged moral intuition to evaluate revelation. Yet in that event, he has no independent criterion to distinguish moral intuition from social conditioning.

## II. Examples

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## Is inerrancy dispensable?

### ANNOYED PINOY

*Is it inconsistent and disingenuous for someone like me when dealing with skeptics to affirm my belief in inerrancy, but at the same time tell those skeptics that the truth of Christianity doesn't depend/hinge on the truth of inerrancy? It seems to me it's not. If I'm wrong, I'm open to correction. Also, it seems to be very useful to say that to skeptics because it deflates so much of their objections since many of them depends on the assumption of inerrancy.*

*I find that if I can convince skeptics that Christianity could be true even if inerrancy is false, it sometimes humbles them enough to be open to the possible truth of Christianity. Or it flusters them to the point that they don't know what to say next. Or they start backpedaling or conceding various points on issues they were insistent upon just a few moments ago.*

*Skeptics want to argue about and focus on inerrancy for various reasons.*

- To create a barrier and buffer to protect their disbelief.
- Because to defend inerrancy inductively and comprehensively, one would have to deal with each and every possible Biblical difficulty, discrepancy and apparent contradiction. Thus strengthening their buffer. Since such debates can go on indefinitely.
- It distracts from the real issue. Namely, the issue of the truth of Christianity.
- In order to address all or even just the main apparent contradictions/discrepancies/errors a Christian would have to know a vast amount of knowledge, and they know most Christians aren't that knowledgeable or even have the aptitude to use that knowledge to formulate responses.

So, it seems to me that by asserting that Christianity could be true even if inerrancy were false does two things. 1. It disarms to a great degree skeptics of their objections, and 2. also arms Christians with a way of dealing with both a.) their own personal doubts and b.) answering their skeptical neighbors.

*There are hundreds of alleged Bible difficulties. If we play into the skeptics methods, s/he can have us address every problem one by one from the smallest to the largest (in that order) in order to insulate his disbelief. Possibly saving the most difficult ones for last as a refuge/festung. Though, usually, they'll pick ones they think are really tough.*

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The context of this statement is Andy Stanley's position, which is similar to W. L. Craig's.

**1.** We need to unpack inerrancy. That's a one-word label. An abstraction. But what does it stand for? Over and above the concept of inerrancy is what it refers to. Inerrancy is an umbrella term that covers at least three or four categories:

### **i) Truth-claims about the past**

The historical narratives of Scripture are true.

### **ii) Truth-claims about the future**

Prophetic statements of Scripture are true.

### **iii) Truth-claims about morality**

Biblical teaching on personal and social ethics is true

### **iv) Truth-claims about God's nature and intentions**



What God is really like—compared to religious distortions.

But suppose the Bible is fallible in these departments. Suppose Abraham never existed. God never appeared to Abraham, to call him out of Ur. God never made a covenant with Abraham. That's pious fiction. Suppose Gen 2-3 is pious mythology. Suppose Jesus was wrong about what sins are damnable sins. Suppose Jesus mispredicted the end of the world. Suppose the Bible is wrong about the afterlife. Suppose Paul is wrong about the nature of the atonement. Suppose Hebrews is wrong about the nature of the atonement. Suppose the Bible misrepresents the character of God. Suppose God never delivered the Jews from Egypt. That's pious legend. Suppose God never made a covenant with David. That's national mythology. And so on and so forth. Is it really the case that the truth of Christianity doesn't hinge on the inerrancy of Scripture?

A fallible Jesus is much more consistent with a merely human Jesus than God-Incarnate.

Suppose the Bible does indeed contain hundreds of errors. Historical falsehoods. Prophetic falsehoods. Ethical falsehoods. Suppose Bart Ehrman's list of contradictions and blunders in the Gospels is accurate. How can the Bible be a reliable source of information regarding the big questions if that's the case?

**2.** This goes to divine providence. How involved is God in human history? If Biblical prophecies and narratives don't correspond to what God is actually up to, then perhaps God is more deistic. What if, in practice, we're on our own? Petitionary prayer is futile. God doesn't intercede. There's nothing to back up the inspirational stories.

**3.** If the Bible is inerrant, then that's reality. Should we tell people to selectively disregard reality?

**4.** As a Christian apologist, the onus is not on me to play by the rules of the skeptic. I don't jump when he says jump. He doesn't get to dictate the criteria. My duty is to tell him what I believe and why I believe it. I explain and defend *my* plausibility structure. I present the evidence that *I* find convincing. He doesn't set the bar for me to jump over.

If he finds my presentation unpersuasive, so be it. I'm not responsible for what he does with his life. I give my reasons. I scrutinize his objections. The rest is up to him.

**5.** Defending inerrancy doesn't entail that we must have independent corroboration for every particular claim of Scripture. Rather, we have corroborative evidence for the reliability of the source.

It's not incumbent on a Christian apologist to have an explanation for each and every difficulty in Scripture. An anthology as ancient as Scripture is bound to have many obscurities at this distance from events.

**6.** That said, we don't need to reinvent the wheel each time. There are prepared answers for most every objection. Some are better than others, but there's no dearth of intelligent answers.

**7.** You can find out in a hurry that some people are a waste of time. Sometimes there are too many layers to peel away, and they aren't listening anyway.

**8.** Sometimes we respond to a person on their own grounds, for the sake of argument. But that's a pressure

point. It's not conceding their position. And it's just at temporary stage in the argument.

For instance, if someone says, "For all you know, we might be trapped in the Matrix!"—I can point out that even if we were trapped in the Matrix, naturalism would still be false. The Matrix only pushes the same issue back a step. One must still account for the Matrix, as well as intelligent agents within the Matrix. Some retooled theistic proofs will apply to a Matrix-like situation.

But that doesn't make the Matrix an adequate substitute for Christianity. Although I might temporarily play along with their thought-experiment for discussion purposes, that's not where it ends.

**9.** As I've often said, rather than starting with the perceived problems of Scripture, we should start with the problems of naturalism. Incinerate naturalism. Burn it out with a flamethrower so that people realize that they don't have that to turn to.

## Circumscribing violence

One of the popular moralistic objections to the Bible concerns the holy war commands and holy war accounts. That's a popular trope among village atheists and "progressive Christians," as well as many OT scholars. My main point is that I think this objection has the issue backwards, but before addressing the main point, a few subsidiary observations:

**i)** War is brutal. I don't think the reader is expected to find this material uplifting. The ugliness is part and parcel of life in a fallen world.

**ii)** The hand-wringing and moralizing is a luxury of people who feel safe and secure. People writing in peacetime.

Not surprisingly, people who find themselves in a war for natural survival are far more hard-nosed. A lot of disapproval heaped on the OT is a reflection of decadent culture elites in gated communities.

Mind you, it can be useful to live at a time and place where we are able to practice critical detachment. I'm not saying that automatically disqualifies the critic. But it also fosters self-deception, as people say things they don't really believe, if they found themselves in a life-and-death struggle. They can talk that way because it's a safe abstraction. They can afford to make disingenuous, unrealistic statements because it doesn't cost them anything.

**iii)** Now to my main point: the holy war commands are countercultural. They reflect a dramatic restriction on what is permissible in warfare.

Historically, many or most cultures, if they had the wherewithal, had no compunction about invading other countries or raiding other tribes for land, women, war captives, loot. They didn't think there was anything wrong with wars of aggression and conquest. Might made right.

And they invented war gods to rubber-stamp their military campaigns. They just assumed they had divine sanction for military expeditions and raiding parties.

Likewise, take the glorification of war in the **I**LIAD. For centuries, that was a paradigmatic honor code. An ideal that young men aspired to.

In the OT, by contrast, God does not endorse war in general. There's defensive war, with rules of warfare. And the only war of conquest was the occupation of Israel.

So there was a drastic *reduction* in the kinds of wars deemed to be permissible. Moreover, the enemy was allowed to survive if he submitted to the God of Israel (e.g. Rahab, Gibeonites). So the OT massively curtails the scope of licit violence.

## In retrospect

A striking feature of Biblical narrative is the omniscient narrator. Unbelievers treat this as evidence that Bible stories are fictional. How could the narrator read their minds? On top of that, how could he read the minds of people who lived and died centuries before he was born?

The orthodox explanation is divine revelation: God shared some of his knowledge with the narrator.

I'd like to illustrate that principle with some analogies. In fiction, there are two kinds of suspense. One is where the audience doesn't know the outcome in advance. An example would be a whodunit. That's why a murder mystery is the kind of thing you typically watch or read just once. As soon as the mystery is solved, as soon as the suspense is dispelled, it loses interest.

But another kind of suspense is just the opposite: dramatic irony. That's where the audience knows something a character doesn't. For instance, the audience may be acutely conscious of the fact that a character is in danger, while the character is oblivious to the danger. A viewer is tempted to yell at the screen to warn the hapless character.

Although this is a literary convention, it has real-world analogues. Take *The Diary of Anne Frank*. What makes this so poignant is the ominous fact that the reader knows something she doesn't.

This is a coming-of-age story. She's young and hopeful. If they can just wait out the Nazis, she has so much to live for.

But the reader knows that she is doomed. It's as if the reader knows how the story ends before she does, even though we're reading this decades later. And that's because, at the time of writing, she didn't know how her own story was going to end.

The reader is like a time-traveler from the future who has a conversation with her before her family goes into hiding. We know it's futile. But we smile politely.

Another example is Becky Lynn Black's "Our Cancer Journey." She's the late wife of David Alan Black. She was a missionary, and the child of missionaries.

She chronicles her battle with cancer. Her first entry is 9/9/09. Her last entry is 7/4/13.

In a sense, the reader knows that she's dying long before she does. We know when it ends. We read the earlier entries with the benefit of hindsight. She, of course, didn't have that retrospective outlook at the time of writing. She was looking forward while we are looking back. We know her situation as hopeless from the outset. That casts a shadow over the entire reading experience.

In situations like this, the reader has a kind of God's-eye view of the proceedings. Almost as if we're above time.

There's a classic X-Files episode ("Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose") in which a character knows the future. And it makes him miserable. Fatalistic. In a fallen world, it's a terrible thing to see the future.

That's fiction, but as I've noted, this perspective as real-world counterparts, even apart from inspiration.





## Models of visionary revelation

**1.** Some books of the Bible draw heavily on visionary revelation (e.g. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation). It's striking to me that scholars who write commentaries on these books rarely spend much time on the psychology of visionary revelation. They discuss genre, symbolism, schools of interpretation, rules of interpretation, yet they rarely explore the experience of visionary revelation, and how that might impact interpretation.

**2.** In theory, visionary revelation could employ two different modes of image-processing:

### I) MOVIE THEATER MODEL

Visionary revelation might be analogous to watching a movie. The viewer is stationary, while the scenery is in motion (or the illusion of motion). Like a movie theater, where you sit still, in front of a screen, watching a series of rapid fire images. One scene after another.

### II) VR MODEL

Visionary revelation might be analogous to a VR program. Unlike watching a movie, this would be an immersive, interactive experience. The scenery is stationary while the observer is in motion (or the illusion of motion).

This is also analogous to those time-travel dramas where you can dial up a particular date in the past or future, maybe see a preview, step through a portal, and there you are—right in the thick of things.

The moviegoer model is an extension of looking at a still picture. The observer remains outside the picture.

The VR mode is like stepping right into the picture. The observer finds himself inside the picture.

**3.** Does Scripture give any indication which of these models is closer to the truth? It's possible that God uses both modalities at different times.

Visionary revelation includes revelatory dreams. Dreams are immersive, interactive. That would fit with the VR model. Likewise, in Ezk 40-48, the prophet is given a guided tour of the temple complex. He seems to be moving through the temple complex. That, too, would fit the VR model.

This may be dream-like, where certain details are fuzzy. Perhaps he doesn't describe the temple ceiling, if there is a ceiling, because he doesn't look up.

4. In Rev 19-20 we have a battle, followed by the "Millennium," (and the binding of Satan) followed by another battle. Premils regard this as a continuous action.

Some amils, based on recapitulatory parallelism, regard 20 as a new cycle. I agree with amils that Revelation contains recapitulatory parallelism, but I'm not convinced that there's a hard break between 19 and 20. So it's possible that 20 is a continuation of 19.

Amils also draw attention to the parallels between the battle scenes in 19 and 20. Both are literarily indebted to Ezk 38-39.

Consider a thought-experiment. Suppose we view the battles scenes in 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 as two sides of the

same panel, while 20:1-6 is the hinge. If you swing the panel to the right, that displays 19:11-21. If you swing the panel to the left, that displays 20:7-10.

Which is the front and which is the back? That depends on the direction in which you approach the panel. If you approach the panel from one side, that's the side you're facing. If you approach the panel from the other side, that's the side you're facing.

In that respect, which battle is before or after the other depends on where you are standing in relation to the panel. The Apocalypse is written in a particular sequence, in part because writing is inherently linear.

But John's visionary experience may have been more spatial. Simulated locomotion. He moves from scene to scene. The battle scenes in 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 may have similar features because these are two sides of the same panel.

## Whither the Canaanites?

One thing some students of the Bible find puzzling are apparently conflicting statements about the actual scope of the destruction of the Canaanites. On the one hand we have unqualified statements about the decimation of the Canaanites (e.g. Deut 7:2; 20:16-17; Josh 10:40-42). On the other hand, we have statements acknowledging the continued presence of Canaanites in the Holy Land (e.g. Judges 1-3).

This also crops up in debates over the historicity of the accounts. Does the archeological record confirm or disconfirm the extent of the conquest in biblical narratives?

**i)** Many scholars say the Biblical language is hyperbolic. Hyperbole was a stock literary convention of ANE conquest accounts. And I think that explanation may well be valid.

There are, however, one or two alternative explanations:

**ii)** To begin with, we need to distinguish between commands and compliance. You could well have discrepancy between the scope of the command and the degree to which that was carried out. That doesn't mean the record is inaccurate. Rather, that means the Israelites were not consistently faithful in implementing the command.

**iii)** Finally, Scripture indicates more than one way in which the Holy Land was cleared of Canaanites. Mass execution was one means. But Scripture also refers to expelling the inhabitants (e.g. Exod 23:28-30; Lev 18:24; Num 33:51-56; Deut 7:20; Josh 24:12).

Now, to the extent that many Canaanites were driven out, that means they were still alive. So even if they self-evacuated, they—or their descendants—could stage periodic raids or military incursions. Attempt to reestablish their presence. Retake land which they previously occupied.

Ancient Israel had porous borders. It's not as if there was an electrified fence to secure the boundaries of the Holy Land and keep intruders at bay. An area which might have been free of Canaanites in the time of Joshua might be reoccupied by Canaanites in the time of Judges—absent constant vigilance by the Israelites.

## Biblical "discrepancies"

Liberals and outright unbelievers typically allege that Biblical narratives contradict each other. Various reasons are assigned to these contradictions: one Bible writer didn't know what the other author wrote; each Bible writer was preserving different, divergent traditions; one Bible writer was consciously advocating a rival version of events.

Here are two sets of parallel accounts, which narrate two interrelated events:

### 1. VERSION 1A

**1**At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, **2**a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. **3**About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." **4**And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. **5**And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. **6**He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." **7**When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called

two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

## 2. VERSION 2A

30And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing 31and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' 33So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

## 3. VERSION 1B

9The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance

**11**and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. **12**In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. **13**And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." **14**But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." **15**And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." **16**This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. **17**Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate **18**and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. **19**And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. **20**Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." **21**And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" **22**And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the



whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." 23So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.

34So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ ( he is Lord of all), 37you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, 40but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who had

been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. 43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. 46For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

#### 4. VERSION 2B

4But Peter began and explained it to them in order:  
5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance

I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. 6 Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' 10 This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. 11 And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; 14 he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If

**then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"**

If these variant accounts occurred in four separate books of the Bible, liberals would write learned monographs discussing the independent origin of each. They'd assign different redactors and different dates to each account. They'd reconstruct the community to which, for which, and from which, each account emanated. They'd recreate the socioeconomic situation of each target community. They'd delineate the distinctive theological agenda of each redactor. They'd meticulously tabulate the irreconcilable discrepancies between one account and a rival account. This would all be done with brilliant ingenuity and impressive erudition. "Fundamentalist" Christians who attempted to harmonize these accounts would be accused to special pleading.

But there's only one problem: these four accounts occur in the very same book, back-to-back (Acts 10-11). They were meant to be read together. To contribute to the same overarching narrative.

## From Easter to Pentecost

One of the stock objections which the village atheist raises to the Bible are alleged contradictions in the Resurrection accounts.

Village atheism suffers from self-reinforcing ignorance. There's a typical failure on the part of your average village atheist to acquaint himself with evangelical scholarship—or other types of literature which fall outside his provincial outlook. So he repeats the same stale objections ad nauseam as if these had gone unanswered.

So we need to give the village atheist a remedial tutorial on the question at issue:

**1.** At the risk of stating the obvious, the more complex an event—which is to say, the more things happening, at different times and places, involving different participants—the more difficult it will be to reconstruct the original sequence of events. There are so many possible combinations. So many different ways to correlate the same data points.

**2.** Keep in mind that where you have overlapping events, it isn't even possible to reduce the sequence to a single linear series.

**3.** In the case of the Gospels, an already complicated situation (1) is further complicated by the rhetorical strategies and compositional techniques of the respective writers:

**i)** The gospel writers are selective in what they report. They omit details which are extrinsic to their purpose.

**ii)** They sometimes rearrange the order of events to create a thematic rather than chronological sequence.

**iii)** They engage in narrative compression.

**iv)** Sometimes they employ literary conventions like numerology.

**v)** The same person or place may go by more than one name.

**4.** In addition, what one writer includes or omits won't be the same as what another writer includes or omits. One writer's thematic sequence may differ from another writer's thematic sequence. One writer's numerology, or narrative compression, may differ from another writer's numerology, or narrative compression.

Since we don't have direct access to the original sequence of events, we may not be able to retroengineer a thematic sequence back into a chronological sequence. Indeed, that's not a reasonable expectation at our distance from the time and place.

To know how the reported events go together, you need to know everything that happened, in time and place. For you need to know the connecting events. How two events are interrelated in time and space is often determined by intervening events. That's how historical causation works. Where an earlier event causes, or leads up to, or leads into, a later event. But you can't retrace a stepwise progression if there are too many missing steps in the record.

**5.** Then there's a fairly unique complication in harmonizing the Resurrection accounts. Normally a person can only be at

one place at a time. But even before the Resurrection, Jesus could do remarkable things in time and space. He could walk on water. He could disappear in the middle of a crowd. And in John 20, he has the ability to appear or disappear at will. Physical barriers pose no obstacle.

So in harmonizing the Resurrection accounts, we must also make allowance for paranormal phenomena like bilocation. Which, in turn, raises the issue of spatiotemporal displacement. Variables like that introduce a degree of flexibility which you don't ordinarily have in a spatiotemporal series. But Jesus is not an ordinary person.

Of course, infidels don't believe that. But if they're going to attack the coherence of the Resurrection accounts, then that's a case of judging each account on its own terms, given the theological assumptions of the narrator.

**6.** Some village atheists seem to imagine that merely showing how the Resurrection accounts are formally contradictory somehow disproves the inerrancy or historicity or reliability of the accounts. But that's terribly naïve. That would only be a problem if each writer intended to mirror the original series of events. Since that is manifestly not what they meant to do, the problem is a pseudoproblem.

## One angel or two?

Unbelievers make heavy weather of the fact that Mark mentions one angel at the tomb while Luke mentions two. But if you ask me, I'd chalk this up to Lukan/dominical numerology. Consider the stereotypical use of "2" in parabolic discourse:

"A certain moneylender had **two** debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty" (Lk 7:41).

"There was a man who had **two** sons" (Lk 15:11).

"I tell you, in that night there will be **two** in one bed. One will be taken and the other left" (Lk 17:34).

"There will be **two** women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left" (Lk 17:35).

"**Two** men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector" (Lk 18:10).

Numbering things by two seems to be a narrative cliché.

Consider some other parallels:

While they were perplexed about this, behold, **two** men stood by them in dazzling apparel" (Lk 24:4).

"And behold, **two** men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah" (Lk 9:30).

"That very day **two** of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:13).



So Luke is fond of grouping things by two. Of course, this doesn't mean that every use of "two" must be conventional. But the use of "two" as a storytelling convention ought to forewarn us not to press Lukan usage with mechanical literality.

## "Would you kill Baby Hitler?"

*"Would you kill Baby Hitler?"*

*Of course, you would have needed to know on April 20, 1889 that the little boy would grow up to become Adolf Hitler, and would commit all of the crimes we now know he committed. The only way you could know that, apart from precognition, would be to have traveled backward in time from a point when Hitler had committed all his crimes and you knew about them.*

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[http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2012/10/would\\_you\\_kill\\_baby\\_hitler.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2012/10/would_you_kill_baby_hitler.html)

One of the stock objections to Biblical morality is the mass execution of the Canaanites, by divine command. Now there are some scholars, of whom Richard Hess is the most distinguished, who think this involves a traditional misinterpretation of the text.

But suppose, for the sake of argument, that the traditional interpretation is correct. Roger Ebert has raised an obvious counterexample. Ebert is, himself, a lapsed Catholic. I believe he's an atheist or at least an agnostic.

And that's what makes his hypothetical significant. Unbelievers (and theological liberals) typically attack the morality of the OT conquest accounts. Yet Ebert, a fellow

unbeliever, is posing a hard question that's applicable to that issue.

Canaanite boys were too young to be soldiers. And we might even say they were "innocent" (in the qualified sense that children are innocent). Yet, if allowed to live, they'd grow up to be combatants. They'd mature into Israel's mortal enemies. They'd implement the Final Solution. So we're dealing with the moral and functional equivalent of an infant Hitler scenario.

What are the viable alternatives?

**i)** After killing the adults, do you just leave them orphaned? To fend for themselves? How would they survive on their own in the harsh conditions of the ANE?

**ii)** In theory, Israelites could adopt them and raise them as their own. And that might work when they were too young to know any better. But when they became old enough to remember or realize that their adoptive parents were the killers of their biological parents (and other blood relations), they'd naturally hate their adoptive parents.

For instance, suppose, when you were very young, a couple broke into your home, murdered your parents, kidnapped you, and raised you. If you were very young, you might temporarily adapt to your new caregivers. Identify with your new caregivers.

But as you continued to mature, you'd become increasingly aware of what they'd had done to your parents. Not only what they'd done to them, but what they'd done to you by forcibly removing you from your parents. By depriving you of that upbringing. Your natural allegiance to your parents

would kick in. You'd despise your kidnappers. You'd be tempted to avenge your parents.

My immediate point is that unbelievers suffer from conflicting intuitions. They vehemently object to the OT conquest narratives, but their knee-jerk objections are superficial. As even a fellow unbeliever like Roger Ebert points out, the issue is morally complicated.

## Saving the Canaanites

*Suppose that God knew that unless he were to command the Israelites to wipe out their enemies, they themselves would be wiped out. And suppose further, as the Bible teaches, that Israel was God's chosen vessel to provide a way of salvation to the world—including those very people wiped out in those genocidal attacks...So it is entirely possible that the conquest narratives are consistent with God's doing all he can to save the Canaanites and to do what's best for them in the long term... Moreover, according to Christian thought, the deaths of those Canaanites were partially instrumental in making possible the coming of Jesus through the preserved remnant of Israel.*

---

D. Baggett & J. Walls, **GOOD GOD: THE THEISTIC FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY** (Oxford 2011), 138-40.

I think this argument has some promising features, although it also has some problematic features. I think it can be rehabilitated.

**i)** Their argument contains the gratuitous assumption that God ought to give every Canaanite a chance to be saved. For the moment, let's bracket the special case of infant Canaanites. (By "infant," I mean Canaanites who died before the age of discretion.)

In reference to adults (i.e. those above the age of discretion), God can justly punish them by executing them as well as damning them. In that respect, God's command to wipe out the Canaanites doesn't even present a prima facie problem. They are sinners. No special explanation is required to justify God exacting retributive judgment on the wicked. To the contrary, that's what a just God is supposed to do. Punish evildoers. God would be unjust if he failed to requite iniquity.

**ii)** What some readers find objectionable is not the execution of the men, but the execution of noncombatants. As combatants, able-bodied men are fair game in time of war. But the women (and children) are a different story.

The immunity of noncombatants is very chivalrous, but morally irrelevant to the case at hand. Women are moral agents. Women can be just as sinful, just as guilty, as men.

This isn't just a case of war, but holy war. God is judging the Canaanites for their iniquity.

In addition, Canaanite boys would grow up to be combatants.

**iii)** What many readers find especially objectionable is the execution of the kids. I'd note, in passing, that from a Biblical standpoint, even infants are guilty in Adam. That's a controversial claim, and I'm not going to take the time to defend it in this post, but I think it's both Biblical and defensible.

**iv)** Another question is how pagans can be saved. According to one theory, they can be saved by favorably responding to general revelation.

But according to Scripture, people can only be saved by favorably responding to special revelation. Indeed, that's one of the distinctive privileges and advantages of the Chosen People. By special revelation, they enjoy a saving knowledge of the true God—in contrast to the heathen, who are sunk in idolatry.

By living in proximity to the Jews, it's possible for Gentiles to be saved, if they become worshipers of the true God of Israel. If they convert to the true faith.

I could spend more time all (iii-iv). For now I'm just blocking out the issues.

**v)** Baggett and Walls apparently agree with me that access to special revelation is a precondition for salvation. They get around this by postulating postmortem evangelism (139-40).

That postulate reflects the degree to which modern Arminianism increasingly deviates from Biblical orthodoxy. But I'm not going to argue the point here and now.

**vi)** The authors' argument involves the counterintuitive assumption that the future can affect the past. But we

normally think the past can affect the future, not vice versa. To make this work, we need to supply two subsidiary conditions:

**a)** If God is timeless, then God can confer a past benefit that's contingent on the realization of a future condition. God's viewpoint is ontologically independent of the temporal sequence.

**b)** If history unfolds according to God's master plan, then God can arrange events so that a future event will affect a past event. The past is planned with a view to the future, and vice versa.

**vii)** Both (vi-a) and (b) are consistent with Calvinism. However, they present problems for Arminianism. For one thing, many modern Arminians deny God's timeless eternity.

For instance, they think a genuine dialogue between God and men must take place in real time. In order for God to genuinely respond to human petitions, God must actually listen to the human speaker. Wait for the speaker to have his say.

If, by contrast, God is timeless, then this is a canned dialogue. It lacks the give-and-take of a genuine exchange.

If, however, God is conditioned by time, then God is in no position to confer a past benefit that's contingent on the realization of a future condition. A temporal God lacks the transcendent perspective of take it all in at a glance.

**viii)** On a related note, some Arminians explicate divine foreknowledge to mean God knows the future by foreseeing what will happen. He's on the receiving end of the process.



But in that event, God isn't planning the outcome. God can't orchestrate events so that a future event affects a past event. Rather, his foreknowledge is the effect of what will transpire. So God doesn't control or coordinate the relationship between past and future events. For what will transpire is the cause of God's foresight. God doesn't make that happen. Rather, that happening makes God prescient.

One could spend more time unpacking (vii-viii). For now I'm presenting a thumbnail sketch of an argumentative strategy.

**ix)** What about Calvinism? Given Calvinism, it's easier to see how God could save infant Canaanites. They'd be saved by regeneration in this life, and faith in the afterlife.

Since, moreover, God plans world history, and knows what he plans, God can orchestrate events to confer a retroactive benefit. Although the atonement is future in relation to infant Canaanites, they can be saved ahead of time.

**x)** I'm not taking a position on the salvation of Canaanite babies. Because Scripture says so little about the fate of those who die in infancy, there is no Reformed consensus on the issue. Any position will be speculative.

Some Calvinists believe in universal infant salvation. Some Calvinists believe the dying infants of believers are saved. Likewise, we can be open to the possibility that God saves infants of unbelieving parents. All these positions are coherent with Calvinism.

**xi)** So we could appropriate the argument of Baggett and Walls. Indeed, the argument works better when it's adapted to Reformed presuppositions.

Given Calvinism, mass execution of the Canaanites could be God's way of saving infant Canaanites. In order to save anyone, God must protect ancient Israel from her mortal enemies. For ancient Israel is the conduit of the Messiah.

But in principle, that can circle back to the benefit of the casualties. By protecting Israel at the immediate expense of her pagan enemies, that, in turn, could lay the groundwork for their subsequent redemption (of a subset thereof). They are harmed in the short-term, but restored in the long-term. And the former is a necessary precondition of the latter.

**xii)** An unbeliever might object that this is ingenious special pleading. The conquest narratives say nothing about the salvation of infant Canaanites. That's an anachronistic rationalization. Retrofitting the OT.

**xiii)** To that objection, I'd say several things:

**a)** The argument from silence cuts both ways. If Scripture is silent on the eternal fate of Canaanite infants, then unbelievers are in no position to say God wronged them by bringing about their premature demise. For the unbeliever is ignorant of how the story ultimately ends. (Not to mention other justificatory considerations.)

**b)** Scripture does say God blessed Israel with a view to blessing the Gentiles. That's as old as the Abrahamic covenant. And that's reiterated in the Prophets. God made provision for their eventual redemption from the outset.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean Gentiles who lived in the past would reap the benefits. But it's consistent with

that outcome—just as elect Jews who lived in the past would reap the benefits.

**c)** If a belief-system has the internal resources to address unanticipated objections, that's to the credit of the belief-system. If, after the fact, unbelievers raise an objection that wasn't on the radar back then, but Christian theology has the wherewithal to field that objection, then that illustrates the richness of Christian theology. Indeed, that's something we'd expect if God inspired the Bible.

## Roger Olson's made-to-order God

I'm going to comment on a couple of statements Roger Olson made in a recent book review.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/06/a-good-new-book-on-the-bible-reviewed-continuing-the-discussion-on-the-word-inerrancy/>

His entire post is a target-rich environment, so I'll have more to say at a later date. But for now:

*Where we judge that Scripture presents God as saying or doing something he would not say or do, we should confess that “these texts tell us more about the purposes of their human authors than about the purposes of God.” We will simply admit that the author of Deuteronomy wrongly believed (as Luther did) that God told his people to slaughter their enemies.*

---

How does Olson know, apart from God's self-revelation in Scripture, what God's prepared to say or do? What is Olson's standard of comparison? Apart from Scripture, how is he in a position to predict what God wouldn't say or do? What's his independent source of information?

Perhaps this is his explanation:

*When we run across elements of Scripture impossible to reconcile with God's character as revealed in Jesus Christ, we ought to bite the bullet and admit they are simply wrong, the result of the humanity (finiteness and fallenness) of Scripture.*

---

Several problems:

- i)** Jesus never indicated that OT depictions of God are "simply wrong." Jesus never questioned the inspiration of the OT.
- ii)** Why does Olson think that Jesus is nicer than Yahweh? The Jesus of the Gospels (not to mention Revelation) isn't some hippy guru who doles out bland, grandmotherly aphorisms about love, peace, and brotherhood. The NT Jesus has a real edge to him. He's not somebody you want to get on the wrong side of.
- iii)** According to Olson, Scripture doesn't select for the true God. Rather, the true God selects for Scripture. Scripture doesn't tell you who the true God is. Rather, your prior knowledge of the true God tells you what scriptures are true. You can't use the Bible to identify God. Rather, you have to use God to identify Scripture.

But in that event, how can Olson use Jesus as a benchmark? How does he know what Jesus is really like?

He can't default to the NT, because he doesn't consider the Bible to be reliable. What makes him think his Jesus is the real Jesus, rather than the Jesus of Marcion, Elaine Pagels, or John Dominic Crossan?

Given his low view of Scripture, he can't begin with the NT portrayal of Jesus as a given. Rather, he has to begin with Jesus, then use that to determine which candidates for Scripture match up with Jesus.

But if he can't begin with Scripture, how can he begin with Jesus? He has no alternate source of information? There are some extrabiblical traditions about Jesus, but even if they were trustworthy, they are hardly enough to constitute a frame of reference.

If the OT doesn't select for the true God, then the NT doesn't select for the real Jesus. In both cases, given Olson's methodology, you have to begin at the end, then work your way back. You have to begin with what you already know about God or Jesus, then use that to determine which Biblical depictions are true or false. So how does he kick-start the process?

## Violence in the OT

I'm going to post an email exchange I had with a friend. His comments are indented.

*It seems that I need to understand a bit more about notions of corporate responsibility in the ANE; there seem to be multiple places in the OT where God hold's groups accountable for the actions of one/a few.*

---

There's some truth to that, although that can be overstated. Oftentimes I think it has less to do with corporate responsibility than the fact that we are social creatures. As such, collective judgment is, to some degree, inevitable. Collective judgment doesn't ipso facto mean everyone is guilty, or equally guilty. Take a paradigm-case like the Babylonian exile. You have godly Jews like Ezekiel and Daniel who suffer as a result of what their ungodly countrymen did.

Even when judgment targets individuals, that will impact the innocent. Everyone is related to someone else. If you punish a husband and father, that will impact the wife and kids.

But there's also the fact that, as social creatures, we often think and act alike. We influence each other. We are, to some degree, products of our social conditioning. And it's a circular dynamic. We both condition, and are conditioned

by, our communities. Consider the social dynamic in a high school. The stereotypical subgroups and rivalries.

*Now, I think I have grown very sensitive over time to some of the violence and judgment in the OT.*

---

Brutality is the norm in human history. I've been blessed to live in a time and place where that's rarer. But that's a very narrow window. My experience has been quite abnormal.

I don't think we're supposed to like the violent OT passages. It's not meant to be edifying or inspirational.

Judges is a classic case. That's riddled with atrocities, and the reader is *supposed* to find that appalling.

Or take Lamentations. The writer is appalled by what he sees. The reader is *supposed* to share the writer's horror.

*Maybe you guys will address some of these alleged OT atrocities on Triablogue (or already have). I feel I can often really relate to your perspective. I read some of Holding's stuff, but sometimes I disagree with what he's arguing. I recently was reading 2 Samuel - that instance where David gives Saul's descendents over to the Gibeonites to be killed - to stop the*



*drought. Holding seems to think it was retrieving Saul's bones for burial that stopped the drought. But it seems from the text, it was appeasing the Gibeonites that did this. This whole incident confuses me; I don't understand why God would accept this.*

---

The commentators aren't very helpful on that issue. I think there are two ways of broaching the issue.

**1)** Let's assume for the sake of argument that this is an issue of justice. Saul's sons didn't commit their father's crime. On the other hand, we're all familiar with stories about relatives of tyrannical kings or military dictators. The relatives may not commit any of the crimes the despot commits or commands. But they live under his roof and thoroughly enjoy the perks that go along with being the first family. They wallow in the lavish, pampered, lifestyle, and they don't lose an hour of sleep over the victims of the regime. Indeed, they are happily insulated from all that.

Sometimes the despot is toppled in palace coup or popular insurrection. Suddenly the tables are turned. It isn't just the despot who finds himself on the receiving end of what he used to dish out to others. His relatives suffer the same gruesome fate.

And it seems to me that there's poetic justice in that. No, they didn't kill or torture anyone. No, they didn't starve anyone to death. But they just didn't care. They were happy to reap the benefits of being the first family, having the

crème of everything, while others suffered horrible deprivation.

I seriously doubt that Saul's sons were any different.

**2)** However, that may be the wrong angle. Maybe this has nothing to do with just deserts. Maybe it's about an honor code. Saul isn't posthumously indicted for committing *murder*, but for violating an ancient *treaty*. Even though he murdered Gibeonites, that's not the indictment. It's not killing, per se, but killing those who were supposed to be shielded by treaty. Who are legally sacrosanct.

Israel, in the person her king, failed to honor her public agreements. It's not so much a moral issue, but a failure of reciprocity. In a treaty the parties have mutual obligations to each other.

Saul dishonored the Gibeonites. Disrespected the treaty.

And according to the operative honor code, the penalty is tit for tat. You killed some of ours so we get to kill some of yours.

It was an honor code that everyone understood and tacitly accepted. If the situation were reversed, the Israelites would demand the same in return.

Think of a duel, or single combat (e.g. David & Goliath). That's not about *injustice*, but *dishonor*. We may find it silly, and that's often the case, but in warrior cultures, it's a big deal. And the ANE was a world of warrior cultures.

**3)** This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Saul's *sons* are singled out. His *daughters* aren't included. That's

because it's a male-oriented honor-code. Women are exempt.

The males are the representative figures in this transaction. There were certain perks to being a Jewish man, but that, in turn, carried certain liabilities.

**4)** This is also why the Bible has a doctrine of eschatological justice. Scripture recognizes the fact that many things happen in this life which cannot be adequately recompensed in this life.

*A big one for me also is when it is said that women will eat their offspring during the captivities/famines in the OT and it seems like this is God's punishment. That to me is a horror I can't fathom.*

---

**i)** Well, you're *supposed* to find that horrific. It isn't meant to be edifying or inspirational. Bible writers cite that as an example of extreme depravity. You and I *ought* to find that unspeakably appalling.

**ii)** We're naturally attracted to the attractive sins. It's only when sin turns ugly that we begin to see the real character of sin. Sometimes punishment has to be ugly for us to finally get the point.

**iii)** This is less about Scripture than the *world*. It's not unique to Scripture. For cannibalism during siege also

happens outside the Bible. So that goes to the general "problem of evil."

It's not so much whether the *Bible* is believable, but whether *God* is believable. For that's a part of God's world. Not just the world of the Bible, but the world *outside* the Bible.

**iv)** So it's ultimately a question of why God "allows" it. I've discussed theodicy at various times.

**v)** Of course, some folks take this as a reason to chuck the Christian faith. But there's a catch. If we live in a godless world, then it's not evil for mothers to kill and consume their children. A godless world is a world beyond good or evil. We're just animals. Animals driven by the survival instinct. Like wild animals that eat their young. Lions that kill the cubs of a rival lion. Hyena siblings that kill the runt.

## Inspired intent

I'm going to comment on some recent statements by William B. Evans over at Ref21. For the most part I will avoid commenting on the correct interpretation of Gen 1. Instead, I will focus on the correct methods and assumptions we should bring to the interpretation of Gen 1. Evans illustrates his claims by making certain interpretive moves, and to the extent that this goes to the question of correct methods and assumptions, I will comment on his exegesis. But in the main my comments are more programmatic in nature.

I basically agree with what he said about "the perspicuity of scripture" and "exegetical populism" in his initial "Perspicuity, Exegetical Populism, and Tolerance: A Reply to G. I. Williamson." To be sure, he had more in mind than he actually spelled out at that juncture, but confining myself to what he stated in that particular post, I agree with him. The issue is how he subsequently developed those otherwise unobjectionable points.

Moving along, he says:

*And finally, in practice nobody consistently regards authorial intent as decisive. For example, there are those who champion the Westminster regulative principle of worship and yet see no contradiction in singing hymns (something originally understood to be*

*precluded by that principle). I'm also struck by the way that even the most ardent sabbatarian today does not observe the Sabbath with near the rigor that is implied by the language of WLC QQ. 115-121. The confessional reasoning behind the 1722 deposition of a minister by New Castle Presbytery for bathing in a creek on the Sabbath is undoubtedly closer to authorial intent. Finally, WLC QQ. 124-133 clearly assume the British class system of the seventeenth century (and would not have been written apart from that social context), and yet I do not hear the strict-subscriptionist champions of authorial intent, who tend to be quite Whiggish and republican in their social sentiments, calling for confessional revisions here. In short, a focus on authorial intent at the expense of subsequent interpretive history and the authority of the believing community results in an unfortunate selectivity as intent is appealed to when it is convenient and ignored it when it is not.*

---

This fails to adequately distinguish two distinct and separable issues. Perhaps that distinction was implicit in what he wrote, but if so, it needs to be explicated:

**i)** Is original intent normative for the *interpretation* of a document?

**ii)** Is original intent normative for the *application* or *enforcement* of a document?

Suppose (arguendo) that the Westminster Divines meant to say that God made the world in six consecutive calendar days. If so, then that does bind subsequent generations when it comes to the *interpretation* of the Confessional text. We should exegete the Confessional text according to the intent of the framers. What it means is rooted in what they meant to convey by their words. And that principle holds true for inspired and uninspired writings alike.

Evans has also said it can be difficult to ascertain original intent. We can't interview the dead. And that's true, although it overlooks the fact that one reason people commit their beliefs to writing is to preserve a posthumous record of their beliefs. Put another way, one purpose of writing is to make a personally unavailable writer available to the reader. For instance, that's why St. Paul writes letters to churches when he can't address the audience face-to-face. That one-to-many dynamic applies both in time and space. It makes dead writers available to the living via their writings. The dead aren't directly available to the living, but indirectly available via the thoughts they commit to writing.

Over and above the meaning of the text is the question of textual *authority*. Do the intentions of the writer bind the belief or practice of the reader? Does the writer have the

authority to impose his viewpoint on subsequent generations?

That's a different issue than the interpretive issue. For instance, even if (arguendo) the Westminster Divines both meant to teach a particular timeframe for creation as well as to mandate that teaching for posterity, those are distinct and separable issues. In principle, you can say, "Yes, that's they understood their own words, but I simply disagree with them."

That would be an honest disagreement, which—however—allows the writer to speak in his own voice rather than ventriloquize what the reader would like him to say if the reader were the writer. Can a writer impose his views on the reader? Can a reader impose his interpretation on the writer? Different questions.

But unlike (i), where the same principle applies to inspired and uninspired writings alike, there is a distinction with (ii). An uninspired writer cannot ipso facto impose his views on the reader. He lacks that inherent authority. Of course, if he happens to be right, then the reader ought to assent.

In the case of an inspired writer (or speaker), by contrast, whatever the writer means to inculcate does have the authority to obligate the reader's assent. And this, in turn, can generate psychological tension if a Christian reader happens to think original intent is mistaken.

***But there is also a deeper issue lurking here in this hermeneutical apotheosis of the common man, and that is the role of***



*ANE historical data to this discussion.  
For example, would the average person  
in ancient Israel read the text in the  
same way that Matt Miller does?*

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That's a valid distinction as far as it goes.

*Given that the cosmologies assumed are quite different, there are likely to be significant divergences as to details. I dealt with this question in the article I cited in my first post on this topic. In it I wrote: "In recent months, I have perused a number of Reformed defenses of literal 24-hour, six-day creationism. Sadly, all of these works have failed to take any stock of the enormous amount of data from comparative studies of ancient Near Eastern literature suggesting that the narrative in Genesis 1 is framed in terms of a cosmology quite coherent to the ancients, but which we ourselves do not share. Now this is quite important, for none of us believes in a literal 'firmament,' or in 'pillars of heaven,' or in 'windows of heaven,' or in 'fountains of the deep,' at least as these biblical terms were apparently understood by the ancients. In short, we must face the distinct possibility that none of us*

is truly a 'literalist.'" (William B. Evans, "The NAPARC Churches and the Peculiar Challenges of Our Time," *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 27/1 (2001): 10-11).

We have known for quite some time how people in the ANE construed the structure of the cosmos. They, and other primitive peoples more recently, thought that there were the "waters below" (after all, if you dig down into the earth or travel far enough in any direction you are likely to encounter water) and the "waters above" (after all, the sky is blue and rain comes down from the sky).

Restraining the "waters above" was a barrier known as the "expanse" (ESV) or "firmament" (KJV). The Hebrew term translated here (*raqia*) has the sense of a hard vault or dome or canopy (see the massive body of ANE and anthropological data compiled in Paul H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above. Part I: The Meaning of *raqia* in Genesis 1," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 227-240; and "The Firmament and the Water Above. Part II: The Meaning of 'The Water above the Firmament' in Gen. 1:6-8," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 31-46), and such

*usage meshes well with other ANE documents where the same conceptions are evident. Other portions of the narrative, such as the creation of the sun, moon, and stars on Day 4 and their placement "in the expanse," fit well with this ancient phenomenological conventional cosmology, but severe aporias result when we try to pull this narrative without remainder into a post-Copernican scientific cosmology.*

*As we probe the interpretive significance of this cosmology the key terms here are phenomenological and conventional. This understanding of the world is phenomenological (the way the world appears to those unencumbered by knowledge of modern science) rather than mythical, which explains why similar notions occur in a wide variety of ancient and primitive cultures. It is also conventional in that it was shared by people in that cultural context generally, and in that it was not a rigorously systematized understanding. For example, sometimes rain is said to come when the "windows of heaven" in the expanse are opened (Genesis 7:11; 8:2; Isaiah 24:18; Malachi 3:10), while at other times rain is*

*said to come from clouds (Judges 5:4; Proverbs 16:15). For these reasons, the term "cosmology" is likely a bit pretentious for what we are talking about here. This was simply the conceptual furniture of the ancient Israelites, the way the average person thought, and it likely did not occur to them that things might be otherwise.*

*The fact that the narrative is framed in terms of this ancient phenomenological and conventional understanding of the cosmos places some limits on how literally we can interpret at least some of the details of Genesis 1. But it is quite a leap to maintain that the recognition of this ancient cosmology somehow undermines the Evangelical and Reformed doctrine of Scripture. That the narrative in Genesis 1 is framed in terms that would be understandable to the original audience rather than in a modern scientific idiom hardly means that the text is teaching the truth of that ancient phenomenological and conventional cosmology (more about this below).*

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This raises a host of issues:

**i)** Not only is Evans suggesting that the narrator of Genesis 1 “framed” the account in terms of an obsolete cosmology, but that he understood this cosmology to be true, that his audience understood this cosmology to be true, that he therefore intended to convey as a true description of the world what we now know to be false. I don’t see how Evans can salvage an orthodox doctrine of inspiration from that position.

**ii)** He says “it was not a rigorously systematized understanding,” noting the alternation between rain from clouds and rain from the “windows of heaven”—fed by a cosmic sea. But doesn’t this invite the explanation that rain clouds” were understood literally whereas “windows of heaven” (fed by a cosmic sea) were understood figuratively?

**iii)** He seems to use “phenomenological” as synonym for figurative or nonliteral. If so, that’s incorrect. Take the phenomenological description of the Ascension in Acts 1:9-11. That’s narrated in observational language, from the perspective of ground-based eyewitnesses. Yet that hardly renders it figurative. For that’s how a ground-based observer would actually perceive the Ascension. That’s how a real event like the Ascension would appear to him, from his vantage point.

To be sure, that’s relative. If you saw the Ascension from a helicopter, that would be a different perspective on same event. But both phenomenological descriptions would be “literal” or representational.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), Evans says “This understanding of the world is phenomenological (the way the world appears to those unencumbered by knowledge of modern science)...” But 2nd millennium AD observers inhabit the same

“phenomenological” world as 2nd millennium BC observers. The sensible world appears the same way to us as it did to them. Our scientific knowledge doesn’t change appearances. It doesn’t alter our sensory perception of the world, or the perspective of a ground-based observer. We may interpret the sense data differently, but the sense data remain the same.

**v)** Likewise, in relation to a ground-based observer, we perceive the sky higher than the surface of the earth, while lakes, oceans, &c. seem lower than the surface of the earth—because that’s really the case. Take someone who goes to Jacob’s well. The well water seems to be lower than ground level because it really is. There’s nothing unscientific about that perspective. Likewise, take a fisherman on the sea of Galilee. The lake seems lower (or deeper) than ground level because it really is. There’s nothing unscientific about that perspective.

By the same token, when birds fly in the air, over our heads, they really are above us. That’s not figurative.

**vi)** Evans says “This was simply the conceptual furniture of the ancient Israelites, the way the average person thought, and it likely did not occur to them that things might be otherwise.”

Is that true? Think about that for a moment. Imagine yourself in the situation of an ancient Near Easterner. You can see storm clouds precipitate rain and hail.

Conversely, if the world was basically a closed-system, like a fish tank, then wouldn’t the water table continue to rise after every heavy rain? Wouldn’t coastal flooding be permanent? Wouldn’t “groundwater” rise to the surface over time?

Likewise, you'd have occasion to climb the local hills or mountains. Once you got to the summit you could see for yourself that a solid dome of the sky didn't rest on the tops of the hills or mountains—like pillars supporting a roof. The air on the mountaintop wasn't enclosed by a "hard vault."

If the celestial luminaries were embedded in a hard vault, how would an ancient observer account for sidereal motion, synodic motion, or even retrograde motion?

**vii)** It's unclear how Evans relates the "phenomenological" category to the "conventional" category. Does the conventional idiom codify the phenomenological perspective? Or is he setting "conventions" in some sort of contrast to phenomena?

**viii)** For instance, Gregory Beale take the position that the "triple-decker" universe is a conventional architectural metaphor. Bible writers depict the world as a building to foreshadow the tabernacle and backshadow the cosmic temple. Cf. **THE EROSION OF INERRANCY IN EVANGELICALISM** (Crossway, 2008), chaps. 6-7.

On that interpretation, this is consciously figurative or analogical. The narrator intentionally compares the physical world to a building to trade on connotations with sacred space. That would also account for the "lights" on day 4, which prefigure and parallel the lamps in the tabernacle. Cf. W. Vogels, "**THE CULTIC AND CIVIL CALENDARS OF THE FOURTH DAY OF CREATION (GEN 1,14B)**," SJOT 11 (1997), 175.

**ix)** Apropos (viii), is *raqia* a "hard vault"? That's disputed. For instance, Victor Hamilton, in his standard commentary,

argues otherwise. Cf. **THE BOOK OF GENESIS: CHAPTERS 1-17** (Eerdmans, 1991), 122.

But even if that's the imagery which the term conjures up, this doesn't necessarily mean the narrator thought the sky was actually a solid dome. Rather, he may be using architectural imagery to foreshadow the tabernacle. An intertextual Pentateuchal parallel.

**x)** Appealing to other ANE literature merely pushes the same interpretive questions back a step.

**xi)** It's unfortunate that Evans uncritically cites two articles by Paul Seely without addressing the counterevidence. Cf. Noel K. Weeks, "**COSMOLOGY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**," WTJ 68.2 (Fall 2006): 283-293; V. Poythress, **REDEEMING SCIENCE** (Crossway, 2006), 96n8.

He quotes a statement by A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield:

*They are written in human languages, whose words, inflection, constructions, and idioms bear everywhere indelible traces of human error. The record itself furnishes evidence that the writers were in large measure dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible, and that their personal knowledge and judgments were*



*in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong.*

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But this is odd. For idiomatic usage is normally understood to be idiomatic (i.e. a figure of speech) by a native speaker and his target audience. So how would that indicate an erroneous conception?

The biblical authors wrote to an audience that knew what things like trees and clouds and the Euphrates River were, and they expected readers to use that background of knowledge in the interpretation of the biblical text. In fact, we cannot begin to interpret any text, let alone the Scriptural text, apart from the matrix of knowledge and experience that we possess (most of which is not derived from Scripture).

But there's a difference between what constituted background information for the narrator and his target audience over against what may constitute background information for a modern reader. It would be anachronistic to reinterpret Gen 1 in light of modern science.

## The resurrected saints

Licona's discussion assumes that this incident (Mt 27:52-53) presents unusual difficulties if taken literally. I myself don't find anything notably problematic about this incident. It's a rather enigmatic event because Matthew only gives the reader a thumbnail sketch of what happened. As such, he leaves our idle curiosity unsatisfied. We'd like to know more. But that's often the case.

I expect his brevity is due in part to the fact that he's writing to contemporaries, some of whom would be in a position to fill in the blanks. He refers to this incident in passing because it would be familiar to some of his readers. Some of them were in Jerusalem at the time. They have inside knowledge. That can be frustrating to a modern reader, who isn't privy to the same background information.

The account itself makes perfect sense in Matthew's narrative theology. The resurrection of Christ lays the foundation for the resurrection of the just. And the resurrection of this subset of the just is a pledge of things to come. It graphically grounds the resurrection of the just in the resurrection of Christ. Connecting the past and the future is a cause/effect relation, with a linking event in the then-present.

It's an amazing event, but no more so than any other miracles in Matthew's gospel.

On 185-86 of his book, Licona uses the word "legend." Needless to say, "Legend" is a hot-button word. But in context, I don't think Licona was classifying the Matthean pericope as a legend. Rather, that's part of his inference-to-the-best explanation methodology. He's listing a range of

logically possible options; then, by process of elimination, zeroing in on the most probable explanation. He mentions the “legendary” explanation to eliminate that alternative as a less likely explanation.

You test the “Resurrection hypothesis” against competing hypotheses, based on 5 criteria. The hypothesis which meets all five criteria, or comes the closest, is the preferred hypothesis.

Mind you, I personally cringe at this way of framing the debate. It also depends on whether this is simply an apologetic strategy, or a genuinely open-ended dialogue.

Via Raymond Brown, Licona cites descriptions from Plutarch, Ovid, Virgil, and Pliny that are allegedly similar to the Matthean pericope. On the next page, he also cites Lucian and Dio Cassius. However, this raises two questions:

**i)** What is the genre of these sources? How does that compare with the genre of Matthew?

**ii)** How relevant are these Gentile writers to Matthew? He’s a Jew, and he’s writing for the benefit of Jews. So it’s not like audience adaptation for Gentile readers.

Licona also cites Josephus. However, he says:

***Josephus reports that even the strangest of these things actually happened (550).***

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But assuming that Josephus is relevantly parallel to Matthew, wouldn’t this imply that Matthew, too, reports the

resurrection of the saints as an actual event?

Licona then shifts to eschatological imagery in the OT prophets. Here he's on somewhat firmer footing. However, this raises additional questions:

**i)** Sometimes OT prophets employ stock imagery. But at other times they employ literal imagery. Licona needs to establish, in any given case, whether an OT prophet is speaking literally or figuratively.

**ii)** Even if an OT prophet is using figurative imagery, you must still identify the literal, real-world referent of that metaphor. What event does the metaphor stand for?

**iii)** In addition, is Licona saying that Matthew is alluding to these passages? That this is the background material for the Good Friday "effects"? Or is he just treating this as generic, free-floating imagery. It makes a difference in terms of how Matthew understood his own account.

Licona also cites OT seismic and resurrection passages. But this raises the same questions:

The fact that a NT account may have OT precedent doesn't imply that the NT account is a poetic device. In a prophecy/fulfillment scheme, we'd expect the OT prophecy to correspond to a future event. Even if the prophetic imagery is figurative, it will still have a real-world analogue. There must be some concrete correlation.

Licona says:

*Matthew adds that they did not come out of their tombs until after Jesus' resurrection. What were they doing between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning? (552).*

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**i)** But that's a disappointing objection. To begin with, he footnotes Crossan and Borg to support that objection. But they are hardly reliable. Both of them automatically discount the supernatural.

**ii)** In addition, the syntax of the Greek sentence is ambiguous. It can be rendered in more than one way. And that affects the sequence of events. Surely Licona is aware of that fact. Cf. J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2005), 1215-16.

Recently, Licona has modified his previous position:

*Although additional research certainly remains, at present I am just as inclined to understand the narrative of the raised saints in Matthew 27 as a report of a factual (i.e., literal) event as I am to view it as an apocalyptic symbol. It may also be a report of a real event described partially in apocalyptic terms.*

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<http://deeperwaters.wordpress.com/2011/09/08/mike-licona-replies/>

To say the account is a real event partially depicted in apocalyptic terms is a more defensible alternative.

In his book, Licona says:

*During the past three years, I have attempted to divest myself of preconditioning and have worked toward experiencing empathy when reading the works of those with whom I do not agree...I have been able to experience what I believe was a neutral position for a number of brief periods. During these, I have been so uncertain of what I believe in terms of Jesus' resurrection that I prayed for God's guidance and continued patience if the Christianity I was now doubting is true. I was walking on a balance beam and could have tipped toward either side...I am doubtful that I will conclude that the resurrection of Jesus did not occur. However, I believe myself very open to the possibility that the historical evidence for the event is*

*not strong enough to place the resurrection hypothesis far enough along on my spectrum of historical certainty to warrant a conclusion of “historical.” ...I am convinced that my interest in truth supersedes my fear of embarrassment and disappointment (131-132).*

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This raises a number of issues:

**i)** Apparently, Licona precipitated a crisis of faith by bracketing or suspending his Christian commitments. Putting his faith on hold while he tried to give the other side a fair hearing. Truly assuming the viewpoint of the other side. Not just for the sake of argument.

On this methodology, no position has a head-start. You identify with each position, making each position your own.

**ii)** That goes far beyond critical sympathy. And it betrays a basic flaw in his methodology. For one thing, he collapses the distinction between what is historical and what is demonstrable. Even if you couldn't prove the historicity of the resurrection using his 5-point criteria, or inference-to-the-best explanation, that simply reflects the limitations of proof.

For instance, most things that happen in history go unreported. In that respect, we can never prove they happened. Yet it would be irrational to doubt that many things have happened, for which we have no record. No specific evidence.

**iii)** In addition, I understand that in apologetics we often cite corroborative evidence for Scripture rather than using Scripture itself as evidence. But Scripture ought to be evidentiary to a Christian, even if that's not evidentiary to an unbeliever. It should count for Christians, even if it doesn't count for unbelievers.

**iv)** This also exposes the weakness of a top-heavy apologetic, where the Resurrection is the lynchpin for everything else we believe. On that model, the evidence for the Christian faith is only as good as the evidence for the Resurrection. But that's terribly myopic.

**v)** On a related note, Licona needs to shift to a more holistic religious epistemology, like Newman's illative sense and Polanyi's tacit knowledge. It's often impossible to retrace all the lines of evidence for what we believe. Impossible to explicate all our reasons in a formal argument. Human experience operates at a more subtle, elusive level.

**vi)** By the same token, even the "right" methodology won't immunize us from possible doubt. An apologetic method (be it evidentialism or presuppositionalism) is no substitute for faith. An apologetic method can't be the source of faith. The aquifer must lie elsewhere, and deeper.

**vii)** One source of doubt is the failure to think through an issue. However, an opposite source of doubt is to overthink an issue. The paralysis of analysis. Indeed, philosophers are notorious for doubting the indubitable.

It's possible to work yourself into an artificial state of doubt by staring at the same "problem" all the time. So it's



important to strike a balance. Sometimes we just need to take a break. Get some fresh air.

**viii)** On a related note, Christian apologists aren't disembodied minds. Their faith can be affected by their moods, and their moods can be affected by what's going on in their life. The aging process. A marriage going through a dry spell. Regrets and disappointments. A death in the family. Lost opportunities. Unanswered prayer. The wear and tear of life in a fallen world.

And there's no guarantee in life that you will find your way out of the tunnel in this life. Some Christians may die depressed.

**viii)** It can also be a problem if we only read the Bible to defend the Bible rather than reading the Bible to water our soul.

**ix)** The notion of disinterested commitment to truth for truth's sake, just pursuing the truth wherever it takes you, sounds very pure and noble. But it's actually quite shortsighted. Naively idealistic.

What if following the evidence wherever it leads you ends up leading you into a blind alley? What if pursuing the truth wherever it takes you is a trip to nihilism?

Are you getting closer to the truth, or farther away? Truth is only a value in a worldview that values truth. If, in your disinterested pursuit of truth, you wind up leaving truth behind as you hurtle headfirst into nihilism, then there's nothing very truth-affirming about the conclusion.

Seems to me that Licona fails to appreciate the stark alternatives. What if going wherever the evidence leads you

is a one-way ticket to nowhere? Are you really making progress? Or do you find yourself out of gas, out of water, in the middle of the desert? A no-man's-land with no way forward and no way back?

Mind you, I don't think the evidence points away from Scripture. But even if it appeared to do so, that doesn't mean the "truth is out there," in some alternative to Christianity.

## Hear the word of the Lord

One popular apologetic strategy is to bracket inspiration by simply treating the Bible as a primary historical source. Having established his claims on this basis, the apologist may then circle back and discuss the evidence for the inspiration of Scripture.

The potential justification for this strategy is that our apologist is meeting the unbeliever on his own grounds. Holding the unbeliever to his own standards. After all, an atheist doesn't think any document is divinely inspired, yet he thinks many uninspired documents are sufficient to establish factual claims. Therefore, it's petty for him to hold Scripture to a higher standard. That's a double standard. That's a stalling tactic. Trying to force the apologist to prove the stronger claim when a weaker claim will do.

I'm not crazy about this method myself, but an apologetic strategy or methodology is just a means to an end, not an end in itself, so that's not a hill to die on. And there's some merit in measuring the atheist by his own yardstick.

That said, there are moderate to liberal professing believers who never take the next step. They think you can skip inspiration altogether. But there are fundamental problems with this terminus.

There's a basic tension in treating the Bible as a naturalistic document which bears witness to supernatural events. Can we still believe in a God acts in history even though he doesn't speak in history? A mute God? A God who expresses himself in the historical process, but doesn't express himself in language?

That's a pretty arbitrary dichotomy. It combines a theistic view of redemption with a deistic view of revelation. A God who, figuratively speaking, uses his hands and feet, but not his lips.

In Scripture we're told far more often to "hear the word of the Lord" than we are to see the works of the Lord. Both are important—even complementary. But certainly divine speech is not expendable.

## Bowdlerizing the Bible

Rauser offers a selective, deflective response:

<http://randalrauser.com/2011/08/if-the-bible-is-not-a-childrens-book-then-why-do-we-have-childrens-bibles/>

*Steve Hays of Triablogue wrote a response to my discussion of teaching biblical genocide to children called “Scout’s Honor!” It includes all the hallmarks of Hays’s critical analysis (or lack thereof) including the claim that I accept the UN as my “moral authority”. (How’s that supposed to work exactly?! “Hmm, has the UN addressed whether I can cheat on my taxes? No? Then I guess I’m good to go!”)*

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He took the position that the UN trumps the Bible on POWs.

*So how does Hays explain the fact that the market is flooded with “children’s Bibles” which include the R-rated bits but attempt to obscure the horror with*

## ***things like talking parrots? Isn't his quibble with Zondervan rather than me?***

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**i)** I don't have to explain that fact since that does nothing to refute my contention. That does nothing to show that I'm either inconsistent or mistaken. That's a red herring.

I assume children's Bibles are published because there's a market for that demographic niche. It's profitable.

**ii)** Moreover, his counterexample makes no sense even on his own terms since he immediately qualifies his counterexample by saying children's Bibles present a bowdlerized version of events. But if that's the case, then publishers don't think everything in Scripture is suitable for children. They don't give kids the straight skinny.

**iii)** Does Rauser think the Bible was written to or for children? Does he think Romans was addressed to 5-year-old? Was Hebrews, Lamentations, or the Song of Solomon written for children? Was that the implied reader? Is that the intended audience?

***And the fact is that kids in Sunday school are fed all sorts of R-rated Bible stories. It is just that they are airbrushed to the point of egregious distortion. The drowning of millions of people and animals in a mass flood becomes a playful bedtime story in which animals***

*march onto a big boat two by two, driven by a jovial Santa Claus with sandals and staff. David killing and decapitating Goliath becomes the equivalent of giving the bully a knockout punch at the bike racks. The genocide of Jericho is taught with a joyful ditty that makes it sound like we're cheering on our favorite basketball team: "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho...." And all depictions of the atonement — understood as a human sacrifice to appease the wrathful deity — is rendered as bloodless as the death of Aslan in a certain big budget, family friendly film.*

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So how does that disprove my point?

*I can understand that Hays would think these are not age appropriate stories. So does he believe we shouldn't teach children about Noah and the flood, David and Goliath, Joshua and Jericho or Jesus and the cross?*

*And if you think we should teach these stories, how do you do so in a way that is age appropriate without hopelessly distorting the R-rated realities that they convey?*

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**i)** I didn't single out any particular instance. I merely made a general observation. If you want some concrete examples, I don't think children need to read stories about incest (Gen 19:30-38), prostitution (Gen 38), dismemberment and gang-rape (Judges 19), or war brides (Deut 21:10-14).

That's not because it's wrong for the Bible to record these incidents or have regulations mitigating the fate of wartime widows. But it's not relevant to children. It's not something they need to know about.

**ii)** As to what's appropriate, I'd draw a broad distinction between boys and girls. As a boy, I used to play cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians—with other boys. We had toy cap guns. But what's suitable for boys might not be suitable for the average girl (unless she's a Tomboy).

Of course, given his radical chic ideology, Rauser would probably disagree. If he fathered a son, Rauser might wait to let his son choose his/her gender—or transgender. Dress him in a frilly pink skirt. Let him play with dolls instead of cap guns.

Speaking for myself, both boys and girls should be taught the metanarrative of Scripture. Both boys and girls should learn about the life of Christ—including the Crucifixion.



Children have an instinctive understanding of penal substitution. Indeed, they grasp that better than Bible-haters like Randal Rauser, Thom Stark, James McGrath et al.

In the meantime, Rauser dodges the larger issue I raised. Why does he believe in God if Yahweh is unbelievable? Why not be an atheist?

When the Bible attributes something to God that Rauser finds too repugnant to believe, he relegates that story to the realm of fiction. That never happened. Whew! What a relief!

That's his way of domesticating the Bible. Making it safe for his flower power faith. Insulating his flower power faith from abrasive truths. So he has his own way of bowdlerizing the Bible.

Yet all sorts of equally horrible things happen outside the Bible. And unlike the Bible, he doesn't have the luxury of salvaging God's reputation by relegating these events to the realm of fiction.

He doesn't believe any children really perished in Noah's flood. That's fictitious. Yet he believes many children perish in coastal flooding from tsunamis.

He doesn't believe women and children really died in Jericho, or Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet he believes real women and children die in aerial bombardments.

Why is God believable outside the Bible, but unbelievable inside the Bible?

## Scout's honor!

### *How do you teach God's genocide to children?*

*In this "classic post" from my CP days I explore the thorny issue of how Christians introduce the darker parts of the biblical narrative — in particular the Joshua genocide — to a young readership. The answer seems to be: not very well.*

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<http://randalrauser.com/2011/08/how-do-you-teach-gods-genocide-to-children/>

- i)** To begin with, the Bible is not a children's' book. The Bible wasn't written to or for children. Not everything in Scripture is age-appropriate for children.
- ii)** The laws of warfare in Deut 20 were not a search-and-destroy mission. Israel was not commanded to pursue the Canaanites beyond the borders of the Holy Land.
- iii)** When Rauser turns his back on the word of God, he must reenter the world of God. Beyond the "darker parts" of Bible are the "darker parts" of the world.

How does he teach childhood leukemia to his 9-year-old daughter? How does he teach her that some kids are raped and murdered? That some kids live on the streets of Russia, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Ethiopia, the Philippines, etc.? That some kids starve to death? That some kids die in war?

Liberals like Rauser have this strangely compartmentalized faith, where they reject the God of the Bible, but accept the God of the world. Yet you can parallel every terrible thing that happens in Scripture with something terrible outside of Scripture. That ultimately lands on God's doorstep.

If theodicy is adequate to address terrible things that happen in the world, then theodicy is adequate to address terrible things than happen in the Bible. (Not that I think God's commands are evil.)

***But then it gets worse, for if the city refuses to surrender to the Israelites, all the men are to be slaughtered (v. 13), a practice condemned by the Third Geneva Convention and universally renounced by civilized nations today.***

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Rauser rejects the Bible as his moral authority, but he accepts the UN as his moral authority. The UN is such a beacon of idealism and virtue, you know.

It's easy for someone living on a nice island like New Zealand to feign outrage at Deut 20:13. He makes no effort to project himself into the situation of ancient Israelites. Does he think the Israelites should send the Canaanite soldiers home after defeating them in battle? Where does he think they'd go?

Does he envision Canaanite soldiers promising ("Scout's honor!") not to attack the Israelites after they had a chance to regroup?

## Trust & Obey

*My unqualified condemnation of those who bludgeoned babies to death in Rwanda is rooted in a belief that you ought never ever bludgeon babies (NEBB). NEBB is not only a basic belief, it is as indubitable as any belief I have (and more indubitable than most). Though I am not clear on the mode by which I know NEBB, fortunately I need not know how I know to know that I know. It may be that I know NEBB as an immediate intuition,<sup>25</sup> or perhaps I know it by a faculty of moral perception that parallels sense perception.*

*In this paper I have argued that genocide is always a moral atrocity from which it follows that if Yahweh is God then Yahweh did not command the Canaanite genocide. To this end I critiqued four arguments Paul Copan uses to justify the genocide while providing four counter arguments against the possibility of divinely mandated genocide. While this may not yet tell us how we should respond to biblical narratives of divinely sanctioned violence, at the very least it will save Christians from the sorry spectacle of attempting to convince ourselves*

*and others of that which everybody knows cannot be true.*

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<http://randalrauser.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Rauser11.1.pdf>

There are several basic problems with Rauser's claim:

**i)** "Everyone" doesn't know that cannot be true. For starters, the OT writers didn't think divinely commanded "genocide" was "morally atrocious."

And from Rauser's standpoint, it wasn't just OT writers. If, like Rauser, you reject the inspiration of Scripture, then ancient Israelites didn't practice genocide or child sacrifice because the Bible sanctioned that practice; rather, the Bible sanctioned that practice because ancient Israelites practiced genocide and child sacrifice.

(I don't think the Bible sanctions infant sacrifice. I'm merely playing along with Rauser's allegation for the sake of argument.)

On the liberal view of Scripture, which Rauser espouses, the OT merely canonizes the prevailing social mores of the day.

Furthermore, child sacrifice was a common ANE custom. It wasn't just an OT phenomenon.

**ii)** That, however, counts as prima facie evidence against Rauser's appeal to "immediate intuition" or a "faculty of moral perception." For if that's the case, then why wasn't that immediate intuition or moral perception shared by ancient Israel and other ANE civilizations?

Same problem applies to the perpetrators of the Rwandan massacres. I haven't studied the issue, but from my recollection of news coverage at the time of the event, this was on a massive scale.

**iii)** In principle, Rauser could postulate that OT writers, ancient Israelites, and other ancient Near Easterners knew these practices were morally atrocious, and violated their conscience in so doing. And that could be the case.

But unless Rauser has independent evidence for an "immediate intuition" or "faculty of moral perception" according to which genocide and infant sacrifice are morally atrocious, how can he discount the prima facie evidence to the contrary?

What's his evidence for "an immediate intuition" or "faculty of moral perception" that condemns genocide or child sacrifice? He can't appeal to empirical evidence or testimonial evidence, then preemptively discount empirical or testimonial evidence to the contrary without vicious circularity.

**iv)** There is also the dilemma of secular ethics. On the one hand, Rauser is appealing to a free-floating faculty of moral perception or immediate intuition to judge religious ethics, but without a religious grounding for ethics, what does his appeal amount to? Aren't objective moral norms dead in the water apart from God?

**v)** Apropos (iv), the feasible options don't range between secular ethics and religious ethics, but between rival religious ethics. Secular ethics is a nonstarter.

**vi)** Then there's the hypothetical case of an ostensible divine command which might be so repugnant to us that this would call into question the source of the command. However, that raises two additional issues:

**a)** A command might be deliberately repugnant as test of faith. Indeed, that's how many construe the command to sacrifice Isaac.

The test actually involves a counterfactual command, yet its counterfactual status can't be known in advance of the attempted compliance with the command. Only the divine speaker is privy to his ulterior motives. Only by attempting to obey it does the human subject discover that it was just a test. That the command was never in play.

**b)** Or a command might be repugnant to us because we lack sufficient information to appreciate the overriding considerations which justify the command.

For instance, suppose a police captain orders a sharpshooter to kill a baby in a stroller. On the face of it, that's morally atrocious. On the face of it, we'd say the sharpshooter has both the right and the obligation to defy a direct order from his commanding officer in that instance.

But suppose, as it turns out, the baby in the stroller is not a real baby. Suppose it's a dummy, concealing a powerful bomb.

**vii)** Rauser also sidesteps the question of whether the identity of the divine speaker can be known. If so, then his objections are moot.

## Life in the vat

**THE SOURCE CODE** plays on the brain-in-vat scenario.

Characters never show Stevens his true condition. They describe his true condition, but they don't show him because that would be too depressing. Yet in principle, a brain-in-a-vat can see itself. It can't see itself using its own sensory organs. But in the **SOURCE CODE** model, it would be possible to point the camera at the truncated body of Stevens and input that data stream directly into his brain.

And that's analogous to our own sensory self-perception. I look at my hands with my eyes. An external stimulus feeds information into my eyes, which transmits information to the brain and consciousness. In that respect, we're like brains-in-vats, seeing ourselves via a security camera connected to a neurointerface.

But there's a catch. In **SOURCE CODE**, there are characters outside the vat. They can see the vat in the room. They are truly external observers.

By contrast, every human, individually and collectively, is inside the vat. We think we're seeing ourselves as we really are, but there's no objective frame of reference. No third-person perspective.

The only individual who's truly in a position to know what we are really like is God. And God can communicate his perspective to us.

Absent propositional revelation, there's no check on idealism or solipsism. There's no way to lift the veil of



perception. No way to bridge the gap between perception and reality.

## Perception & transcendental theism

Thomas Nagel is a leading secular philosopher. He even admits to having a strong emotional aversion to God's existence. He doesn't want God to exist.

However, unlike many atheists, Nagel is a fairly independent thinker who frankly admits the inadequacies of the standard secular paradigm. For instance:

*For the most creatures, however, objectivity extends no farther than this. Their lives are lived in the world of appearances, and the idea of a more objective reality has no meaning.*

*But once we come to recognize the distinction between appearance and reality and the existence of objective factual or practical truth that goes beyond what perception, appetite and emotion tell us, the ability of creatures like us to arrive at such truth, or even to think about it, requires explanation.*

*The problem has two aspects. The first concerns the likelihood that the process of natural selection should have generated creatures with the capacity to discover by reason the truth about a reality that*

*extends vastly beyond initial appearances—as we take ourselves to have done and to continue to do collectively in science...The second problem is the difficulty of understanding naturalistically the faculty of reason that is the essence of these activities.*

*But whenever we take such a reasonable detached attitude toward our innate dispositions, we are implicitly engaged in a form of thought to which we do not at the same time take that detached attitude. When we rely on systems of measurement to correct perception, or probability calculations to correct intuitive expectations, or moral or prudential reasoning to correct instinctive impulses, we take ourselves to be responding to systematic reasons which in themselves justify our conclusions, and which do not get their authority from their biological organisms. They could not be backed up in that way.*

*In the perceptual case I can recognize that I might be mistaken, but on reflection, even if I think of myself as the product of Darwinian natural selection, I am nevertheless justified in believing the evidence of my senses for the most part, because*

*this is consistent with the hypothesis that an accurate representation of the world around me results from senses shaped by evolution to serve that function. That is not a refutation of radical skepticism, since evolutionary theory, like all of science, depends on the evidence of the senses.*

*This is the second problem: What is the faculty that enables us to escape from the world of appearance presented by our prereflective innate dispositions, into the world of objective reality? And what, besides consciousness, do we have to add to the biological story to make sense of such a faculty?*

*Perception connects us with the truth only indirectly. When I see a tree, I see it because it is there, but not just because it is there. Perception is not a form of insight: I do not grasp the presence of the tree immediately, even though it may seem so prior to reflection. Rather I am aware of it because the tree causes a mental effect in me in virtue of the character of my visual system, which we may suppose has been shaped by natural selection to react in this way to light reflected from physical objects. Having such a system together with other perceptual and motivational dispositions enables*

*me to survive in the world. So it is only in a complicated and indirect sense that when I see a tree, I see it because it is there*

*Mind and Cosmos (Oxford 2012), 73-74,79-80, 82.*

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**i)** Nagel is rehearsing an ancient philosophical conundrum: the hiatus between appearance and reality. And even though he's aware of the difficulty, he understates the difficulty. Having said "I am nevertheless justified in believing the evidence of my senses for the most part, because this is consistent with the hypothesis that an accurate representation of the world around me results from senses shaped by evolution to serve that function," he admits that this "is not a refutation of radical skepticism, since evolutionary theory, like all of science, depends on the evidence of the senses." So his appeal is circular.

**ii)** In addition, when he appeals to "senses shaped by evolution to serve that function," that is contrary to naturalistic evolution. He's offering a teleological description, but if naturalistic evolution is true, then evolution didn't shape our senses to serve *any* function.

Quine has made similar observations. For instance:

*It would address the question of how we, physical denizens of the physical world, can have projected our scientific theory of that whole world from our meager contacts with it; from the mere impacts of*

*rays and particles on our surfaces and a few odds and ends such as the strain of walking uphill. From Stimulus to Science (Harvard 1999), ibid. 16.*

*There is a puzzle here. Global stimuli are private: each is a temporally ordered set of some one individual's receptors. Their perceptual similarity, in part innate and in part modeled by experience, is private as well. Whence then this coordination of behavior across the tribe? ibid. 20.*

*The sensory atomist was motivated, I say, by his appreciation that any information about the world is channeled to us through the sensory surfaces of our bodies; but this motivation remained obscure to him. It was obscured by his concern to justify our knowledge of the external world. The justification would be vitiated by circularity if sensory surfaces and external impacts on nerve endings had to be appealed to at the outset of the justification. Confessions of a Confirmed Extensionist and Other Essays (Harvard 2008), 328.*

*There is much clarity to be gained by dropping the project of justifying our knowledge of the external world but continuing to investigate the relation of*

that knowledge to its sensory evidence. Obscurity about the nature of the given, or epistemic priority, is then dissipated by talking frankly of the triggering of nerve endings. We then find ourselves engaged in an internal question within the framework of natural science. There are these impacts of molecules and light rays upon our sensory receptors, and there is all this output on our part of scientific discourse about sticks, stones, planets, numbers, molecules, light rays, and, indeed, sensory receptors; and then we pose the problem of linking that input causally and logically to that output, *ibid.* 328.

Much as I admire [David] Lewis's reduction, however, it is not for me. My own line is a yet more sweeping structuralism, applying to concrete and abstract objects indiscriminately. I base it, paradoxically as this may seem, on a naturalistic approach to epistemology. Natural science tells us that our ongoing cognitive access to the world around us is limited to meager channels. There is the triggering of our sensory receptors by the impact of molecules and light rays. Also there is the difference in muscular effort sensed in walking up

*or down hill. What more? Even the notion of a cat, let alone a class or number, is a human artifact, rooted in innate predisposition and cultural tradition. The very notion of an object at all, concrete or abstract, is a human contribution, a feature of our inherited apparatus for organizing the amorphous welter of neural input, ibid. 402-03.*

*The conclusion is that there can be no evidence for one ontology as over against another, so long anyway as we can express a one-to-one correlation between them. Save the structure and you save all. Certainly we are dependent on a familiar ontology of middle-sized bodies for the inception of reification, on the part both of the individual and of the race; but once we have an ontology, we can change it with impunity, ibid, 405.*

*This global ontological structuralism may seem abruptly at odds with realism, let alone naturalism. It would seem even to undermine the ground on which I rested it: my talk of impacts of light rays and molecules on nerve endings. Are these rays, molecules, and nerve endings themselves not disqualified now as mere figments of an empty structure? ibid. 405.*



*Naturalism itself is what saves the situation. Naturalism looks only to natural science, however, fallible, for an account of what there is and what what there is does. Science ventures its tentative answers in man-made concepts, perforce, couched in man-made language, but we can ask no better. The very notion of object, or of one and many, is indeed as parochially human as the parts of speech; to ask what reality is really like, however, apart from human categories, is self-stultifying. It is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from parochial matters of miles or meters. Positivists were right in branding such metaphysics as meaningless, *ibid.* 405.*

*So far as evidence goes, then, our ontology is neutral. Nor let us imagine beyond it some inaccessible reality. The very terms 'thing' and 'exist' and 'real,' after all, make no sense apart from human conceptualization. Asking after the thing in itself apart from human conceptualization, is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from our parochial miles or kilometers. *ibid.*, 416.*

*So it seems best for present purposes to construe the subject's stimulus on a given occasion simply as*

*his global neural intake on that occasion. But I shall refer to it only as neural intake, not stimulus, for other notions of stimulus are wanted in other studies, particularly where different subjects are to get the same stimulus. Neural intake is private, for subjects do not share receptors, ibid. 463-64.*

*But in contrast to the privacy of neural intakes, and the privacy of their perceptual similarity, observation sentences and their semantics are a public matter, since the child has to learn these from her elders. Her learning then depends indeed both on the public currency of the observation sentences and on a preestablished harmony of people's private scales of perceptual similarity, ibid. 464.*

*These reflections on ontology are a salutary reminder that the ultimate data of science are limited to our neural intake, and that the very notion of object, concrete or abstract, is of our own making, along with the rest of natural science and mathematics, ibid. 471.*

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**i)** That's the dilemma. How does the mind escape the world of appearances to come into contact with objective reality?

How does appearance map onto reality?

**ii)** Science tries to present an objective, third-person description of the world. But science must rely on the subjective, first-person viewpoint of the human observer. How can science bootstrap an objective understanding from the “meager input” of our sensory receptors? How can science reliably extrapolate from “impacts of light rays and molecules on our sensory surfaces or nerve endings” to a global depiction of the outside world? Indeed, even talk of nerve endings and sensory receptors depends on the realm of appearance. On how our body appears to us. For instance, we have to use our eyes to see our eyes. If we see our eyes through our eyes, what are we really looking at? So the appeal is circular.

At this level we can't directly appeal to other observers to corroborate our own perceptions, for they are in the same boat—and, in any case, our knowledge of other observers is filtered through our own perceptions.

**iii)** Here is where transcendental theism can break into the circle. Let's begin by defining a transcendental argument:

*As standardly conceived, transcendental arguments are taken to be distinctive in involving a certain sort of claim, namely that X is a necessary condition for the possibility of Y—where then, given that Y is the case, it logically follows that X must be the case too.*

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<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendental-arguments/>

**iv)** So, for instance, if God designed our sensory perceptual system, and if that's preadapted to our physical environment, which God also designed, then our senses are generally reliable to perform what they were designed to do.

**v)** That, itself, is a fairly modest claim. It doesn't tell you in advance what they were designed to do. It doesn't specify the scope of their reliability. In principle, this is consistent with anything from direct realism through indirect realism and phenomenalism to idealism.

**vi)** It does, however, *ground* the reliability of sensory perception in a way that atheism cannot. The senses are trustworthy when we use them to do whatever they were designed to do.

**vii)** That's an argument from creation and providence. But there's also an argument from revelation. If the Bible is divine revelation, then there's a sense in which the Bible gives us a second pair of eyes. A God's-eye view of the world. God's knowledge of the world doesn't arise from the world of the senses.

We can't get outside ourselves. We can't access the world behind the senses. But God's viewpoint is truly external.

**viii)** Of course, God speaks to us in sensory language. Revealed truths assume an analogy between appearance and reality. They overlap at the relevant point of comparison. Even if our mental representation of the world were a metaphor, metaphors convey knowledge.

Indeed, God created that analogical correspondence. That's why he can use this medium to reveal truths about the physical world, truths about history, truths about the past and the future.

**ix)** Now this kind of argument admittedly has a limitation. Transcendental arguments must begin from some starting-point or another. If an atheist rejects the starting-point, then the argument will be ineffective. If we grant Y, and X is a necessary condition of Y, then that commits us to X—but what if we don't grant the premise?

**x)** So this has the limitations of any conditional or hypothetical argument. But that doesn't make it a flawed argument. Persuasion is not the only aim of argumentation. We may use an argument to expose the cost of atheism. What price is the atheist prepared to pay to maintain his atheism? Will he commit intellectual suicide?

We're pushing the atheist. Pushing him to the ledge. We can't stop him from jumping, but that will betray the defiant irrationality of the atheist. In order to deny God, he must deny himself. The price of hating God is self-hatred.

**xi)** This also has implications for the relationship between philosophy and theology, general and special revelation. On one model, special revelation is subordinate to general revelation. You must begin with general revelation. And that, in turn, will adjudicate special revelatory claimants.

But on the model I'm proposing, we need special revelation to ratify our knowledge of the external world. Appeal to general revelation assumes the reliability of sensory perception (as well as reason and memory). But unless God vouches for sense knowledge, unless we have that external

check on our private perceptions, there's no overriding reason to trust our senses.

So the relationship between general and special revelation is dialectical. Mutually validating. Without general revelation, special revelation is blind; without special revelation, general revelation is lost.

Consider psychotics. They may have acute hearing and 20/20 vision. But it makes no difference, for they are trapped in the prison of the mind.

To be lost inside your own mind is far more terrifying than if you lose your way in the woods. In a godless world, that's our fate.

## Words of light and life

The following is a partial transcript that Annoyed Pinoy typed up of William Lane Craig's podcast entitled "What Is Inerrancy?"

**Harris:** *The debate often centers on Inerrancy with skeptics of the Christian faith and those who are considering [it]...I've seen it go round for years and years just on Inerrancy and that often detracts from the \*person\* of Christ.*

**Craig:** *Yeah, I think that's just a huge mistake, Kevin. Because now, what you're trying to make the focus of your evangelism is \*Inerrancy\* rather than \*Christ\*...as you say. It's \*Christ\* that is the center of the Gospel. And so, \*He\* ought to be the stumbling stone. Not the doctrine of Inerrancy. Inerrancy is an in-house debate for someone who is already a Christian.*

**Harris:** *Okay, alright.*

**Craig:** *It's an in-house argument about what corollaries are there to the concept of inspiration.*

**Harris:** Now that is very important because, again, you can go off on a rabbit trail for years with a person on Inerrancy. And, again, to detract you from [what Kevin says is garbled but he seems to say "the central truths of the gospel."]

**Craig:** It would actually...here's the...here's the serious [thing]...it would keep people from salvation. Which is just horrible. If people have to jump through the hoops of Biblical Inerrancy in order to become a Christian...you will actually prevent people from coming to know Christ. By forcing the unbeliever to embrace this belief in order to be saved."

[www.rfmedia.org/RF\\_audio\\_video/RF\\_podcast/What\\_is\\_Inerrancy\\_.mp3](http://www.rfmedia.org/RF_audio_video/RF_podcast/What_is_Inerrancy_.mp3)

**1.** It sounds very pious to say, in the abstract, that we should focus on Christ rather than inerrancy, but what does that really mean? We don't have Jesus apart from Scripture. We don't have independent access to the words and deeds of Jesus.

So *who* are people coming to? Do we *have* the words of Jesus?

Jesus doesn't speak to us directly. Rather, he speaks *through* others. We have *reported* words of Jesus.

Did Jesus *really* say, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live," or



is that one of those “in-house” debates?

Do we *have* the deeds of Jesus? We have *reported* deeds of Jesus. Jesus’ reported statement to Mary is embedded in a story. But did Jesus *really* raise Lazarus from the dead? Or is that one of those “in-house” debates?

The words and deeds of Jesus go together. But if the record of his words and deeds is errant, then maybe Jesus didn’t raise Lazarus from the dead. Then maybe Jesus didn’t say, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”

**2.** Did Jesus really appear to Paul on the Damascus road, or is that one of those “in-house” debates? Did God really call Abraham out of Ur, and make a covenant with Abraham—to bless all nations? Did Isaiah really see into the future? Did the Apostle John really see into heaven? Are these merely “in-house” debates? Are these peripheral to the Christian faith?

**3.** Is it appropriate to tell God, “Take a little piece of paper and write down in two or three sentences the bare minimum I need to believe to avoid going to hell. Then shut up! That’s all I want to hear!”

What kind of attitude is that? It’s not as if we’re only obligated to believe some “saving” truths. Rather, we’re obligated to believe whatever God tells us.

And we should believe *what* he says because of *who* he is. That’s the main thing. To believe the word of God because we believe the God of the word. For if we didn’t believe in God, there would be no reason to believe in his word.

That's the problem with this grudging, nominal approach. If people can't bring themselves to believe whatever God *tells* them, then they don't really believe in *God*.

We trust what he says because we trust him. We take God at his word because he is truthful and trustworthy.

If you don't have *that*, what *do* you have? What's left?

Notice how Craig treats the word of God like a yoke. We mustn't burden unbelievers by "forcing" them to take God at his word.

What a thankless attitude! Shouldn't we view the word of God as a blessing rather than a burden? A light in the darkness? Something that frees us, not shackles us? An object of gratitude rather than resentment?

The word of God is a priceless gift to lost sinners. How can Craig possibly say that having to believe the word of God is a hindrance to salvation? What a perverse thing to say! You might as well say fresh water is hazardous to a man stranded in the desert.

The word of God is the word of our Father in heaven. The word of God is the word of our Good Shepherd. Words of light and life. Healing words. Words which guide us and guard us on the journey home. What could be more precious? More essential to our wellbeing?

## Ehrman v. Williams rematch

I watched a recent debate between Bart Ehrman and Peter Williams:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF\\_2I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I)

**1.** I think Williams did very well. I agree with everything he said.

There are always missed opportunities in debates like this, in part because the topics keep shifting so that it's impossible to develop a line of thought. Hence, the debater has to make snap judgments about what to discuss. Many worthwhile lines of thought are left out because there's only so much he can discuss within the time constraints.

In addition, debaters play to their areas of strength, so there will be neglected lines of thought since that isn't their forte. Which is why the Christian side needs to be represented by debaters with a variety of skill sets.

Although I watched the whole debate from start to finish, I'm going to focus on Ehrman's presentation.

**2.** Modern readers below a certain age have grown up with televised news coverage. That puts the viewer in a position analogous to an eyewitness.

**i)** When you watch a televised recording of an event, you are not only seeing *what* happened—you are seeing *how* it happened. You're like a firsthand observer at the scene. And, of course, the proliferation of cellphone cameras has made that experience even more ubiquitous.

As such, saturation exposure to televised news coverage may condition or bias the modern reader when he studies biblical narratives. That's an artificial frame of reference to assess written accounts. Historical narratives, whether biblical or extrabiblical, *tell* you what happened rather than *showing* you how it happened.

**ii)** Apropos (i), this means that when attempting to visualize a historical account, the reader must mentally fill in the background details. All he's got is a verbal description. Compared to a televised recording, biblical accounts are very spare.

**3.** Apropos (2), this means that when it comes to historical reconstruction, a reader must use his own imagination to fill out the picture. Of necessity, he is mentally adding details not contained in the account. That's hardly unique to Scripture. That holds true for historical writing generally.

To an unbeliever, Gospel harmonization smacks of special pleading. But the Gospel harmonist isn't doing anything unusual. He isn't switching from one mode of reading the text to another. When he endeavors to harmonize apparent discrepancies, he's using the same approach he uses when reading accounts with no apparent discrepancies.

To a cynical unbeliever, this may appear ad hoc, but when we read historical narratives, and when we attempt to go from *what* happened to *how* it happened, every reader must postulate additional details not contained in the text. So there's nothing essentially sneaky or strained about what Christian readers are doing. That's a perfectly normal and necessary way to process historical narratives, whether or not they exhibit apparent (or real) discrepancies. Ehrman is very naive in that regard (among others).

**4.** Ehrman cites the death of Judas as a showcase example. There are striking differences in how Matthew and Acts report this event. But even in that respect, it's equally striking that both accounts say the death of Judas occurred at the same place (the "Field of Blood"). If, however, these are independent legends, then how do you explain that parallel? It only makes sense if both accounts have a common source in a common event. Judas did indeed die at that location.

**5.** Ehrman makes a big deal about Judas falling "headlong" (in Acts). I think the point Ehrman is driving at is that, from Ehrman's perspective, if Judas hanged himself, his feet would point to the ground, so that if for some reason he fell, he'd maintain the same position on the way down. If he fell feetfirst, the body would land feetfirst rather than headfirst.

But if that's what Ehrman has in mind, notice that both sides are attempting to visualize the logistics of the two accounts. Ehrman, no less than Williams, is postulating conjectural background details to create a mental picture of what the description implies or rules out.

**6.** Suppose Judas hanged himself on the branch of a tree on the ridge of a hill. There's nothing unrealistic about that scenario.

Suppose, in addition, Judas didn't simply fall from the tree. Suppose the rope didn't break from the weight. Rather, what if the body was pulled down.

By what, you ask? What about scavenger dogs? It's not unrealistic to posit scavenger dogs. We know they exist. Packs of dogs on the prowl for carrion. That happens.

If the dogs got on their hind legs, perhaps supported by the tree trunk or the corpse, grabbed the corpse by the armpit, and kept tugging, and if that dislodged the corpse, the corpse wouldn't just fall *down* but fall *over*. It wouldn't fall feetfirst but headfirst. For the very act of pulling it down would reposition the corpse.

(Incidentally, I once saw a nature show in which photographers hung meat from a branch to photograph the reaction of lions. The lions were very persistent in attempting to pull the meat down.)

The only remaining question is if it falls headfirst, does it land headfirst? I'm no expert, but when we watch swimmers highdive (10 meters), they dive headfirst and land headfirst. Their body doesn't change position in mid-fall.

From what I can tell, there's nothing unrealistic about my harmonization. These are things that naturally happen.

Sure, my reconstruction is speculative, but that's true for historical reconstructions in general. Ehrman's objection requires conjectural details to fill in the mental picture. To have a complete mental image of what the description implies or rules out, the reader must do that. And that's germane to so many of Ehrman's list of "contradictions."

## **7. Some other scenarios:**

**i)** Suppose you have a corpse that falls from a hilltop. The slope of a hill means that it's narrower on top but spreads out further down. Depending on the slope, a body could tumble down a hill. It's in one position when it begins the descent, but rolls over and over, picking up speed on the

way down. It's in a different position when it reaches bottom.

**ii)** Or a corpse might begin the descent feetfirst in freefall for several yards, then strike the side of the hill one or more times. Bouncing off the hillside repositions the body.

There's nothing ingenious about these explanations. They're realistic, commonplace scenarios.

**8.** One problem with how he dismisses corroborative evidence Williams marshals for the historical accuracy of the Gospels is that Ehrman has backed himself into a position that he can't credit the historicity of the Gospels even if they *are* historically accurate. As Williams pointed out:

*In order get the story wrong you'd have to have a different mechanism of information—so it's like they've gone to the effort of doing research to get all the context right and then you're going to say they were casual about the stories; and for that you need to have some sort of system of selective corruption of information that corrupts the most important stuff and leaves all the trivial stuff in place.*

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**9.** Ehrman rattles off names like Milman Parry and Albert Lord to demonstrate that oral tradition undergoes creative

change.

**i)** But a problem with his comparison is that scholars like Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and John Miles Foley were examining the role of creative change in epic poetry. Yet the fact that epic poetry may undergo significant change in the process of transmission from one bard to another is not directly comparable to historical narratives. He's drawing fallacious extrapolations from one genre to a very different kind of genre.

**ii)** In addition, it's demonstrably false that oral tradition can't preserve factual information intact:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-longevity-of-oral-history.html>

**10.** Ehrman posits that the sources for the Gospels passed by word-of-mouth through many links before the authors wrote down the latest oral traditions. But there's no presumption that that's the case.

If, however, traditional authorship is correct—and Williams provides some direct evidence as well as alluding to other evidence—then Matthew and John were eyewitnesses. For that matter, Mark was probably an eyewitness. He's a younger contemporary of Jesus living in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's public ministry.

Moreover, there's no presumption that Luke's sources involve a chain of transmission. He could easily interview eyewitnesses to the life of Christ. Many were still alive at the time he conducted his investigations. So there's no justification to stipulate a series of intervening links. The same holds true if Matthew, Mark, or John supplement their firsthand observation with testimony from other informants.



The same holds true even if Matthew, Mark, and John weren't eyewitnesses.

**11.** Evidence for harmonization. That's not an evidentiary question but a logical question. It doesn't require any evidence to demonstrate how two accounts are possibly consistent.

**12.** Ehrman said:

*What would it take, if you're already committed to the idea that there can't be any mistakes, then how would you be open to the idea that there might be a mistake. It's doing theology, it's not doing history. History isn't done by coming at it with a theological presupposition about what had to happen. You look at the evidence. You don't approach it by saying this has to be right. If you're going to do proper history you can't allow your presuppositions about God to affect the outcome. You're saying Christian history isn't the same as history. If you go to a history department there are criteria.*

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**i)** One problem is Ehrman's fallacious argument from authority. But that's just an observation about the sociology of history departments at secular universities.

**ii)** We all evaluate historical claims based on our plausibility structures. We come to historical claims with views about what we think the world is like. What's possible or impossible, realistic or unrealistic. What's antecedently probable or improbable.

Ironically, that's exactly what Ehrman is doing with his methodological atheism. He isn't confining himself to the raw evidence. To the contrary, he takes a position, in advance of the fact, that any divine explanation must be disallowed. He takes that position before he sees the evidence. So even if divine agency is a direct factor in some outcomes, Ehrman is always committed to a naturalist explanation regardless of whether that's the right explanation. He's saying the only proper historical explanations must be naturalistic explanations—even if that explanation is wrong.

**iii)** There's an interplay between evidence and plausibility structures. Up to a point, your plausibility structure ought to be revisable in light of evidence. Keep in mind, though, that there's an asymmetrical relationship between naturalism and supernaturalism in that respect. If your naturalistic plausibility structure is based on lack of perceived evidence for God, providence, or miracles, then it only takes some positive evidence to the contrary to falsify your plausibility structure.

It's much harder to come up with what would even count as conclusive evidence for God's nonexistence. Even if (ex hypothesi) God is generally invident, it only takes a few good examples to disprove a universal negative.



## Chicago's muddy waters

A friend asked me to comment on an older article by Mike Licona:

<https://www.risenjesus.com/chicagos-muddy-waters>

**i)** Geisler is a poor representative of the inerrancy position. That makes him an easy target for Licona. In fairness, Licona is returning fire. He didn't initiate hostilities.

**ii)** Licona jumbles together a desperate list of evangelicals who draw fire from Geisler (Blomberg, Bock, Bird, Craig, Evans, Keener, Vanhoozer, Wallace, and Yarborough), but there are significant differences in their respective positions. Licona is seeking cover by blending into the crowd, but some of the scholars he mentions don't share his views.

**iii)** It's not enough to criticize the Chicago statement. It's up to him to provide an alternative formulation.

***"If Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity would still be true even if it were the case that some things in the Bible are not."***

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**i)** But he doesn't say which things are expendable.

**ii)** Warfield isn't the father of inerrancy.

***"Historians of the Bible do not have such a luxury. Historical investigation does not allow us to presuppose the inerrancy of the Bible in the course of a historical investigation. Otherwise, historians would just use the above argument, close shop and go home. The doctrines of the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Gospels are faith doctrines that cannot be proven...when approaching the Gospels historically and making no theological assumptions pertaining to whether they are divinely inspired or inerrant, historians can apply the tools of historical investigation..."***

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To be consistent, Licona should also endorse methodological naturalism. The logic of his strictures can't be contained to inerrancy/inspiration.

His statement is philosophically naive. It makes a big difference whether or not God is generally active in the world—as well as active in the production of Scripture in particular. That can't be bracketed off, so that we approach the Bible as though it's a naturalistic product. That's a skewed approach which takes atheism as the operating worldview when we study the Bible. That's not a Christian view of the Bible.

*"Iconoclasts like Bart Ehrman are now responsible for the shipwrecked faith of many. For them, if the Bible is not absolutely true in every detail, we should reject it. (This is a good spot to remind ourselves that if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true even if it were the case that some things in the Bible are not.) Ehrman has a polished routine in which he articulates a list of Gospel differences. Was Jairus' daughter dead or alive when Jairus asked Jesus to heal her? It depends which Gospel you read. Was Jesus crucified on the day after the Passover meal or the day before the Passover meal? It depends which Gospel you read. Did the temple veil split before or after Jesus' death? It depends which Gospel you read. Was there one or were there two angels at the empty tomb? It depends which Gospel you read. How many women went to the tomb? It depends which Gospel you read."*

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The solution is not to concede Ehrman's examples but to challenge them. Inerrancy operates at two different levels: there are specific examples of "problem passages," and then there's the hermeneutics of inerrancy.

Ehrman's fundamental error doesn't lie with his downstream examples but the upstream issue of what makes a historical account accurate. He has a very simplistic, unimaginative grasp of what makes historical writing true. As Vern Poythress would put it, Ehrman operates with a paradigm photographic realism. But there's a basic difference between seeing an event and a verbal description. There's lots of extraneous information in witnessing an event which will be left out when writing it up.

So a reader must mentally fill in the gaps. And different scenarios are possible. So there's a lot of play in how to visualize what happened.

***"Thus, Matthew may have taken some liberties when writing his genealogy in order to arrange it in an artistic manner, not to invent, but to emphasize Jesus' Davidic ancestry: Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah. This shows Matthew was willing to redact his sources by altering details and sacrificing legal precision in the process in order to make his theological point more clearly."***

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**i)** That raises an interesting issue. Matthew is writing with Jewish readers in mind. And Jewish readers could easily compare his genealogies with related OT genealogies. That was a matter of public record. So in what respect would Matthew take liberties with the genealogy? If Jewish readers thought he was tampering with the record, his strategy would predictably backfire.

**ii)** In addition, is Licona saying Matthew took liberties with OT genealogies? If you think the Matthean genealogy is authentic, then he didn't get that from the OT but from Jesus or the dominical family. But if that's Matthew's source, then we're in no position to say he "redacted" or "took liberties with his source since we don't have the unredacted original to compare with the Matthean version.

**iii)** For modern readers, the Matthean genealogy has some puzzling features, but it was written for 1C Palestinian Jews, not modern readers, so the original target audience might not think Matthew was taking liberties with his sources. We need to exercise humility when we read ancient documents. Many things are lost on a modern reader.

***"The original readers of Mark would have heard that divorce is not permissible under any circumstances. But Jesus was probably speaking in hyperbolic language to make His point stronger and more memorable as He does elsewhere and where Matthew again redacts for clarification (Luke***



***14:26//Matthew 10:37). Therefore, Matthew clarifies Jesus' teaching on divorce by adding an exception clause by which divorce is permissible: adultery."***

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**i)** Licona just takes for granted that that's the only way to harmonize the passages. But in many cases, Jesus likely spoke at greater length than what the Gospels record. So it's not a case of adding words but cutting out some things.

Indeed, given how shocking his statement on divorce was, it would be surprising if there wasn't a longer discussion than the Synoptics record. The disciples couldn't believe their ears. So we'd expect Jesus to repeat himself, with verbal variations.

**ii)** Licona then cites other stock examples, but there's more than one way to harmonize the differences. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/03/raising-dead.html>

***"Would it be possible for God to ensure that certain messages He regarded as having great importance were preserved accurately while He allowed the biblical authors freedom to write in their own words and style..."***

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Because it's not divine revelation if the wording simply the fallible choice of Bible writers. It's no longer the voice of God, but the voice of men, because that drives a wedge between divine revelation and what's actually communicated.

*"...even tolerating a lapse of memory on their part, their need to fill in the blanks, or even a deliberate altering of data for theological reasons resulting in a portrayal of events in ways not reflective of what we would have seen had we been there?"*

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That's a euphemism for pious fiction. But the Judeo-Christian faith is grounded in historical events, not legendary embellishments.

*"Consider the following: 1 Kings 4:26 reports that Solomon had 40,000 stalls for chariot horses and 12,000 horsemen, whereas 2 Chronicles 9:25 reports he had 4,000 stalls for chariot horses and 12,000 horsemen.[13] How is this difference to be explained?"*

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i) Scribal error is the most obvious explanation.

**ii)** I'd add that OT writers often appear to use stock numbers.

*"When we look carefully through the Gospels, we find their authors compressing stories, displacing them from their original context and transplanting them in others, transferring words spoken by one person and representing them as spoken by others, simplifying their representation of a historical scene in order to avoid complicating the portrait they are painting of Jesus, converting Jesus' direct teaching into a dialogue, and so on."*

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**i)** Matthew and Luke sometimes group material thematically. That's different from intentionally fostering a false impression regarding the actual sequence of event.

**ii)** Yes, Bible writers use narrative compression. That's true of historical writing in general. It's necessarily selective.

**iii)** Licona's paradigm is too literary. If Matthew, Mark, and John are transcriptions of oral history, then the sequence isn't based on deliberately reordering events but how Matthew, Mark, and John remember events when they dictate their recollections to a scribe.

***"If we truly have a high view of the Bible, we must submit ourselves to the Gospels as God has designed them and has given them to us rather than squeeze the Gospels to fit within a view of how God should have written them."***

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That sounds pious, but it fails to distinguish between the Gospels as God designed them and Licona's *perception* of redaction and discrepancies.

The quote by Walton/Sandy is confused. Orality is irrelevant because inerrancy is concerned with what was committed to writing in Scripture, and not hypothetical oral stages leading up to the canonical text.

The "word" inerrancy is just a shorthand designation of a position that has to be defined. But the issue isn't about the *word* "inerrancy". Labels are necessary for reference.

"Inerrancy" is an umbrella term for several propositions:

- i)** The Bible is true, including its moral and theological teaching.
- ii)** Biblical historical narratives are factual. They accurately describe real events.
- iii)** Biblical prophecies are predictive rather than "prophecies" after the fact.



## In all it affirms

Let's begin with some standard definitions of biblical inerrancy:

*Nevertheless the historical faith of the Church has always been, that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact, or of psychological or philosophical principle, are without any error, when the ipsissima verba of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense. There is a vast difference between exactness of statement, which includes an exhaustive rendering of details, an absolute literalness, which the Scriptures never profess, and accuracy, on the other hand, which secures a correct statement of facts or principles intended to be affirmed. It is this accuracy and this alone, as distinct from exactness, which the Church doctrine maintains of every*

*affirmation in the original text of Scripture without exception. Every statement accurately corresponds to truth just as far forth as affirmed.*

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<http://www.bible-researcher.com/warfield4.html>

*Inerrancy will then mean that at no point in what was originally given were the biblical writers allowed to make statements or endorse viewpoints which are not in conformity with objective truth. This applies at any level at which they make pronouncements (Roger Nicole).*

*Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences (Paul Feinberg).*

*Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms: obeyed, as God's command, in*

*all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises (Chicago Statement on Inerrancy).*

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There are some problems with these definitions. Or perhaps I should say there are some limitations to these definitions:

**i)** Three of the four definitions include a key caveat: Scripture is true or inerrant in what it *affirms*. The reason for that qualification is indicated in the Hodge/Warfield article. Even when Scripture employs hyperbole or approximations, it is still true because the Bible writer didn't intend to be more precise. For instance, round numbers would be false if the author intended to be exact, but he didn't. It is true in regard to what he was aiming for.

**ii)** In some respects that's a useful caveat, but not without problems or ambiguities. Does a Bible writer affirm (i.e. intend) all the logical implications of his statements? Bible writers can only intend what they consciously will, but Bible writers aren't aware of all the logical implications of their statements. In that sense, they do not and cannot affirm everything that their statements entail.

But that qualification would have the ironic consequence that while whatever the Bible affirms is true, the logical implications of Biblical statements may be fallible and mistaken! Yet that's an unwittingly subversive definition of inerrancy.

By the same token, Micah didn't affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. He didn't know who the Messiah would be. He knew some things about the Messiah, but he did not and could not intend for them to be about Jesus in particular, since he was ignorant of Jesus.



It seems to follow from the caveat that Micah's messianic oracle might be fallible and erroneous in reference to Jesus. But once again, that definition sabotages the purpose of the definition!

**iii)** This goes to another ambiguity in the definitions. What's the relationship between the Bible and Bible writers? Strictly speaking, a writing does not and cannot intend anything. Only a writer can intend something. Intent is a psychological state.

On the other hand, a writing can imply something. So we might say Bible writers are inerrant in whatever they intend while the Bible is inerrant in whatever it implies. A distinction between what the prophet Micah intends and what the prophecy of Micah entails. And these are complementary.

BTW, when I say "intend", I don't mean that in terms of what a prophet was planning to say or planning to write, but what he meant to express by his actual words.

Sometimes there's a gap between intent and performance, where an agent was planning to do something, but failed to realize his objective. But I'm not separating intent from performance.

**iv)** To say that a Bible writer didn't affirm all the logical implications of his statements, or that a Bible writer didn't affirm future referents of his oracles, doesn't mean he *disaffirms* their referents or entailments. His intentions are not at variance with the implications or outcomes.

**v)** Another ambiguity concerns the truth-bearers of inerrancy, or the truth-bearers of what the Bible "affirms".

The Bible contains different kinds of statements. Assertions, denials, questions, commands, prohibitions. Strictly speaking, truth or falsity is a property of propositions.

But consider that restriction in regard to nonpropositional statements in Scripture. Take the binding of Isaac, which is a command. Or prescriptions and proscriptions in the Mosaic law. Or God interrogating Adam and Eve in the Garden. Technically, that falls outside the purview of the definition.

Questions per se don't affirm or deny anything. Commands and prohibitions don't affirm or deny anything. Does this mean that since the genre of nonpropositional statements has no truth-value, an inerrantist needn't credit them?

**vi)** A final omission is a failure to define "truth". Insofar as Scripture is propositional revelation, that might select for the coherence theory of truth:

*A coherence theory of truth states that the truth of any (true) proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions. The coherence theory differs from its principal competitor, the correspondence theory of truth, in two essential respects. The competing theories give conflicting accounts of the relation that propositions bear to their truth conditions. (In this article, 'proposition' is not used in any*

*technical sense. It simply refers to the bearers of truth values, whatever they may be.) According to one, the relation is coherence, according to the other, it is correspondence. The two theories also give conflicting accounts of truth conditions. According to the coherence theory, the truth conditions of propositions consist in other propositions. The correspondence theory, in contrast, states that the truth conditions of propositions are not (in general) propositions, but rather objective features of the world.*

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<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-coherence/>

Yet the Bible constantly makes claims about the world. So that might select for a correspondence theory of truth. It may be best for a statement on inerrancy to define truth in reference to coherence and correspondence alike, where these are applicable.

Mind you, that's deceptively simple. For instance, the correspondence theory involves vexed questions about the identity of the relevant truth-makers and truth-bearers.

**vii)** I don't think these deficiencies are a big problem, because definitions of inerrancy function to some degree as

placeholders for creedal statements. In other words, abstract definitions, because they operate at such a high level of generality, are deficient at the level of particulars. But inerrantists have very specific things in mind when they formulate these definitions. The Bible is the concrete frame of reference. Inerrantists have specific *kinds* of things in mind which their definitions are designed to cover. In and of themselves, the definitions are not that discriminating. So they need to be supplemented by actual examples. The historicity of many Bible narratives. Predictive prophecy. And so on.

## How far did Judas fall?

In his debate with Peter Williams, Bart Ehrman said (48 min. mark):

*I would like to know a single case in history where somebody was hanged and he died by going head first and his gurgles opened up:*

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF\\_2I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I)

**1.** Ehrman has a simplistic notion regarding the role of evidence in historical reconstruction. Our evidence for ancient history is fragmentary. As a result, modern historians make educated guesses to fill the gaps. Imagine a modern historian trying to write a history of ancient Greece, Roman, or Egypt if he confined himself to direct evidence. That's not possible. The surviving records are too fragmentary. So when scholars reconstruct history, they must use their imagination to postulate scenarios that bridge the lacuna. They should, of course, admit that these are educated guesses. But there's nothing special about what Bible scholars do in that regard.

**2.** Matthew doesn't say where Judas hanged himself. Acts doesn't say where Judas hanged himself. It indicates where he landed. All it says (in Greek) is that:

**He acquired a field from the reward of unrighteousness, and falling headlong he burst**

**open in the middle and all his guts spilled out.**

He may well have hanged himself in a different location above the Field of Blood, then his falling corpse landed in the Field of Blood. For instance, Mount Olivet has an elevation of 2684 feet while the adjacent peak (Mount Scopus) has an elevation of 2710 feet. If, say, he hanged himself on the branch of an olive tree high on the hillside of Mount Olivet, it's easy to imagine the falling body splattering over the field when it hit the ground.

It's possible that the tree was dislodged by seismic activity (Mt 27:51; 28:2).

## Greek lexicography and the death of Judas

It's common to allege that Matthew and Acts present contradictory accounts regarding the death of Judas. One issue is the meaning of  $\pi\rho\eta\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ ,  $\acute{\epsilon}\varsigma$  in Greek. Two related observations:

**1.** Some words in ancient Greek are much better attested in our extant Greek sources than others. This means a number of Greek words had additional means which weren't preserved in our extant sources.

**2.** On a related note, our extant source of ancient Greek are random and unrepresentative. They depend on what scribes wanted to copy. They oversample of literary Greek. As a result, there's lots of Greek slang or Greek words with slang definitions (in addition to literary definitions) because the spoken language is poorly preserved.

So that's something we must make allowance for in debates over inerrancy and harmonization.

## Does God punish people through natural weather events?

I'll comment on a post by progressive theologian Randal Rauser:

<https://strangenotions.com/does-god-punish-people-through-natural-weather-events/>

Before I get to that I have a preliminary observation. It's striking that his post is hosted by a Catholic apologetics website. In particular:

*StrangeNotions.com is the central place of dialogue between Catholics and atheists. It's built around three things: reason, faith, and dialogue. You'll find articles, videos, and rich comment box discussion concerning life's Big Questions. The site was created by Brandon Vogt (brandon@brandonvogt.com) and operates under the aegis of Word on Fire.*

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<https://strangenotions.com/about/>



That's revealing with regard to how Catholic apologists like Brandon view the Bible. Perhaps sweet little Brandon is just too gullible and guileless to suspect where Rauser is going with this. It should be obvious that Rauser doesn't think the Biblical accounts he alludes to are true. The reported events never happened. And the narrators misrepresent the character of God. From Rauser's perspective, these accounts are pious fiction, or in a sense, impious fiction.

Regarding Rauser's argument:

1. No sophisticated Christian thinks all natural disasters are divine punishment. The fact that some natural disasters are divine punishment carries no presumption that every natural disaster, or any disaster in particular, is punitive.

In the case of Scripture, we have the benefit of inspired interpretation. Outside the Bible there may be some personal calamities that are so fitting and antecedently unlikely that they appear to be divine judgment.

2. Rauser commits an elementary blunder by failing to distinguish between judgment and the side-effects of judgment. Because human beings are social creatures, punishing human behavior sometimes necessitates collective judgment.

That doesn't mean everyone who suffers as a consequence to collective punishment is being punished. Innocent people may be harmed as a side-effect of collective punishment. If parents are chronically tardy in paying the monthly dues on their apartment, and if they are evicted, both for failing to pay the landlord, as well as trashing the apartment, their children will suffer as a result of parental delinquency. But eviction isn't punitive with regard to the children. Rather,

that's a necessary but incidental consequence of their inextricable involvement in the lives of their parents.

3. It's striking that Rauser's morality is completely independent of the Bible. Indeed, from what I've read, he doesn't think that God is necessary to ground moral realism. So it's hardly surprising that he often stands in judgment of biblical ethics.

Rauser is basically an atheist with a thin coating of Christianity. That's why so few people on either side take his progressive alternative seriously. It's not consistently Christian or secular, although secularism represents his center of gravity. His residual supernaturalism is cobbled together from philosophical theology and the paranormal rather than biblical revelation.

## Contradictory names

**1.** A stock objection to biblical inerrancy is really or apparently contradictory names in the extant text of Scripture. Examples include 2 Sam 21:19, Mat 1:7-8,10, and Mk 2:25-26. Bart Ehrman says the case of Mk 2:25-26 was the first domino in his apostasy.

**2.** I'll make some preliminary points before getting to the main points. To an outsider, this may look like Christians clinging desperately to the inerrancy of Scripture, which betrays them into special pleading. Let's take 2 Sam 21:19: who killed Goliath—David or Elhanan?

Even if you don't come to the text with a prior commitment to inerrancy, it's puzzling. After all, David is among the most celebrated figures in Jewish history, and the confrontation with Goliath is unforgettable. So how could a case of mistaken identity ever arise?

Likewise, if the error originates with the narrator, we'd expect scribes to correct it. Or if a scribe introduced an error into his copy, that wouldn't automatically spread to copies independent of his copy. It's hard to see how the narrator or scribes could be confused about something like that.

That said, one commentator regards the MT reading as a scribal emendation. Cf. A. Steinmann, **2 SAMUEL** (Concordia 2017), 406-407. Another commentator, after summarizing other options, proposes that this might be a variant name, based on comparative linguistics. Cf. D. Tsumura, **THE SECOND BOOK OF SAMUEL** (Eerdmans 2019), 299.

**3.** Apropos (2), let's take a comparison: John Ruskin was named after his father—John James Ruskin. And even as an adult he continued to live with his parents when he wasn't traveling. In addition, his father hired a man-servant for his son named John Hobbs. But because it was impractical to have three guys living under the same roof, answering to the same first name, they decided to call the man-servant George.

Now we know this because Ruskin explains it in his autobiography. And it's a very logical explanation. But if we didn't have his explanation, there'd seem to be a contradiction. It looks like John Hobbs was confused with somebody named George—when, in fact, the original reason was to forestall confusion!

**4.** In the case of Mt 1:7-8,10 (Asa/Asaph, Amon/Amos), one possible explanation is scribal error/scribal confusion.

**5.** Moving onto the main points, these "contradictions" are, of course, discussed in conservative commentaries and monographs defending inerrancy. But in my experience, the debate on both sides suffers from unexamined assumptions. If you say the Bible uses the wrong name for someone, what makes a particular name the right name for someone? I haven't seen that discussed.

In practice, a proper name is a tag we give a person so that we can refer to them. Names are ways to identify people and differentiate them from other people. A name picks them out.

One candidate might be the original name. The person's birth name or baptismal name. The name their parents gave them.

But that's clearly too restrictive. Take nicknames. Those aren't birth names, but that doesn't mean a nickname is the wrong designation to use for someone. Some nicknames stick. Indeed, many people use the nicknames other people gave them—if they like the nickname.

Consider a different example, as a boy, C. S. Lewis decided to call himself Jack. And he continued to call himself Jack for the rest of his life. That wasn't his birth name, but it became as much or more his real name than his legal name.

**6.** To take another example, consider names like Charlemagne, Charles the Bald, and Richard the Lionheart. These certainly weren't their original names. Their parents didn't look down on their baby boy and say, "Let's call him Richard the Lionheart". Minimally, these are names they acquired later in life, as adults.

It's also possible that these are posthumous designations. Names conferred on them by posterity.

So some names may be retroactive names. They aren't the original name. Rather, it's what they were known by later on. During their lifetime or after they died.

**7.** I'd add in passing that a name in one language may be translated into its counterpart in another language. A French name may be Anglicized, and so on.

**8.** Apropos (6), some names may be folkloric names. This is how the individual was remembered by posterity.

Suppose, in popular memory, an individual with one name is confused with another individual by another name. In

folklore, he's now referred to by a different name. And originally that may be a mistake. But if it catches on, then that's how he's referred to.

Suppose an individual is confused with a better-known member of his family. That becomes fixed in popular usage. That's his folkloric name. And that happens prior to when a biblical account is written.

At the time of writing, should a Bible writer correct folklore and revert to the "correct" name? Or should the Bible writer use the folkloric name because that's what readers recognize?

The confusion didn't originate with the Bible writer. Moreover, the issue for inerrancy isn't whether the correct name is used but whether the correct individual is referred to. Names aren't true or false. They're just designators. What's true or false is the referent. Even the "wrong" name may have the right referent if that's how it's come to be understood. Perhaps that's what lies behind the apparent confusion in Mk 2:25-26.

By the time the Biblical account is written, folkloric usage overrides original usage. The Bible writer is not in error if he copies folkloric usage so long as he's talking about the right person, regardless of the current designation.

## Did God command genocide?

*@RandalRauser*

*Genocide is the act of attempting to destroy a specific racial, cultural, and/religious identity.*

*8:36 AM - 12 Jul 2019*

*Aaron Taylor*

*So would ordering all the Amalekites to be killed be classified as a call for genocide?*

*@RandalRauser*

*Yes. That's an instance of genocide by legal definition, as is the destruction of the tribes in Deuteronomy 20.*

*10:14 AM - 12 Jul 2019*

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**i)** Of course, somebody can always define a word a certain way, then say something in Scripture falls under that definition. That, however, says nothing about Scripture but how the word was defined. You could redefine "banana" to mean "God," then say that Christians worship a banana.

**ii)** It's not as if we're required to submit to someone's tendentious or stipulative definition of "genocide". I didn't

vote on that. I reserve the right to disregard tendentious definitions. You're not entitled to make me accept your definitions.

**iii)** The definition is equivocal because the same word is used to denote three different concepts. It would be clearer to use a different word for each concept.

**iv)** It becomes a loaded question. As defined, God commanded genocide in one respect but not another. Yet the word itself doesn't draw those distinctions—it's the same word for all three concepts. It is therefore inaccurate, even if you accept that definition, to say God commanded genocide—inasmuch as the definition is only partially true in regard to Scripture. The definition bundles together three different concepts. But it would be inaccurate to affirm the semantic bundle in regard to Scripture.

**v)** In addition, it means the odious connotations of one concept tar a different concept by association. Even assuming that it's intrinsically wrong to destroy a specific racial identity, there are situations where attempting to destroy a specific cultural or religious identity is praiseworthy. Take religions or cultures that practice human sacrifice, child sacrifice, torturing war captives, burning widows, honor killings, gang rape, sodomy, pederasty, female genital mutilation, &c. It isn't wrong to destroy those cultural and/or religious markers. To the contrary, their destruction makes the world a better place.

**vi)** Notice that the definition doesn't say "violently" or "forcibly" destroy. But that would mean an intellectual critique of a specific cultural or religious identity is genocidal. That the attempt to discredit ideas through rational analysis is "genocide", even though there's nothing coercive about that exercise.



**vii)** Suppose (voluntary) interracial mating became the norm. That would destroy specific racial identities. That might not be the intent, but it would have that side-effect. Does that mean interracial mating is genocidal?

## 14 generations

*In Matthew's list, some names have been omitted. The 14-14-14 pattern is only achieved through means of those omissions. If we add in the missing individuals, the symmetry (and divisibility by seven) disappears...The difficult questions, though, are a) on what principle does Matthew omit the particular individuals that he does (or, conversely, include the others) - is it arbitrary, or is there some scheme in it...*

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<https://david.dw-perspective.org.uk/da/index.php/three-times-fourteen-generations/>

I'm not going to offer a solution to the crux. Instead I'll use a comparison to illustrate a general principle. As of 2019, there have been 45 US presidents. Suppose someone listed the US presidents, but the list was incomplete. There might, however, be a pattern to who's included and who's excluded so that that total isn't randomly selective. For there are different ways to group US presidents. For instance, wartime presidents or peacetime presidents, Yankee presidents or Southern presidents, Republican presidents or Democrat presidents, Baptist Presidents or Presbyterian

presidents, Presidents who served in the military, and so forth.

So there might be an unstated selection criterion, if you know what to look for. The reason for the selectivity wouldn't lie on the surface. Rather, it would have a coded significance to readers in a position to register the subtextual affinities. Perhaps Matthew's selection criterion is too in-house for readers who don't share a 1C Palestinian Jewish frame of reference. Perhaps we've lost the key to unlock Matthew's numerology.

It's like Dante scholars who find some of Dante's historical allusions in the **DIVINE COMEDY** to be inscrutable because we lack the topical background knowledge he took for granted. Yet that doesn't mean Dante was writing nonsense.

## Did Matthew miscount?

Here's one explanation for an alleged numerical discrepancy in Matthew's genealogy:

[https://defendinginerrancy.com/bible-solutions/Matthew\\_1.17.php](https://defendinginerrancy.com/bible-solutions/Matthew_1.17.php)

However, I'd like to discuss the issue from a different angle. Suppose someone says the obvious explanation is that Matthew made a computational error, and inerrantists are guilty of special pleading when they flail about for face-saving explanations. Let's play along with that alternative for argument's sake and consider how plausible it is.

**i)** Even from a naturalistic perspective, it's unlikely that Matthew miscounted. This isn't some off-the-cuff computation. Matthew's numerology is carefully worked out. So it would be surprising if Matthew miscounted. This isn't something he dashed off in haste.

**ii)** But suppose, for argument's sake, he did commit a computational blunder. Let's take it to the next level. What should we expect in that event?

Even if Matthew didn't catch his oversight, some of the initial readers of the first run of Matthew's Gospel would notice the error. We'd expect word to get back to Matthew regarding his embarrassing blunder. And it would make sense for Matthew to issue a corrected edition—if for no other reason than to spare himself the public embarrassment. It's not like the first run of his Gospel had a wide circulation. It had to be informally copied. It's not like modern publishing where there are, say, 5,000-10,000

initial printings, and if that runs out, the publisher issues another batch of printings.

No, I believe the process would be more like Matthew dictates his Gospel to a scribe, then Christians make private copies. The initial distribution is tiny.

At most, this would result in two different manuscript traditions, where there were copies of the erroneous ur-text along with copies of the corrected edition. But on that scenario, I think it more likely that only a few copies of the erroneous ur-text would be made, so those are less likely to survive. What would survive is the manuscript tradition preserving the corrected edition, which wouldn't contain the apparent numerical blunder.

But that's not what we have. So I think it's implausible to impute a computational error to Matthew. If that happened, I'd expect there to be a different manuscript record.

**iii)** Notice that I'm not proposing a solution to the crux. I'm doing something different. I'm pointing out that on closer scrutiny, the naturalistic explanation is implausible. We don't need to know what the right explanation is to eliminate the naturalistic explanation.

## A note on biblical inerrancy

I'd like to float a suggestion regarding a neglected, potential solution to some apparent biblical discrepancies or contradictions. The Bible is bilingual (with some Aramaic thrown in for good measure). In the NT, speakers like Paul alternate between Greek and Aramaic, depending on the audience. Although Jesus probably did most of his public teaching in Aramaic, he may have switched to Greek on some occasions. But the NT itself is written in Greek.

Take a sample sentence like:

*Jeremy gave a spirited speech*

Suppose we paraphrase that using different synonyms for "spirit":

*Jeremy a vigorous speech*

*Jeremy gave a tipsy speech*

*Jeremy was possessed when he spoke*

*The ghost of Jeremy spoke*

Now these four different renderings are discrepant. They don't mean the same thing. Yet all of them are true to the meaning of the original wording. Put another way, the synonyms are inconsistent with each other, but consistent with "spirit".

Although that's a paraphrase rather a translation in the strict sense, a paraphrase is a kind of translation, not into a

different language, but rendering the original in different words. So it illustrates the basic principle.

In theory, Bible writings could quote the same underlying statement in different translations. The translations might be discrepant, yet each would accurately render the original statement. So the "contradiction" would be superficial. Each would be correct renderings.

I haven't bothered to run through a series of examples. At the moment I'm just offering this suggestion for consideration, where applicable.

## Hobbits

**1.** This raises a potential challenge to biblical creation:

<https://humangenes.org/2019/04/22/asian-diversity-and-the-seafaring-hominin/>

As we discover more fossils, there may be further challenges in kind. One issue this raises is whether Christians should just admit that human evolution is true. Is the time past due to throw in the towel? Sure, we can contrive ingenious explanations to reconcile this with biblical creation, but isn't that special pleading? It's only because Genesis is part of the sacred canon of Christianity rather than *The Argonautica* that we make an effort to defend the historicity of Genesis when we'd never make a comparable effort to defend the historicity of *The Argonautica*. So goes the argument.

It would, indeed be special pleading to defend the historicity of *The Argonautica*, but the comparison is inapt. If there's abundant evidence that Christianity is true, then it's not special pleading to treat the Bible differently than we treat *The Argonautica*.

Not to mention that there are scientific objections to the theory of evolution. The evidence isn't one-sided.

**2.** Another issue is how we tell that something has humanoid intelligence. For instance, there are animals that use things designed by humans. It would be invalid to infer that animals invent what they use. For that matter, lots of humans are smart enough to use a cellphone who aren't smart enough to design a cellphone. So there's a distinction between inventing tools and using tools. Suppose you had



jungle inhabited by humans and apes. Apes might steal human tools and toy with them. Discovering apes with tools wouldn't ipso facto prove the apes had humanoid intelligence.

**3.** There's also the question of how we identify humanoid intelligence. This goes to the larger issue of what makes humans human or unique compared to animals. A common criterion is a certain level of intelligence. A capacity for abstract thought. Imagination. Deliberation. Thinking about the past and future. Is it possible for a creature to have humanoid intelligence, yet be inhuman?

In Christian theology, angels have humanoid intelligence, yet angels are unrelated to humans. To take another example, there's a sense in which psychopaths are both human and inhuman. On the one hand they have human intelligence. Indeed, above-average intelligence. Yet a psychopath lacks normal human psychology. Psychos are expert at mimicking human emotions, but they lack human emotions. In particular, they lack empathy. They have no conscience.

A psychopath is like a vampire. A vampire retains human intelligence and memories. But its psychological makeup is inhuman. When it looks at a human being, it views the human as food. By the same token, psychos are predators who hunt human prey. So there's something fundamentally inhuman about psychopaths (and sociopaths).

Or take someone like Bobby Fischer who's a genius, but devoid of social intelligence. He can relate to the game of chess, but he can't relate to human beings.

Or, to consider this from the other end of the telescope, consider people with Down syndrome who, in a sense, have

subhuman intelligence, yet they have a human emotional makeup. In a sense, someone with Down syndrome has greater humanity than Bobby Fischer.

Another example, albeit fictional, is rational aliens. Suppose you had a conversation with an E.T. Initially, you might find that you have a lot in common with the E.T. But as the conversation progresses, you come to the terrifying realization that there's something fundamentally foreign about its outlook. Suppose what humans find beautiful, our hypothetical aliens don't find beautiful. What we find emotionally compelling, they don't. They don't respond to music. They don't gaze in awe at sunsets. They have no instinct to comfort a crying child.

**4.** Apropos (3), imagine if God created some animals with humanoid intelligence that are, nevertheless, unrelated to humans. Imagine if you had a conversation with one of them. At first you seem to share a lot in common. But as the conversation deepens, it becomes increasingly apparent that they operate on a different wavelength. Humanoid intelligence is, at best, a necessary but insufficient condition to make one human. And even that may be overstated (e.g. Down syndrome).

**5.** Scripture doesn't detail the animals God created. It classifies them by ecological zone. Land animals, aquatic animals, and volant animals. Even if God created (now extinct) animals with humanoid intelligence, there's no presumption that Scripture would mention that fact. Just as there's no expectation that the Genesis narrator would list the Tasmanian devil. For one thing, the original audience would have no idea what the narrator was referring to. Indeed, the narrator wouldn't have the vocabulary. And even if the Bible did use the word "Tasmanian devil", that term would be co-opted by Bible readers to refer to

something other than the marsupial. By the time the Tasmanian devil was discovered, it would be called something else.

**6.** Inspiration doesn't make a Bible writer omniscient. The Genesis narrator was ignorant about the existence of most species. But ignorance is not the same thing as error. And even if he knew about Australian/Tasmanian fauna, there'd be no occasion to mention that in the creation account. By the same token, even if God created (now extinct) animals with humanoid intelligence, there'd be no reason for Genesis to mention that.

## Quiz Show: Bible Contradictions!

Normally I wouldn't bother commenting on something this sophomoric:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB3g6mXLEKk>

But considering the fact that it's approaching 2.5 million views, with over 32,000 comments and 95,000 upvotes, I'll make an exception.

Do you find my videos offensive?

Actually, atheists should be embarrassed by the intellectual quality of his videos. If anyone ought to be offended, that would be atheists, not Christians. It makes atheism look bad.

Yahweh's anger lasts both forever and NOT forever.  
(Not forever: Micah 7:18) (Forever: Jer 17:4)

In context, Jer 17:4 refers to the permanent effect of God's judgment in this particular situation.

K: Well, Yahweh tempted Abraham, so it definitely is something he'd do.

Well Ken you're right about that, (Gen 22:1) so 10 points for you, and 10 points for you also Craig, because "God cannot be tempted with evil, nor tempteth he any man" (James 1:13).

**i)** Just for starters, that's such a dumb way to approach the issue. Surely James doesn't disagree with Gen 22. James is a messianic Jew who's probably writing to messianic Jews.

He reveres the OT. His audience reveres the OT. The binding of Isaac is a famous episode in OT history. So the question is what Jas meant by 1:13. Whatever he meant, he couldn't intend it to rule out passages like Gen 22. Even if I didn't know how best to understand Jas 1:13, I know that construing that in contradiction to Gen 22 can't be the right interpretation.

**ii)** <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/08/god-tempts-no-one.html>

Can salvation be attained by works? Yes Craig,  
C: No. A man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ (Gal 2:16)

OK, and Ken?

K: Well I'm afraid Craig's correct, and I'm going to differ with him on this one, and instead go with what Jesus said, namely if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments (Matt 19:17) and Luke 10:26-8 , Matt 25:41-46 , Matt 16:27 etc

Two Correct answers! Well done<<<

C: Yes, but A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law ( Romans 3:28)

K: "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (James 2:24)

**i)** Paul doesn't say that we're saved by faith alone, but that we're *justified* by faith alone. Justification is a narrower category than salvation. So the "contradiction" is vitiated by equivocation.

**ii)** It's often the case that the same word may have more than one meaning. The same word may have an ordinary sense as well as a technical sense. The same word may be used to denote different concepts. One writer may use the same word in a different sense than another writer.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), there's no contradiction in saying believers are justified by the atonement while unbelievers are condemned by their works. If the sins of unbelievers are not atoned for, then they can only be judged by their behavior and character. By contrast, Christians are judged on the basis of what Jesus did for them—in their place, on their behalf.

What are the consequences of seeing Yahweh's face.

Yes Ken:

K: death!

Hmmm - Ken saying death, do you agree, Craig?

C: I'm saying the preservation of life. (Gen 32:30)

K: But "there shall no man see me and live" (Ex 33:20)

And that's Correct<<<

K: But hold on, Jacob saw god face to face (Gen 32:30)

C: Yes, and so did Moses (Ex 33:11)

And Abraham (Gen 12:7)

K: But no man hath seen god at any time (John 1:18)

C: Except Moses and the seventy elders of Israel (Ex 24:9-11)

And all the others too, and of course none of them did because no man hath seen nor can see god (1 Tim 6:16)

**i)** Whether or not humans can see God and live is an OT paradox. That can be harmonized in part by the distinction between God in himself and manifestations of God. Although God is naturally invisible, humans can see theophanies and theophanic angelophanies which represent God.

**ii)** That distinction is deepened and clarified by Trinitarian theology. Although the Father remains visible, God becomes visible in the person of the Incarnate Son.

Does Yahweh delight in burnt offerings?

YES/NO

Correct. (Jer 7:22, Ex 20:24)

Fails to make allowance for hyperbole.

Is God the author of evil

YES/NO

Correct (Is. 45:7, 1 John 4:8)

Fails to distinguish between moral evil and calamity or misfortune.

According to Genesis, were humans created BEFORE the animals?

YES/NO (Yes: Gen 2:18-9 No: Gen 1:25-7)

Fails to distinguish between the creation of animals in general and the subset of animals created for the Garden.

On the road to Damascus, did Paul's traveling companions hear the voice that spoke to Paul ?

YES/NO (Acts 22:9, Acts 9:7)

These minor verbal variations are a mark of authenticity. When people repeatedly relay a personal anecdote, the wording varies. They aren't actors reciting a script. This is realistic.

Correct. Will the Earth last forever? (2 Peter 3:10 Ecc 1:4)

YES/NO

Eccl 1:4 is not an absolute statement but an observational statement, based on the narrator's experience. It's not

about linear eternality but the periodicity of nature. The author cites cyclical natural processes. So life is repetitious.

Is Jesus the only man to have ascended into heaven?  
YES/NO (2 Kings 2:11, John 3:13)

**i)** A dumb way to approach the issue. Surely Jesus/the narrator are familiar with assumption of Elijah. So the statement can't be mean to deny that event.

**ii)** Unlike Elijah, who originates on earth, Jesus *returns* to heaven. That's the point of contrast.

In old testament law, were children to be punished for the sins of their fathers?  
YES/NO (Deut 24:16, Deut 5:9)

Fails to distinguish between sin and crime, penology and providence. Deut 5:9 is about historical divine judgments. By contrast, Deut 24:16 is about the administration of justice by human judges in courts of law.

And onto the next round, which is all about numbers.

**i)** Once again, this is a dumb way to approach the issue. OT numbers are often perplexing to modern readers. But they presumably made sense to the Bible writers and the original audience. So it's presumptuous and arrogant to think something that's puzzling to a modern reader must in error. When reading ancient literature, from a different culture, we need to make allowance for lost idioms and conventions.

**ii)** In some cases these are probably transcriptional errors. Numbers are easy to miscopy. That's inevitable.



Since, however, the phenomenon is widespread, I doubt that's a complete explanation. Here's one treatment:

<http://www.michaelsheiser.com/TheNakedBible/foutlargenumberbersinOT.pdf>

And my own musings:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/07/stock-numbers.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/08/one-angel-or-two.html>

When is a thief, two thieves?

C: Ooh, well there were two thieves crucified with Jesus,

Yes, you're on the right track<<<<

C: Did they both revile Jesus or did only one of them?

Well, both are correct depending on which gospel you're reading! (Luke 23:39-42, Mark 15:32, Matt 27:44 ) It's just like how many blind men Jesus healed near Jericho - it was two AND yet it was one. (Mark 10:46, Matthew 20:30).

Once more, that's such a dumb approach. The fact that different accounts are selective in who they mention doesn't entail a contradiction. Think of how many people we encounter in the course of one day. Yet when telling our spouse what we did that day, we may only mention meeting one person in particular. Why are atheists and apostates unable to allow for Scripture what they allow for themselves?

Think of a single historical event that featured two men standing, < Matt 28:2, Mark 16:5, Luke 24:4, John

20:12 > that were actually two men sitting, which was in fact one man sitting, and in actual fact was one angel descending from heaven and causing an earthquake. Was this non-contradictory singular event witnessed by

- a) one woman, (John 20:1)
- b) two women, (Matthew 28:1)
- c) three women, (Mark 16:1) or
- d) an unknown number of women numbering at least five (Luke 24:10)?

**i)** In Scripture, angels suddenly appear and disappear at will, as the occasion demands. No reason to suppose they'd be continuously present at the scene.

**ii)** There's also the mechanics of angelic apparitions, which may be germane:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/03/angels-at-tomb.html>

The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. (Ex 34:6).

He then cites capital crimes. But that's not a contradiction. For God to be merciful and long-suffering doesn't mean there are no limits to what humans can get away with.

(Psalm 12:1-3) Enjoy it!

Either way, Craig, you be sure to sell that new possession of yours and give to the poor ( Luke 18:22 Luke 12:33 Luke 14:33 ). Or perhaps you could take the example of the early christian church, who got together as a community, sold what they owned, and shared the proceeds amongst themselves communally. (Acts 2:44-5, Acts 4:34-7)

**i)** There is no command to all Christians to sell all their possessions.

**ii)** In the early church, rich Christians shared. But they had to be wealthy in the first place to have the largess to spread around.

Did the temple curtain rip before or after Jesus died?  
(Mark 15:37-8, Luke 23:45-6)

That would only be contradictory if both accounts are chronological. But what if Luke is bunching similar events thematically? Grouping the cosmic portents (HT: Arndt; Bock).

Who put the gorgeous purple robe on Jesus, Herod's soldiers or Pilate's soldiers? (Luke 23:11, Matt 27:27-8, John 19:1-2)

Which assumes that Herod's soldiers and Pilate's soldiers are two different groups. But since Jesus was escorted by a posse as he's shuttled between Herod and Pilate, it's likely that the same soldiers who comprise the posse are present at both events. So it's not surprising if they repeat similar indignities.

Did Jesus curse the fig tree before or after driving the merchants from the temple? (Matt 21:12, 17-19, Mark 11:12-17)

Ummm... before or after?

Fails to take narrative compression into consideration.

Should homosexuals be killed or exiled? (1 Kings 15:11-12, Lev 20:13)

**i)** The translation of “male shrine prostitutes” in 1 Kgs. 15 is a guess. The text identifies them as qedeshim. This is simply “the holy ones.” They could be male prostitutes but they could also be a priestly class officiating at sites of false gods (HT: Richard Hess).

**ii)** Even if there was a contradiction, it wouldn't be contradictory biblical teaching or contradictory biblical commands, but a discrepancy between a command and failure to comply with the terms of the command.

**iii)** However, the context seems to be different. Lev 20:13 is about generic sodomy whereas 1 Kgs 15:11-12 is about pagan cultic prostitution. Lev 20:13 is about punishing individuals whereas 1 Kgs 15:11-12 is about eradicating a pagan cult. 1 Kgs is about a collective policy.

**iv)** In addition, the sodomites in 1 Kgs may well be heathen foreign nationals whereas the offenders in Lev 20 are members of the covenant community. As such, the latter are punished more severely while the former are expelled, since they don't belong in Israel in the first place.

Given that Quirinius became governor of Syria nine years after King Herod's death, was Jesus born during the reign of Herod, or during the governorship of Quirinius? (Luke 2:1, Matt 2:1, Wikipedia)

Because Wikipedia is the gold standard of scholarship.

Why assume Luke and Josephus are referring to the same event in each case? Why assume Josephus got it right while Luke got it wrong?

[https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/54/54-1/JETS\\_54-1\\_65-87\\_Rhoads.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/54/54-1/JETS_54-1_65-87_Rhoads.pdf)

"Reasons for the Lukan Census", Stanley E. Porter, in Wedderburn, A. J. M., & Christophersen, A. (2002). **PAUL, LUKE AND THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD: ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF ALEXANDER J.M. WEDDERBURN** (Vol. 217, pp. 165–188). London; New York: Sheffield Academic Press.

A. Steinmann, **FROM ABRAHAM TO PAUL: A BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY** (Concordia 2011), 238-49.

When the women arrived at Jesus' tomb, was the tomb opened or closed? (Matt 28:2 , Luke 24:2)

I don't assume there was just one group of women. The fact that each Gospel mentions a group of women doesn't entail just one group of women, or the same group in each case.

For one thing, the Gospel writers didn't accompany the women. They are getting their information about what the women directly or indirectly from what some of the women told them or their informants.

It stands to reason that the women who went to the tomb lived in different parts of Jerusalem. Would they be in a position to synchronize their visit to the tomb? Or would they arrive at somewhat different times, in small groups?

Did Judas die by hanging himself, or by falling over in a field and having his midsection burst open spilling his guts everywhere? (Acts 1:18, Matt 27:5)

Since I wasn't there, I can't say exactly how it went down. But here's a simple harmonization: he hanged himself on a hillside, then scavengers (e.g. jackals, feral dogs) yanked his body off the makeshift gibbet.

## Cutting Jesus down to size

*Randal Rauser*

*That depends. To note one example, Jesus refers to Moses (John 6). That provides prima facie evidence for the Christian to believe that Moses did in fact exist. But if there is strong evidence that Moses did not exist, the Christian could conclude based on that evidence that Moses does not exist. In that case, the Christian may come to believe that Jesus was accommodating to the errant beliefs of his audience because he was aiming to teach about his own messiahship, not a history lesson on the ANE. Or one could believe that Jesus adopted to the common knowledge of his day in accord with the kenotic emptying described in Philippians 2:6 ff. Or, one could believe that the text is a post-New Testament theological reflection on Jesus and his unique status. If the evidence for Moses were problematic, I would think the first (accommodation) explanation is the most natural one. (Cf. Jesus saying the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds.)*

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<https://randalrauser.com/2019/03/the-problem-of-evil-and-biblical-violence-a-conversation-with-an-exvangelical/#comment-4373719730>

Several issues:

**i)** This is a good illustration of progressive theology. Rauser has a Rauser-sized Jesus. A domesticated Jesus. Rauser has Jesus on a leash. Rauser's Jesus isn't big enough to ever pose an intellectual challenge to what Rauser is prepared to believe. Rauser's Jesus isn't any bigger than Rauser. Indeed, Rauser's Jesus is smaller than Rauser. A child of his times. Rauser's Jesus is a Jesus Rauser can manipulate and control.

**ii)** Notice the false dichotomy between the historicity of Moses and the messiahship of Jesus. But in Scripture, the credentials of Jesus must be validated by the OT. Jesus is a superior counterpart to Moses.

**iii)** What would count as strong evidence that Moses didn't exist?

**iv)** Phil 2:7 doesn't describe kenotic emptying. That's a 19C misinterpretation. Consult any good commentary. For instance, as Fee explains:

***Christ did not empty himself of anything. He simply...poured himself out. This is metaphor, pure and simple. G. Fee, Paul's Letter to the Philippians (Eerdmans 1995), 210.***

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What is literally meant by the metaphor is explicated in terms of incarnation, undertaking the status of a slave, and a criminal.

**v)** Rauser proposes another explanation: this is a fictional speech which the narrator put in the mouth of Jesus, like a ventriloquist dummy. That makes the Johannine Jesus an imaginary character. There may be a historical Jesus who lies in the distant background, but the Johannine Jesus is a product of legendary embellishment—like King Arthur. The Johannine Jesus never existed in real life. That's the implication of Rauser's proposal.

**vi)** To say the comparison with the mustard seed is divine accommodation is an absurdly inflationary characterization. Why not just say it's idiomatic, proverbial, maybe hyperbolic?

**vii)** Finally, this is a good example of how termites burrow into evangelical institutions. Rauser teaches at a nominally evangelical seminary with a token statement of faith that affirms inerrancy, but he has little gimmicks to evade that, and the administration lets him get away with it. This inerrancy statement is just for show, to hoodwink gullible parents and donors.

Likewise, he's a contributor to **THE CHRISTIAN POST**. Richard Land is the editor, but Land is asleep at the switch. There's no serious vetting process for contributors. That laxity gives progressives openings to hollow out evangelical institutions from the inside, until there's nothing left but the facade.

## Medieval bestiary

A common argument against the inerrancy of Scripture is to compare Scripture to alleged parallels in pagan sources, then infer that Bible writers shared the prescientific outlook of their pagan neighbors. In that regard I'd like to expand on a comparison offered by John Collins in **READING GENESIS WELL** (Zondervan 2018), 260n34.

Suppose a modern reader thought a medieval bestiary was a reliable source for what medieval folk knew about animals. Yet medieval peasants clearly had accurate knowledge of farm animals and game animals. So a medieval bestiary is not a representative sample of what-all they knew about animals. Which is not to deny that a bestiary may reflect a degree of ignorance and superstition, just as pagans in the ancient Near East suffered from ignorance and superstition. But it means we need to be avoid the knee-jerk assumption that some of their depictions were necessarily meant to be realistic.

## Studied inaccuracy

Here's a neglected consideration in debates over inerrancy. Consider artwork. It's sometimes amusing to see Medieval depictions of exotic animals (e.g. African animals), because it's clear that the artist never saw a real animal like that. Likewise, before the advent of linear perspective, artistic representations were often inaccurate in terms of scale.

On the other hand, we know from cave paintings of animals that "primitive" cave painters using primitive resources under poor conditions could nevertheless depict animals with amazing accuracy. It required talent rather than formal training.

However, in some cases the inaccuracy isn't due to technical deficiencies. Take paintings of the Madonna and child where Jesus looks like a tiny man. A miniature adult. It's not because the painters didn't know how to draw a baby. Rather, that was an artistic and theological convention. Likewise, Byzantine icons are stereotypical.

Although these depictions are inaccurate from a representational standpoint, that's intentional and functional. They achieve the purpose they were designed for. Theological code language. Not unrealistic because they don't know any better. A modern counterpart are comic books.

That's something to keep in mind when critics allege that Scripture is inaccurate. A consideration they're failing to make allowance for.

## "Marry your rapist law"

*Citing Biblical injunctions (particularly Exodus 22:16-17 and Deuteronomy 22:25-30)...*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marry-your-  
rapist\\_law#Antiquity\\_until\\_1900](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marry-your-rapist_law#Antiquity_until_1900)

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I've discussed the Deuteronomic passages before:

[http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/09/legal-  
technicalities.html](http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/09/legal-technicalities.html)

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/06/10-questions.html>

By contrast, Exod 22:16-17 concerns a shotgun wedding in the case of consensual premarital sex. For instance:

*The primary and secondary rulings in these verses concern a man who entices an unbetrothed girl to have intercourse with him. The inference appears to be that the girl agrees to this; she is not raped as in Deut 22:2-29. J. A. Thompson describes it as "seduction". T. D. Alexander, Exodus (IVP 2017), 498.*

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## Thugs and she-bears

Atheists love to quote this passage. One complication is the age-range denoted by ne'arim qetanim, which is ambiguous. cf. [http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/grace-journal/03-2\\_12.pdf](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/grace-journal/03-2_12.pdf)

For instance, Solomon uses that descriptor to characterize himself in 1 Kgs 3:7. Perhaps he's waxing hyperbolic since he certainly wasn't a little child when he became king. He was probably a young adult. So there's no presumption that 2 Kgs 2:23-25 refers to preadolescent boys. They act like juvenile delinquents. The size of the group suggests street gang. In context they seem to be young thugs. But we can't be too precise one way or the other.

The text itself is hyperbolic inasmuch as two bears couldn't maul all 42 boys. It's not as if they'd stand there, waiting to be mauled, one by one. Rather, they'd scatter in all directions, running for their lives.

I'd add that bears are larger in North America and smaller in hotter climates. It's misleading for a reader to conjure an image of a grizzly bear or Kodiak bear. In addition, due to sexual dimorphism, she-bears are significantly smaller than their male counterparts.

So the reader needs to avoid exaggerating what happened. They learned a very painful lesson. I think the point is that the she-bears lunged at the youths. Some may have been injured, but the point was to send a message. All of them didn't have to be injured to get the message. I don't think the reader is meant to visualize 2 bears systematically hunting down 42 boys, one after another. Rather, I think we should visualize the bears rushing the boys, the boys

running away in different directions, the bears chasing some of them, overtaking and injuring some of them, which gives the other boys time to get away.

## Did Jesus die four times!

*I was converted from a non-Christian background, so I didn't grow up hearing the Gospels. The first time I read through the Gospels as a new believer, I was shocked. Matthew was great, but then Jesus got crucified again at the end of Mark. "How often is this going to happen?" I wondered.*

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<http://www.craigkeener.com/differences-in-the-gospels-part-1/>

This is an unintended parody of Bart Ehrman's case for Gospel contradictions. A reductio ad absurdum of his approach. Ehrman is always telling people to read the Gospels horizontally.

So you read Matthew's crucifixion account, then you slide over to Mark—and Jesus dies again! Then you slide over to Luke and John and it keeps on happening. Jesus died four times!

Just do the math! He dies in each Gospel, so if you add them up, he was crucified and resurrected four different times! Ehrman's case for Gospel contradictions isn't much more sophisticated than that.



## Stock numbers

Some numbers in Scripture don't make sense to modern readers. Presumably, they made sense to the original audience (unless the number we read is a scribal error). These numbers may be puzzling in their own right, or be puzzling in relation to in parallel accounts where there's a numerical discrepancy.

There are different possible explanations. Here I'd like to consider a neglected explanation. What if Bible narrators sometimes use stock numbers? Stop and ask yourself, was the narrator in a position to know the actual figure? And if he didn't know the actual figure, was it a literary convention to use stock numbers? For instance, 2 Kgs 19:35 says the angel of the Lord slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers.

Did someone actually do a headcount? How long would that take? Also, the corpses weren't lined up in neat tidy rows, where you could walk up and down each row, taking a tally. Presumably, this was a pile of corpses, scattered about, with some bodies on top of other bodies. Moreover, it would be easy to lose count. For that matter, is it as easy to count up to thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands in the Hebrew numeral system compared to our modern numeral system?

What if the narrator didn't know the actual figure, so he used a stock number. He plugged a big number into the account to indicate that *lots* of soldiers were slain. Big numbers to indicate a big event.

That's different from hyperbole. It's not conscious exaggeration, but using a large number to indicate this was something big. *Really* big. Something big happened here.

The original audience understood that this wasn't the actual figure but a wild estimate. Absent revelation, there'd be many situations in which the narrator didn't know how many people there were, somebody's age, how long it took for something to happen.

Take the angels at the tomb. One or two? What if the narrator didn't know, so he inserts a stock number into the account. Stock numbers are equivalent to "many", "some", "a few", "a lot".

We ourselves use stock numbers, viz. six feet under, eleventh hour, inching along, third degree, take five, a ton, a dime a dozen, five will get you ten, forty winks, nine times out of ten, ten-to-one, million/billion/gazillion, a mile away.

## Museum of the mind

**i)** Some biblical place names are hard for modern readers to correlate with the surviving evidence. Stock examples include Gadara/Gerasa, Jericho, and Ai. That's not surprising given the vicissitudes of time.

Critics view this issue through the wrong end of the telescope. What's striking isn't that we have a few cases like this, but that we're able to make a confident identification most of the time.

Memory is a museum of the mind. I remember many places that no longer exist. To take some comparisons:

**ii)** In some cases a place name changes. It's the same site under a different name. When I was a boy back in the 60s, a shopping plaza was built nearby. The supermarket was originally called the PX. Later it was renamed Mayfair. And it changed hands a few more times before the shopping plaza was eventually demolished to make way for an upscale condo community with artsy shoppes.

Very few residents are in a position to remember what used to be there and what it was called. You had to live through that period. It's very time-sensitive information. Some long-term natives remember, but the area has undergone a tremendous turnover, due to gentrification and urbanization. Many of the locals didn't live at that time and place.

The fact that Bible place names are often so identifiable at this great distance from events is a tribute to the accuracy of Scripture. It would be so easy to get these wrong if the document was written at a different time or place.

**iii)** Once again, when I was a kid back in the 60s, there were two rival towns next to each other: Kirkland and Houghton. I remember my parents taking me to the Houghton public library when I was a very young boy. Many years later when I happened to be driving around there, I stumbled across the long-shuttered Houghton library.

Because Kirkland was more competitive, Houghton was eventually annexed by Kirkland. And Kirkland has annexed some other nearby municipalities or parts of unincorporated counties.

As a result, some of the original place names have changed, although individual businesses may use the old place name. What "Houghton" refers to would be opaque to a resident who wasn't there at the time. It requires pinpoint knowledge to be conversant with the local historical minutiae.

**iv)** This raises a dilemma for a historian. Suppose you're writing a history about that locality. Some of the place names have changed. Do you use the new place names or the old place names? If you use the new place names, that's anachronistic—but if you use the old place names, that's unrecognizable to most readers. Ideally, the place name should match the period you write about, but if a reader doesn't know what that refers to, the precision is pedantic. It fails to communicate.

**v)** It may also depend on the emphasis. Is this primarily a history about that locality, or a biography, where the setting is more incidental?

**vi)** Sometimes you have the opposite phenomenon, where the site changes while the name remains the same. I attended four different elementary schools, then junior high

and high school. Some were built in my lifetime. All of them have since been torn down and replaced with new school facilities. They kept the same name for the school, but it has new buildings. And the campus is different to accommodate the new buildings.

I have detailed firsthand memories of the original schools. I could describe the layout of each campus and buildings. That wouldn't bear any correspondence to the current campus and floor plan.

Then there's the school where my father taught. That's long gone. Today it's just a public park. For that matter, some of the public parks have been drastically relandscaped.

Imagine a "Bible critic" thousands of years later reading my account, which doesn't match surviving records, and concluding that my account is either fictional or based on faulty sources. It would, however, be the critic rather than the source that has faulty information.

**vii)** Keep in mind, too, that due to military invasion, the Middle East has undergone tremendous change over the millennia. Cities razed and villages burned to the ground.

**viii)** One more example. When I moved to a new area, I went to a supermarket. I glanced at a picture framed history of the franchise. It's a chain store that was started by a local business man in 1957. So there was that historical description on top. Below was a photograph of the store and parking lot full of cars. Since the ostensible purpose of the photo is to illustrate the history, you'd expect the photo to be taken around the time the first store opened. Like the grand opening or shortly thereafter.

But the cars in the photo were from the 1960s, not the 1950s. That's something I instantly recognize because I was born in 1959, so as a kid I saw lots of 1950s cars. And, of course, having lived through the Sixties, I saw lots of 1960s cars. I automatically know the difference.

Perhaps the person who posted the story and the photo didn't have a period photo. Or perhaps he was too indifferent to dig around for a period photo. Or perhaps he's too young to be aware of the difference between 1950s cars and 1960s cars. Even though the anachronism is obvious, it isn't obvious to someone who wasn't alive at that time and place. Sometimes there's no substitute for firsthand knowledge.

In relation to the history, the photo was off by about 7 years, give or take. Very narrow parameters, but enough to falsify the illustration inasmuch as it's impossible for 1960s cars to be around before a store that opened in 1957. There's no wiggle room for that chronological incongruity.

Once again, it requires pinpoint knowledge to be aware of these things. We should be impressed by how accurate the Bible is. How rarely biblical place names are hard to identify from surviving records. These apparent discrepancies are predictable and consistent with the complete accuracy of scripture, given the spotty evidence that's survived. By contrast, the demonstrable accuracy of Scripture is very hard to explain if books were written at a later date and/or place.

## Inspiration in eclipse

**i)** There are theologically moderate Bible scholars and Christian apologists who regard inerrancy as dispensable. However, to deny inerrancy is to deny the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture.

When people demote or dismiss inerrancy, I always wonder what they believe about inspiration. Do they limit inspiration to episodes of direct revelation, like an audible voice or God beaming visions into the mind of a seer like Ezekiel?

Even in visionary revelation like the Apocalypse, there's lots of spoken material. What would be the point of God disclosing that to the seer if the seer had to rely on his fallible memory to recollect what was said in the vision?

**ii)** Do they think inspiration doesn't figure in the composition of historical narratives? If the Gospels are un-inspired, what about the NT letters?

**iii)** A problem with un-inspired memory is that it's better at remembering events than speeches. But if the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is an un-inspired translation of un-inspired recollections, how dependable is that? At best, we have a reasonably trustworthy record of what Jesus did but not what he said. We have the deeds but not the words. We lose the words. Yet the teaching of Jesus is central to Christian faith.

It's sometimes said that Jesus taught the same things over and over again, which drilled his teaching into the minds of the disciples. True up to a point, but a lot of Christ's teaching is contained in one-time debates and dialogues. The disciples only heard those exchanges once.

**iv)** Or take the parables. Those are very memorable, but what's memorable is the characters and plot, not the actual wording.

**v)** Jesus has lots of quotable one-liners. However, those aren't necessarily memorable when embedded in a longer discourse. If you heard that speech, dialogue, or debate one time, would uninspired memory pick out the catchy statements, or would they tend to be lost in everything else that was said?

**vi)** The only access we have to the teaching of Jesus is the text. How it's verbalized. And exegesis is concerned with the actual wording of a text. Syntax and semantics. Consider how many exegetical and theological debates turn on the exact wording of a Biblical passage.

If the actual wording is just an uninspired summary or paraphrase of fallible memory, how can that be authoritative? How can we rely on that?

**vii)** Moreover, how the description of an event is worded will greatly affect our understanding of the event. Uninspired speakers often express themselves poorly. So to some extent the events become hazy too.

**viii)** For that matter, there are many incidents in the life of Christ which are only reported in one Gospel. A lot is hanging on uncorroborated reports. Without the safety net of inspiration, we have a composite life of Christ that's multiply-attested in some respects but thinly attested in other respects. If we confined ourselves to the multiply-attested incidents, how much would be left?



So there's actually quite a lot at stake on the inspiration of Scripture. If inspiration is expendable, so is the teaching of Jesus. If inspiration goes down, it takes a lot with it.

## Modern historiography

*I am glad to see that in one major way Mike and I agree about the Gospels. We agree that we cannot hold the Gospels to modern standards of accuracy, because if we do, the Gospels are not accurate. In Mike's words, the Gospels are "flexible with details" and they are comparable to modern movies that employ extensive "artistic license." I couldn't agree more.*

*My sense is that when people today want to know whether the Gospels are historically accurate, what they want to know is this: Did the events that are narrated in the Gospels actually happen in the way the stories are told or not?*

*And so the natural question arises, as Mike himself raises it: What do we mean by historical accuracy? Let me tell you what I think most people mean. My sense is that when people today want to know whether the Gospels are historically accurate, what they want to know is this: Did the events that are narrated in the Gospels actually happen in the way the stories are told or not? People in general are*

*interested in that basic question, not so much in the points that Mike raises. That is to say, people are not overly interested in the question of whether the Gospels stack up nicely in comparison with ancient biographers such as Plutarch and Suetonius. Of course they're not interested in that. Most people have never read Plutarch and Suetonius. I'd venture to say that most Bible readers have never even heard of Plutarch or Suetonius, or if they have, it's simply as some vague name of someone from the ancient world.*

*People don't care much, as a rule, about other ancient biographers and their tactics when talking about the Bible. They are interested in the Bible. Is it accurate? For most people that means: Did the stories happen in the way they are described or not? If they did happen that way, then the stories are accurate. If they did not happen in that way, they are not.*

*If it were, however, important to talk about the relationship of the Gospels to such ancient authors, then it would be worth pointing out, as Mike knows full well, that Plutarch and Suetonius are themselves not thought of as historically reliable*

*sources in the way that many people hope and want the Gospels of the New Testament to be. Both authors tell a lot of unsubstantiated anecdotes about the subjects of their biographies; they include scandalous rumors and hearsay; they shape their accounts in light of their own interests; and they are far less interested in giving abundant historically accurate detail than in making overarching points about the moral qualities of their characters. That is what Plutarch explicitly tells us he wants to do. He wants the lives that he describes to be models of behavior for his readers, and he shapes his stories to achieve that end. He is not concerned simply to give a disinterested historical sketch of what actually happened.*

*Mike thinks the Gospels are like Plutarch, and I completely agree. They are far more like Plutarch, and Suetonius, than they are like modern attempts at biography. In modern biographies, an author is concerned to make sure that everything told has been verified and documented and represents events as they really and truly happened. Ancient biographies, including the Gospels, are not at all like that.*

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<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

**i)** Ehrman's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, there is some value in judging ancient historical/biographical writing by ancient standards. For instance, it's not erroneous for a writer to use round numbers. Since he wasn't aiming for exactitude, he can't fail to hit a target he wasn't aiming for.

**ii)** However, I disagree with the popular contention that the Gospels and Acts operate with essentially different standards than modern historical/biographical writings. It's often said that the Gospels weren't merely history, but interpretive history. That's true, but it's hardly distinctive to the Gospels.

Good historians and biographers don't content themselves with giving a bare chronicle of events. Rather, they wish to explain what caused events. Why did the Roman Empire fall? That sort of thing.

They consider different determinants. The motivations of human participants. Economic factors. Social dislocation due to famine or pandemic. And so forth. Modern biographies and history books are interpretive history no less than the Gospels or Acts.

## Pseudo-dilemmas

Thought-experiments are common in science and philosophy. Atheists and Christian apologists both employ thought-experiments. These are useful in different ways:

**i)** Sometimes we resort to a thought-experiment because an actual expedient isn't feasible.

**ii)** Apropos (i), an advantage of thought-experiments in ethics is that no one is really hurt, since the victims are hypothetical characters rather than sentient people.

**iii)** Thought-experiments enable us to screen out extraneous variables. By contrast, real life is messy.

**iv)** Thought-experiments are used to test a generalization. If there are counterexamples, then that's a hasty generalization. If it allows for exceptions, then it's not true or false in principle. Rather, it may be true or false depending on the situation.

**v)** By the same token, thought-experiments can be used to test someone's consistency or commitment. If their position has dire consequences when taken to a logical extreme, will they balk?

**vi)** Despite the value of thought-experiments, it's necessary to distinguish between real or realistic dilemmas, and highly artificial or pseudo-dilemmas.

Suppose an atheist puts a Christian on the spot by asking, What would you do if you discovered that the Fall (Gen 3) was legendary, or the Flood (Gen 6-9) was legendary, or the call of Abraham (Gen 12) was legendary, or the binding of

Isaac (Gen 22) was legendary, or the Exodus was legendary, or the nativity accounts (Matthew & Luke) were legendary?

These hypothetical scenarios are designed to generate a psychological dilemma for the Christian. What is he prepared to jettison to relieve the dilemma?

In the nature of the case, dilemmas eliminate all the good options. That's what makes them a dilemma. Within that framework, there is no good answer. Every answer will be costly.

But that the same token, that makes them pseudo-dilemmas. We're not really confronted with that stark choice. And we have no obligation to submit to those arbitrarily restrictive alternatives.

Unless and until we actually have to cross that bridge, there's no reason to take them seriously. They're just mind games. A conundrum that only exists in the imagination rather than reality. It's up to God, in his providence, whether we face genuine dilemmas.

**vii)** And thought-experiments cut both ways. It's easy to pose dilemmas for an atheist. How much is he prepared to lose? And that's not even hypothetical.

## Cliques

A perennial issue regarding inerrancy, historicity, and the Resurrection, is whether the Resurrection accounts are discrepant. Can the differences be harmonized?

One problem with answering the question is due to the ambiguity of the question. In addition, some people, like Bart Ehrman or Harold Lindsell have a very rigid definition of what it means for an account to be factually accurate.

There's more than one sense in which the Resurrection accounts may be reconcilable or irreconcilable:

- i)** It's possible to collate the original order of events
- ii)** There are plausible ways to collate the original order of events
- iii)** The accounts are hopelessly contradictory

(i) is a more ambitious claim than (ii). According to (i), by comparing the different accounts, we can reconstruct the original sequence. We can thereby demonstrate that the accounts are harmonious.

According to (ii), given the available data, there's more than one way to sequence the events. Although we can't detail the original sequence with certainty, we can demonstrate that the accounts aren't necessarily (or even probably) contradictory.

Let's take a comparison. Suppose you walk into a high school cafeteria for the first time. You see a bunch of



students at tables talking and eating. At first glance, the distribution appears to be random.

However, if you come back day after day, you notice a pattern. Usually the same students sit together. The crowd self-segregates into smaller groups or cliques. Some students are friends with other students, although no student may be friends with every student. There may also be unpopular students who don't belong to any clique.

In addition, there may be overlapping cliques. Two different cliques can share at least one student in common. Suppose Ted and Ed belong to the same clique, while Fred and Ed belong to another clique, but Ted and Fred don't belong to the same clique.

Suppose there's a high school reunion ten years later. Let's say four alumni who attend the reunion jot down who they saw in diaries when they return home after the reunion that evening.

What would these entries have in common? It wouldn't be surprising if they have almost nothing in common besides a generic reference to their high school reunion. They might not name their alma mater, because they are making a record for their own benefit, and they know what high school they attended. They don't need to remind themselves of that.

In addition, it wouldn't be surprising the four accounts fail to mention any of the same students. That's because, when they go to their high school reunion, they don't want to reconnect with all their former classmates. They didn't even like some of their classmates.

Instead, they want to reconnect with members of their clique. When they attend the reunion, they will have their eye out for a subset of students they want to see again.

However, it wouldn't be surprising if at least two of the four accounts mention one or more students in common, due to overlapping cliques. At the reunion, Ed spoke to Ted and Fred, even though Ted and Fred didn't converse with each other.

But contrast, it would be extremely surprising if all four accounts mentioned all the same students. Indeed, that would scarcely be credible. If the accounts are accurate, you'd expect one account to omit names included in another account. That's because socializing at such an event is not a random aggregate, but discriminating. Some former classmates are looking for other former classmates in particular. They won't write about most of the people in attendance. It would be a telltale sign of artificiality if all four accounts mentioned all the same students.

Now, if you attempted to correlate these four accounts, could you reconstruct the original order of events. I don't see how that's possible. For one thing, these accounts are highly selective. There's not enough information to say who saw who first, then who saw who second, then who saw who third.

Moreover, it's not reducible to a single linear sequence even in principle. For the way in which members of one clique reconnect at that event aren't synchronized with how members of another clique reconnect at that event. There's a different sequence for each witness, because each witness talks to one classmate, then another, then another. And that will be different from the people another classmate talks to.

Put another way, at a high school reunion there are reunions within reunions. They will break up into their old cliques, and chatter away with members of their own cliques. There will be parallel conversations in different cliques.

Furthermore, some arrive at the event sooner and leave sooner, some arrive later and leave later, some arrive later and leave sooner, while some arrive sooner and leave later. There will be many different chronologies within the same event.

Compare that to the first Easter. You have different groups going at different times. It's not coordinated, but spontaneous. Some people may go back more than once. Some go as individuals, others go in groups. It's like the high school reunion with different cliques.

When different witnesses write that down, or share their testimony, there will naturally be omissions, and it will be hard to intercalate one account with another account, since each account is selective, and even if they overlap, it will be hard to say who did what first, then who did what second, then who did what third, in a uniform series of encounters.

It's completely unreasonable to think a reader should be able to harmonize the four accounts in that sense. Did Ted talk to Ed before or after Ted spoke to Fred?

But what we may be able to do, using our imagination to fill in the gaps, is to arrange the same information in different possible configurations. What a critic of the historicity or inerrancy of the accounts must demonstrate is that there is no way to arrange these accounts into a plausible sequence. But the same imponderables which prevent a harmonist

from reconstructing the original sequence prevent the critic from demonstrating a contradiction.

I think the best we can expect at this distance from events is to mentally try out different combinations. And more than one hypothetical combination may be consistent with the available information. Go back to the illustration of four entries from different diaries about the same reunion. Your ability to correlate those accounts will be limited. That isn't special pleading. That's just the situation that confronts an outsider reading partial accounts of the same event. There's no presumption that the four accounts are inaccurate just because we're unable to correlate them with certainty, for reasons I've given.

## Flogging

**20 “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. 21 But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money...26 “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. 27 If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth (Exod 21:20-21,26-27).**

I'm going to discuss a controversial OT law (esp. v20).

**i)** Whenever we respond to unbelievers who attack OT ethics, we must constantly remind them that atheism has no basis for human rights. Atheism can't ground objective morality. Moreover, given their reductionistic view of human beings, there's no reason to think humans are the kind of entities entitled to special treatment.

Although it's tedious and repetitive to replay the same broken record, it's necessary so long as unbelievers evade the implications of their own position.

**ii)** OT laws don't necessarily endorse what they regulate. This is true of law generally. Laws of morality presuppose the existence of evil. Laws can't eradicate evil. At most, they improve the situation. Mitigate evil. The fact that OT law regulates slavery doesn't ipso facto mean it condones

slavery. Not every evil can be forbidden. Some well-meaning laws are unenforceable. The best thing some laws can aim for is to limit damage. Make the status quo less harmful.

**iii)** Critics need to be clear on what they find objectionable in this law. Do they find slavery objectionable or corporal punishment? If their primary objection is to slavery, then they'd object to any OT law regulating slavery. They don't object to slavery because it may involve corporal punishment. So their offense at this particular passage is disingenuous.

**iv)** "Slavery" is an umbrella term. There were different kinds of "slaves." There were indentured servants. There were war captives. Without repeating what I've said elsewhere, I don't think there's anything intrinsically wrong with indentured service or enslaving enemy combatants. You have to consider the practical alternative in that (or some analogous) situation.

**v)** Assuming this verse alludes to corporal punishment, adult corporal punishment is hardly unique to this particular law. It's not as if flogging was reserved for slaves. Adult corporal punishment was a general punishment for various crimes:

***“If there is a dispute between men and they come into court and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty, 2 then if the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie***

*down and be beaten in his presence with a number of stripes in proportion to his offense. 3 Forty stripes may be given him, but not more, lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight (Deut 25:1-3).*

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In principle, a slave master could also be punished by flogging if he committed a crime where that was the usual punishment. Both masters and slaves could be subject to flogging. Masters were not exempt.

**vi)** Although commentators tend to assume 21:20 refers to discipline, that's not entirely clear. It occurs in the context of other passages dealing with assault and battery. So it may not refer to corporal punishment at all.

**vii)** This statute is actually concerned with protecting slaves from physical abuse. According to scholars, this is unique among ANE law codes. It's not about the rights of the master, but the rights of the slave. It limits the prerogatives of the master. Indeed, an abusive master is subject to legal jeopardy (perhaps the death penalty). So that's a significant deterrent.

## Skin-deep faith

I'll comment on a post by Arminian theologian Randal Rauser:

<https://randalrauser.com/2018/03/is-the-exodus-as-important-to-christian-belief-as-jesus-resurrection/>

*When I was growing up, I learned to read biblical narratives as historically reliable accounts of past events. Whether the issue was the death and resurrection of Jesus, the curious maritime journey of Jonah, the Exodus from Egypt, Samson's killing a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass, or Adam and Eve talking to a serpent in the Garden of Eden, all these stories were accepted with equal conviction as accurate accounts of past events.*

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Unlike Rauser, I attended mainline denominations as a child, so I never had that point of contrast. I moved right while Rauser moved left.

*Then I went to university and that "historicity assumption" began to be*



*eroded.*

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Such a cliché. How many times have we seen that rerun?

*The erosion began with the details. For example, Exodus 12:37-38 describes the Israelite Exodus as “about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.” Altogether, the total number would have been close to two million people. But there is no archaeological evidence in ancient Egypt for a demographic shift on this extraordinary scale.*

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It would help if Rauser bothered to stay abreast of evangelical scholarship. For instance:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/01/number-of-israelites.html>

*Next, there was the matter of dating texts. For example, while I was raised to believe Moses wrote the Torah, I soon discovered that scholars believe the Torah reached final form around the time*

*of the Exile, perhaps eight hundred years after the Exodus. To be sure, these texts would have been based on earlier writings and abundant oral tradition. Nonetheless, the question needs to be asked: how reliable should we consider an eight-hundred-year transmission process?*

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**i)** That illustrates the problem of only listening to one side of the argument.

**ii)** And even if we grant the interval, notice how inspiration doesn't figure in Rauser's assessment.

*Third, there were the scientific considerations. This factor was most obvious when it came to the familiar bedrock narratives of Genesis beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden. How would one reconcile these narratives with the scientific account of earth history? And what about Noah and the global flood? On that point, I soon discovered scholars who insisted that the flood was local. And other scholars*

*attempted to reconcile Adam and Eve with a dizzyingly old earth by suggesting they lived perhaps fifty thousand years ago. But were these narratives, now reread in such a way as to correspond to scientific data, still the same stories? Or had well-intentioned revisions turned them into something different altogether?*

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Of course, his questions can't be answered in the abstract. Depends on the quality of the exegesis.

*Finally, my historicity assumptions were challenged by literary considerations. The sharpest challenge came with isolated stories like Job and Jonah and Esther. Was there a Job at all? Or was this writing simply a profound poetic-literary exploration of the enduring problem of evil and suffering? Did it miss the point altogether to insist that Job must be a historical person for the book of Job to have authority as an inspired text?*

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**i)** How does the genre of Esther differ from Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, &c.?

**ii)** Do some scholars classify Jonah as fiction because it clearly belongs to a fictional genre, or do they assign it to a fictional genre because they think the content is fictional? Isn't there circularity in that classification? Because they find it unbelievable, they (re-)classify the book as fiction.

**iii)** As for Job, in Scripture we have examples where a historical event (indeed, the same historical event) is described in two different ways: a prosaic account as well as a poetic account. Exod 14-15 is a good example. Why not understand Job as a poetic rendering of a historical incident, like Exod 15 in relation to Exod 14?

**iv)** In theory, Job could be authoritative even if the characters are fictional. But if Job wasn't a real person who made it through a real ordeal, how is that supposed to encourage Christians in crisis?

***Regarding theological centrality, read the classic creeds (Apostles', Nicene, etc.). That's at the heart of Christian belief.***

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No, the heart of Christian belief is biblical revelation.

***I believe that there are excellent historical (and theological) reasons to accept the atoning death***

*and historical resurrection of Jesus. But that same degree of historical evidence and theological importance does not apply to many other narratives in Scripture. To put it bluntly, who can seriously insist that Samson's killing of a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass is as well attested historically and as theologically central as the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus? And if we agree that it isn't, then why not apportion our belief in various narratives to their theological importance and supporting evidence?*

*I pointed out that Christians ought to apportion belief and conviction to theological importance and independent corroborative evidence unless they have some overriding reason not to.*

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**i)** How would Rauser ever witness to an Orthodox Jew?

**ii)** Importance and centrality are irrelevant to whether something is factual. The death of close relatives is more important and central to me than the death of my school teachers (K-12), but does that mean that if I read an obituary about one of my old school teachers, I should have less belief/conviction about that report than the death of a close relative?

**iii)** Notice that Rauser doesn't treat the biblical record as having evidentiary value in its own right.

**iv)** Even from an evidentialist standpoint, it's flawed reasoning to think you need corroboration for every claim a source makes. Rather, you need sufficient corroboration to demonstrate that the source is trustworthy.

**v)** Moreover, historical evidence is not the only pertinent line of evidence. Christianity is a living religion. The Bible makes promises. Many Christians experience the promises of Scripture in providential or miraculous ways. Some cases are more dramatic than others. And Christians whose experience is more mundane can be encouraged by the witness of other Christians. It's not confined to evidence from and for the past. Every Christian generation has new evidence that God's promises are true.

**vi)** If we apply Rauser's prescription consistently, that means a Christian ought to suspend belief in Scripture, then go through the Bible from start to finish, sentence by sentence, with a set of colored highlighters, to probabilify each individual sentence (or clause) according to a graded ranking system. The default position at the outset of the process is total agnosticism. Comprehensive skepticism.

It would then be necessary for Scripture to prove itself to you, sentence by sentence, insofar as you can match individual claims in Scripture with independent corroborative evidence. A systematic presumption that nothing in Scripture merits belief. A presumption that can only be overcome in those random cases where corroborative evidence has survived, been discovered, and published. Rauser's Bible is a color-coded edition, in which the reader constantly oscillates between belief and disbelief, from one sentence to the next, according to the grade each sentence (or clause) receives.



## Eschatological overcrowding

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/02/hilberts-hotel.html>

**1.** A prima facie problem with biblical eschatology is the specter of eschatological overcrowding. What's the optimum population for human life on earth? If you total the saints on judgment day, will there be enough room for them on earth? And not just acreage, but paradisiacal conditions. I've discussed this before, but I'll approach it from another angle.

**2.** A critic would say this just demonstrates that Scripture was written by shortsighted, uninspired authors. But other issues aside, that doesn't work. Supposing Bible writers thought the boundaries of the world approximated the Middle East or the Roman Empire, that would furnish much less space to squeeze all the saints into. It's not as if our modern sense of modern geography aggravates the problem. To the contrary, our modern sense of scale diminishes the problem.

**3.** There are basically two kinds of biblical predictions about the final state feeding into this issue:

### **1) RESURRECTION PASSAGES**

These are passages about the general resurrection, resurrection of the just, and/or resurrection of Christ. They imply or presume that the final state will be an embodied or reembodied state. And a physical body requires a physical environment.



Although a few of these passages have figurative or surreal elements (e.g. Ezk 37), in the main they're representational descriptions. That's reinforced by the fact that the resurrection of Christ is the template for the resurrection of the just. That supplies a very literal frame of reference.

## II) GOLDEN AGE PASSAGES

These are passages that depict the future world in terms of a new Eden, New Exodus, and/or New Jerusalem. They're specifically terrestrial in orientation. Earthly.

That said, I think the terms of fulfillment for type-(ii) passages is far more flexible than for type-(i) passages. Just in general, long-range Bible prophecies employ stock, provincial, anachronistic imagery. They depict the future in terms of the past or present. They're adapted to the historical horizon of the original audience.

They depict the future world in terms reminiscent of the ancient Near East or Roman Empire. The geography and technology of that time and place. For instance, take Isaiah's golden age oracles in Isa 11:6-9 or Isa 66:20. That reflects ancient Near Eastern livestock and fauna. If Isaiah was a native of the Amazon river basin or Montana, different fauna would illustrate the age to come.

When I read Bible prophecies about the world to come, I automatically make mental adjustments for the fact that God accommodated the blinkered perspective of the original audience in that regard. Since I don't assume that in the world to come, everybody will live in the Middle East and get around on horses and camels and mules, I don't

assume that the physical life in the world to come is necessarily confined to planet earth.

I think the fulfillment of eschatological prophecies is generally *analogous* rather than *univocal*. If it's about future modernity, we need to do some mental updating.

**4.** I'd add that people vary widely in their idea of paradise. Some people are urbanites by choice. Others prefer a more bucolic existence. Some people love to live on the coast while others prefer mountains or deserts. Some people are very attached to their birthplace. And if you went a forward or backward a hundred years, their birthplace would lose its nostalgia, because it would be so different.

Some people fall in love with a particular place. Some people have wanderlust. They like to travel the world and live in different places.

Many people have a customized notion of paradise, not a generic, once-size-fits-all notion. Of course, I'm not saying the final state necessarily mirrors the "dream home" of every saint. But it wouldn't surprise me if the final state is more varied than traditional representations.

Maybe the reality of the final state is grounded in a multiverse. It takes omnipotence no more effort to create a multiverse than planet earth. The multiverse is Hilbert's Hotel in concrete.

## Disarming the warrior-God

In vol. 1, chap. 7 of Greg Boyd's **THE CRUCIFIXION OF THE WARRIOR GOD**, the author catalogues what he takes to be biblical representations of divine violence. That's foundational to his thesis.

**1.** In his reading of the OT, he explicitly takes the side of militant atheists and outspoken enemies of the faith like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris. He cites them in a footnote, in positive agreement. Boyd is a fifth column within Christianity. An ally with those who seek to destroy biblical theism.

**2.** His examples aren't all of a piece. On the one hand, I agree with him that some of his examples depict divine violence: holy war commands, the Flood, Sodom & Gomorrah, plague of the firstborn, David's census, God sending "evil/lying spirits". I agree with him on what those passages represent.

**3.** That said, the specific problem is generated by Boyd's idiosyncratic, "cruciform" pacifism. Divine violence is a problem for *his* theology. It runs counter to his theological paradigm. He devotes 1500 pages to solving an artificial problem that he created.

If you don't think retributive justice is wrong, then these passages aren't at odds with divine benevolence. A good God is a just God. A just God is a punitive God.

I'm not saying that observation dissolves all the difficulties. But Boyd's objection to the OT (and parts of the NT) is predicated on his preconceived notion that God *must* be

nonviolent. At that level, the contradiction is not internal to Scripture, but superimposed by his eccentric theology. He filters Scripture through his "cruciform" prism. In that respect, the problem isn't located in the text; rather, that's projected onto the text by his theological paradigm.

**4.** Over and above that are general difficulties not distinctive to his peculiar theology. I've dealt with this before. Because humans are social creatures, collective judgment inevitably harms the innocent as well as the guilty, the righteous as well as the wicked. Collective judgment doesn't imply collective guilt.

There is, however, a sorting out process in the afterlife. God's rough justice in this life is more discriminating in the afterlife. There's a reversal of fortunes. Eschatological compensations.

**5.** In addition, as I've noted on more than one occasion, everyone dies sooner or later. Whether people die by divine command or divine providence makes no moral difference that I can see. Either both are consistent with divine benevolence or inconsistent with divine benevolence.

**6.** Moreover, as I've said on other occasions, biblical judgments and atrocities don't create a special problem. They don't really add anything to the theodical issue. That's because atrocities and natural disasters occur outside the text of Scripture. Even if Scripture didn't record any of this material, the theodical issue would remain because the same difficulties are paralleled in divine providence. Conversely, if we have theodical resources adequate to exonerate divine providence in the face of atrocities and natural disasters outside Bible history, then these are adequate to exonerate divine benevolence in the face of analogous examples within Bible history.

Sure, the OT is full of grisly stuff. But that's true of human history in general. There's nothing in the OT to uniquely shock our moral sensibilities. Nothing that doesn't have analogue in human history generally. Eliminating the horrors of OT history does nothing to eliminate the horrors of secular history. The problem of evil is basically the same inside and outside of Scripture.

A Christian is somebody who already knows that morally hideous things happen in the world, but continues to believe in God in spite of that. Evil is a given, not a newfound discovery. And it's not as if atheism represents an improvement.

**7.** On the other hand, Boyd includes other examples that reflect a malicious reading of Scripture. It's as though he goes out of his way to make it harder than it really is so that his alternative wins by default. He gerrymanders an intolerable view of divine action in the OT as leverage to his preferred alternative.

**i)** He says Exod 22:29-30 & Ezk 20:25-26 teach divinely mandated child sacrifice.

**a)** Regarding Exod 22:29-30, he willfully construes the command out of context. But as the law code already stated, provision is made to redeem firstborn sons (13:13-15).

Likewise, "devoting" someone to God doesn't entail human sacrifice (e.g. Num 8:16; 1 Sam 1:11).

**b)** Regarding Ezk 20:25-26, I agree with one commentator's observation that:

*this whole chapter [is] creating a rhetorical parody of Israel's history in order to highlight its worst side. In a context of such sustained sarcasm and irony, we cannot suddenly take a verse like this as a face-value doctrinal or historical affirmation. It is impossible to imagine, in the light of his overwhelming emphasis on the goodness and importance of God's law and on the horrific evil of child sacrifice, that Ezekiel could have seriously meant that Yahweh himself gave bad laws and commanded human sacrifice. Christopher Wright, The Message of Ezekiel (IVP 2001), 160.*

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**ii)** He says some passages (Lev 26:29; Jer 19:9; Lam 2:20; Ezk 5:9-10; cf. Deut 28:53-57) "instigate" parents to cannibalize their kids. But four of the five passages are predictive or descriptive.

Only Jer 19:9 attributes that to direct divine action, but in context that's shorthand for the fact that by withdrawing his protection, God made Israel vulnerable to military depravation by her enemies.

**iii)** He says God "caused" soldiers to rip babies from womb, according to Hos 13:16 (cf. Isa 13:16). But that passage is

predictive and descriptive. Moreover, Amos 1:13 says that outrage provokes divine judgment.

**iv)** He cites historical atrocities and massacres (Gen 34; Judges 19-21), yet there's no presumption that narrators condone whatever they record. In his zeal to tarnish Scripture, Boyd commits elementary hermeneutical blunders.

**v)** He takes offense at the admittedly parabolic depiction in (Ezk 16:39-41), but that's written for shock value.

**vi)** He trots out Ps 137:9, but even liberal commentators like Goldingay regard that as figurative.

**vii)** He considers some OT depictions of God to be capricious. He makes no effort to interpret them charitably.

## Cultural genocide

I'll make a few observations:

<https://randalrauser.com/2018/01/1-samuel-15-paul-copans-middling-compromise/>

The Christian committed to recognizing the plenary inspiration of all Scripture now faces a dilemma:

Option 1: retain our moral intuitions that it is always wrong to slaughter non-combatants and thus deny that the plain reading that God commanded mass civilian slaughter is correct.

Option 2: accept the plain reading of the text that God commanded mass civilian slaughter and thus deny our intuitions that it is always wrong to slaughter non-combatants.

The Plain Reading of 1 Samuel 15: Mass Civilian Slaughter

**i)** According to *whose* moral intuitions is it "always wrong to slaughter non-combatants"? Did it violate the moral intuitions of Bible writers? Did it violate the moral intuitions of the soldiers who carried out those commands? Historically, is it universally or even generally true that killing noncombatants violates our moral intuitions?

**ii)** The word "slaughter" is prejudicial. I don't deny that there are cases in which that's an appropriate word. But is killing noncombatants always equivalent to "slaughter", with its pejorative connotations?



**iii)** Notice Rauser's indiscriminate category: "civilians/noncombatants". But do all individuals covered by that umbrella term have the same moral status? Is it morally permissible to kill a combatant who uses a biochem weapon, but impermissible to kill a scientist who designs the biochem weapon? What makes civilian scientist sacrosanct? Isn't he morally complicit?

What about a civilian who gives the orders? Why is it morally permissible to kill a combatant but impermissible to kill a civilian leader who issues orders to combatants? Isn't the leader more responsible (or culpable) than a footsoldier—who may well be a conscript?

Rauser's dichotomy is morally arbitrary. He's taking intellectual shortcuts.

You could argue that killing *some* types of noncombatants is morally wrong without arguing that killing *all* types of noncombatants is morally wrong. Or you could argue that killing some types of noncombatants is normally wrong, but sometimes there are extenuating circumstances.

**iv)** There's a difference between what's morally repellent and what's emotionally repellent. An action may be morally justifiable even if it's gut-wrenching. Sometimes it's morally licit or even obligatory to do things we hate. Take human shield situations. Or amputating a gangrenous limb.

*You see, the concept of genocide is a precisely defined legal concept which refers to any systematic attempt to destroy a cultural, religious, and/or*

*social identity. And one can seek to destroy an identity without ever killing a person. Needless to say, it is small consolation that Copan's abandonment of the plain reading still commits one to God's commanding a legal genocide.*

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Is there something intrinsically wrong with destroying *cultural* identity? Take cultures that practice human sacrifice. Is it wrong to destroy their cultural identity?

What about the Third Reich? Was it wrong to destroy Nazi cultural identity?

Some of my ancestors were Vikings. Vicious, ruthless pagan marauders. Christian missionaries destroyed their cultural identity. How unethical!

## **Abiathar the high priest**

**Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling, and said to him, “Why are you alone, and no one with you?” (1 Sam 21:1, ESV).**

**how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” (Mk 2:26, ESV).**

There is often thought to be an actual or apparent contradiction between these two verses. Bart Ehman has showcased this as the triggering event which precipitated his loss of faith in Biblical inerrancy.

There are commentators like R. T. France who think Mark made an innocent mistake. There are commentators like Stein and Bock who offer possible harmonizations to defend the accuracy of Mark, but admit that there's no good resolution to the apparent contradiction.

But I confess that I don't even see a *prima facie* contradiction:

**i)** Mark's actual wording is very terse. He uses a three-word phrase: *epi* followed by Abiathar [the] high priest.

A contradiction is generated when Mark is rendered: "at the time when Abiathar was high priest." But I don't think it would even occur to me to construe the text that way. For one thing, that's not what Mark actually says. Mark doesn't say this happened when Abiathar was high priest.

I simply take "high priest" to be a title. That's what Abiathar was known for. So it's not a statement of when he was in office, but a designation that identifies the Abiathar in question as that Abiathar. Presumably, he wasn't the only Jewish male with that name. So the title singles him out by giving that additional information to distinguish him from other Jews who might have the same name. We do the same thing with ex-presidents.

**ii)** Moreover, the association between Abimelech and Abiathar is natural, since they were father and son, as well as predecessor and successor in that office. They were contemporaries. Their lives overlapped. But Abiathar is the more prominent figure in OT history, so it makes sense to mention him to give the general timeframe.

**iii)** For that matter, it's quite possible if not probable that they were both present on that occasion. As father and son in the Levitical priesthood, it makes sense that both were in attendance at the tabernacle.

**iv)** We see a similar alternation between Annas and Caiaphas during the trial of Jesus. Annas had been deposed. Technically, Caiaphas, his son-in-law, was high priest at the time. But formalities aside, Caiaphas seems to be a figurehead while his father-in-law, though high priest emeritus, was still running the show behind-the-scenes.

## Ghost towns

Critics sometimes allege that some biblical place names are fictional or legendary. But this assumes that it should be easy for modern investigators to correlate literary notices with sites.

**i)** In the case of famous cities, their identity might be well-known.

**ii)** Likewise, in the case of sites that have been continuously occupied over the millennia, although even in that case, they might have been renamed.

**iii)** Also, because the Holy Land is a tourist trap and pilgrimage magnet, local traditions might invent identifications to feed pious curiosity.

**iv)** In the case of villages and hamlets from 2000-3000+ years ago, is there any expectation that they'd be easy to identify at our distance from events?

Nowadays, we have maps. Public records. Post office records. Libraries. Street signs. Some buildings are named after the locality. Official letterhead.

But aside from inscriptions, I imagine most ancient villages and hamlets never had that kind of direct evidence to begin with, and even if they originally had evidence naming the locale, there's no presumption that would survive or be discovered (as of yet).

**v)** I've read that the state of Kanas has over 6000 ghost towns. Suppose that was 2000-3500 years ago. Even if these towns were named in historical records, how many

sites would we be able to correlate with literary notices? It's not like they'd all have signs "Entering X". It's not like they'd all have artifacts that named the village or hamlet. For that matter, some artifacts with place names might be imported.

**vi)** When I was a boy, back in the 60s, there were two rival towns side-by-side: Kirkland and Houghton. Eventually, Houghton was annexed by Kirkland. But even though the name "Houghton" is still attached to some local businesses, natives below a certain age don't remember Houghton as an independent municipality. And people who later moved into the area from out of state or out of town never knew the local history. Within my lifetime, that's vanished. There are historical records, if you wish to do research, but what would survive after 2000-3500 years?

**vii)** What's remarkable is that we're able to identify so many place names in Scripture, and not that we're stumped by a few.

## Biblical fallibilists

A stock objection to biblical inerrancy is that inerrantists supposedly operate with a deductive, a priori theory of inspiration rather than an inductive approach that takes its cue from the phenomena.

Although that's a straw man, I'd point out that in many cases the situation is just the reverse. There are roughly two kinds of biblical fallibilists. Some reject inerrancy because they think Scripture is demonstrably wrong in a factual sense (e.g. history, science, contradictions).

However, there are other biblical fallibilists who reject inerrancy on philosophical grounds. Their objections are ethical. They think Scripture depicts God in ways unfitting for a morally perfect being. It may be "abhorrent" divine commands, the doctrine of hell, "homophobia", &c.

For them, Scripture is erroneous because it runs counter to their moral intuitions. Ironically, their opposition to plenary inspiration is deductive and a priori. The mirror image of what some critics impute to inerrantists.

## Demythologizing angels and demons

**1.** Here's a cautionary tale of what happens when inerrancy is denied, then taken to a logical conclusion:

<https://randalrauser.com/2018/01/angels-demons-part-obsolete-biblical-worldview/>

It's like tugging on a loose thread of a knitted garment. The entire garment begins to unravel.

**2.** I've critiqued the claim that Scripture operates with a three-story cosmography on numerous occasions, so I won't repeat myself here.

**3.** But beyond the general claim is the specific contention regarding angels and demons. Oddly enough, Rauser doesn't get around to explaining how biblical angels and demons are enmeshed in a three-story cosmography.

I suspect many professing Christians visualize angels coming down from heaven or going up to heaven, like Mercury flying down from Mt. Olympus. Yet the Bible rarely uses that imagery.

**i)** There are some examples in Revelation, but that's visionary material, and surreal things happen in visions.

**ii)** Jn 1:51 is suggestive, but poetic.

**iii)** There's "Jacob's ladder" (Gen 28), but that's a dream.

**iii)** Judges 13:20 has the angel merging with fire and rising with the flames. However, flames don't ordinarily rise all the



way to the sky. Moreover, the depiction seems to suggest the angel transmuting into flame.

**iv)** In Scripture, angels come from more than one direction (e.g. Judges 2:1; Rev 7:2).

**v)** In general, Scripture simply describes angels "appearing", "coming", or being "sent".

**vi)** Perhaps the most explicit example in historical narrative is Mt 28:2. However, that's not a direct, eyewitness description, since the narrator wasn't present to see it happen. He may have gotten his information from one of the sentinels. So it may well be a stock idiom to paraphrase what he was told.

**vii)** Finally, Rauser trots out the case of the demoniac, yet that has nothing to do with a three-story cosmography. Moreover, Rauser assumes that possession can't mimic symptoms of epilepsy. Yet cases of possession are hardly confined to ancient literary texts. There are well-documented examples by medical professionals.

## Royal chronology

Christian apologist Jonathan McLatchie recently responded to a Muslim critic:

<http://www.answeringmuslims.com/2017/12/investigating-alleged-contradictions-in.html>

I'd like to make some additional observations.

**i)** Two standard treatments:

[https://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_Chronology\\_of\\_the\\_Kings\\_of\\_Israel\\_an.html?id=QkgEaWG0\\_j4C](https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Chronology_of_the_Kings_of_Israel_an.html?id=QkgEaWG0_j4C)

[https://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_Mysterious\\_Numbers\\_of\\_the\\_Hebrew\\_Kin.html?id=Wx4GsZH3dzAC](https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Mysterious_Numbers_of_the_Hebrew_Kin.html?id=Wx4GsZH3dzAC)

**ii)** As Jonathan points out, some numerical discrepancies are due to transcriptional errors.

**iii)** Likewise, some nominal discrepancies may be due to scribal errors, viz. transposing letters in the consonantal text.

**iv)** Some nominal differences may be due to orthographical variations on the same name. Or nicknames.

**v)** Sometimes Scripture uses round numbers.

**vi)** Some numbers may be idiomatic rather than literal. In 1 Chron 11:11:

"Thirty" is probably akin to the name of an elite force, a palace guard unit or the like, and is not to be taken too

precisely. E. Merrill, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* (Kregel 2015), 168.

vii) Some numbers may be hyperbolic:

[http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/40/40-3/40-3-pp377-387\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/40/40-3/40-3-pp377-387_JETS.pdf)

viii) Some differences are due to different selection criteria.

ix) We need to define "error". Since the Chronicler was using 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings as a major source, assuming that our MSS preserve the original names and numbers, differences would be intentional rather than due to ignorance or accidental mistakes, since he was working directly from these sources (among others). At this distance we may not be able to reconstruct his editorial rationale, but he knows what he's doing.

It made sense to him, and it presumably made sense to the original audience. The fact that a modern reader finds some of this puzzling just means some of the background information or contextual understanding has been lost to us. That's to be expected when we study an ancient text. Consider commentaries on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and how Dante scholars are sometimes at a loss to identify Dante's historical allusions, even though that's much more recent, with more material surviving from that time and place.

x) The objection regarding chronological discrepancies has been around at least since the 19C, when Bishop Colenso made a big deal about that. However, biblical archeology has uncovered the fact that the issue is more complex, and resolvable in principle, although our surviving sources are necessarily spotty. The basic principle to keep in mind is that the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah might

employ different calendars and regnal-year systems. Moreover, these could alternate in time or place within or between the rival kingdoms. As one scholar explains:

*The first thing to realize is that the chronological data in Kings in particular—regnal years, synchronisms, etc.—follow normal Near Eastern usage. They cannot be understood by just totting up figures as if this were some modern, "Western" composition. That way lies confusion, as many have found to their cost. Ancient regnal years were calculated in one or another of two main ways, simply because kings never normally died conveniently at midnight on the last day of the last month of the year, so making their regnal years identical with the ordinary calendar year. So, as in Mesopotamia, one might use accession-year dating. When the throne changed hands during the civil year, the whole year was (in effect) credited to the king who had died, the new man treating it simply as his "accession year" (a year zero), and counting his Year 1 from the next New Year's Day. On this system, if a list says a king reigned eight years, then eight years should be credited to him.*

*But in Egypt the classical system was the opposite, i.e., nonaccession-year dating. In this case, when one king died and another ascended the throne, the whole year was credited to the new man (as Year 1, straightaway), and none of it to his recently deceased predecessor. In such cases a king who is known to have reached his eighth year can only be credited with seven full years...These phenomena do affect the calculation of regnal years in Israel and Judah.*

*On the Egyptian method a king reaches his seventh year ("seven years"), but it is credited to his successor; so we subtract one, giving him a true reign of only six years. On the Mesopotamian method a king reaches his sixth year ("six years"), which is credited to him (merely=accession for next man), so he has a true reign of six years, nothing to subtract. These usages apply as much to Hebrew kings as to their neighbors, and cannot be ignored.*

*[For instance] Yet within that span our data in Kings give two reigns in Israel, Ahaziah at two years and J(eh)roam at twelve years, which makes fourteen years to our Western minds, On the Mesopotamian accession-year system, this would also be true. But*

the founder of Israel, Jeroboam I, came not from Mesopotamia but from Egypt to found his kingdom (1 Kgs 11:40; 12:2), and so he may well have brought the Egyptian usage with him. Because, on the nonaccession-year usage, Ahaziah would have only one full year and J(eh)roam eleven full years-total, twelve years, fitting neatly into the twelve years from 853 to 841. Then Ahab and his predecessors would also have used this mode. So six kings with eighty-four stated years had actually one full year each less, giving us eighty-four years - six years = seventy-eight years, back to 931/930, for the accession of Jeroboam I, and by inference that of his rival, Rehoboam of Judah.

We have in practice to deal with three distinct calendars: (1) the ancient and Hebrew spring-to-spring calendar (months Nisan to next Nisan), (2) the ancient and Hebrew autumn-to-autumn ("fall") calendar (months Tishri to next Tishri), and (3) our modern winter-to-winter calendar (months January to December, next January), which we have to overlay upon the old calendars to "translate" them into our current usage. Any attempt to work out the two lines of Hebrew kings, assuming that they both

*used the same ancient calendar (whether spring/Nisan or autumn/Tishri), soon falls apart, as neither the regnal years nor the synchronisms given between the two kingdoms make sense on this procedure. It is clear that the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah used different calendars, one Nisan to Nisan, the other Tishri to Tishri). But which used which?*

*Again, any attempt to impose the same type of regnal year-count (accession or nonaccession) on both kingdoms overall is doomed to failure, and has to be discarded. Each used either form of year-count under particular circumstances.*

*Only very minor miscopying need be assumed in (at most!) barely three instances out of scores of figures, and these may simply be correct figures not yet properly understood.*

*A few problems remain that may need further reconsideration...If at some period years were expressed by numerals (e.g. Egyptian hieratic tens, and use of strokes for units), it is quite possible to "lose" an odd unit (29>28; 12>11) in the course of scribal recopying...Here 2 Chron 9:25 retains the*

*best reading, "4,000 stalls" (arba'at alafim), for that of 1 Kings 4:26, reading "40,000 stalls" (arba'im elef), in which m has replaced the feminine singular. Kenneth Kitchen, On the Reliability of the Old Testament (Eerdmans 2003), 26-29, 508.*

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## Stargate

**9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9-11).**

I've discussed this before, but I have a few new things to add.

**i)** Unbelievers cite this as an example of Biblical error, where the narrator subscribes to a flat-earth, three-story cosmography.

Readers who construe the passage that way seem to think it depicts Jesus shooting up into heaven like a rocket. He passes out of sight when he passes through a cloud overhead, obscuring the view for ground-based observers. "Heaven" is up in the sky or outer space.

**ii)** But that's a misreading of the passage. He doesn't pass through a cloud. Rather, the cloud removes him.

In context, the "cloud" is a synonym for the Shekinah, viz. the pillar of cloud in the Exodus narratives. Acts is the

sequel to Luke, and in Luke's Gospel, we have the same type of imagery:

**34 As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"**

Once again, that has reference to the Shekinah, with allusions to cloudy pillar (by day) and fiery pillar (by night). The same phenomenon seen under different lighting conditions. A theophanic "cloud".

When we read the Ascension account, we should visualize something like the theophany in Ezk 1, which—from a distance—may have resembled an electrical storm. In Ezekiel, the theophany is a portable throne room. The Shekinah is like a corona ensheathing the enthroned Deity and his angelic sentinels.

**iii)** In the Ascension account, the theophanic cloud functions like time portals and interdimensional portals in science fiction lore, which transport someone stepping through them into the past, future, or parallel universe. In this case, it transports Jesus to another realm ("heaven").

I'm not saying it's literally an interdimensional portal. I'm just using that analogy to clarify the function. We might also compare it to the Wood between the Worlds in **THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA**.

**iv)** There is, though, the intriguing question of Christ's ultimate destination. In standard biblical eschatology, the intermediate state precedes the final state. The intermediate state is a disembodied condition while the final state is a reembodied condition. However, the resurrection of Christ is "anachronistic" in the sense that it foreshadows the resurrection of the just. So where did Jesus go? Presumably he went to a physical place inasmuch as he has a body. But if his resurrection is a foretaste of something that only happens at the Parousia (or thereabouts), then is he all alone?

**v)** It would be fitting if the much maligned passage in Mt 27:51-53 dovetails with the Ascension. The same question arises: what happened to them after they made their appearance? Perhaps the answer is that Jesus, along with the resurrected saints in Mt 27:51-53, went to the same place—wherever that is. Not here on earth, certainly. And there they remain until the new Eden is inaugurated on earth.

**vi)** As a side note, Lk 1:35 using the same theophanic imagery, like the Shekinah suffusing the tabernacle. Figuratively speaking, Mary's womb was akin the tabernacle while prenatal Jesus was akin the Shekinah in the inner sanctum.

But perhaps it's more than rhetorical. Maybe the Shekinah really did overshadow Mary to effect the Incarnation. To miraculously effect the virginal conception.

## "Cruciform accommodation"

*"The Principle of Cruciform Accommodation" (chs. 13-14) states that, just as Jesus lowered himself to the point of appearing guilty and reflecting the ugliness of sin on the cross, God at times accommodated his self-revelation to Israel's sinful, culturally conditioned capacities and expectations.*

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<http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/review/the-crucifixion-of-the-warrior-god-interpreting-the-old-testaments-violent>

An obvious problem with Boyd's comparison is that Jesus doesn't appear to be guilty in the NT. He doesn't appear to be guilty from the viewpoint of the Gospel narrators—or the other NT writers.

He doesn't appear to be guilty from the viewpoint of gentiles like Pilate and the Centurion.

He doesn't appear to be guilty from the viewpoint of Jews like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

There's even a sense in which he doesn't appear to be guilty from the viewpoint of his detractors, since they oppose him in spite of miraculous evidence that he's a divinely accredited messenger.

From just about every viewpoint in the NT, whether the writers or figures within the narratives, he appears to be innocent and righteous.

Moreover, he consistently presents himself as innocent and righteous.

## Righteous Lot

**7 and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked 8 (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard) (2 Pet 2:7-8).**

Peter's commendation of Lot's character is puzzling to Bible readers because it doesn't seem to be derivable from the depiction of Lot in Genesis. It may be necessary to distinguish between the historical Lot of Genesis and the literary Lot, who undergoes character development in the Intertestamental literature. For instance:

*She it was who, while the godless perished, saved the upright man as he fled from the fire raining down on the Five Cities (Wisdom 10:16, NJB).*

This whole section of 2 Peter uses words and pictures from Intertestamental literature (1 Enoch) and Greek mythology ("tartarus"). So the positive image of Lot is probably filtered through that kind of material.

This might be analogous to how, in our own culture, we use allusive analogies to famous movies, or legends about the Founding Fathers (e.g. George Washington's cherry tree).

That's understood to be a fictional gloss. It may be that in 2 Peter and Jude, we have examples of audience adaptation,

where the author is evoking popular tropes that had resonance with their readers. The Genesis account would be the historical core, but with this overlay.

There are other examples of this. Take Ezekiel's creative description of Adam's fall or Lucifer's fall in Ezk 28. Readers would instantly recognize the allusion to Gen 3, but Ezekiel has recast that in a more poetic vein.

## The Sin of Certainty

I was asked to comment on this very sympathetic review of a book Peter Enns published last year:

<https://baptistnews.com/article/the-sin-of-certainty-peter-enns-journey-from-belief-to-trust/#.WbXPMXpMEv4>

In the 19th century, Enns says, Christian orthodoxy absorbed four body blows, or "uh-oh moments," within the span of 30 years.

To begin with, challenges to the Christian faith antedate the 19C. Take Isaac Newton's defense of Biblical chronology:

The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended (London: 1728)

<http://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/catalogue/record/THEM00183>

Consider 17-18C defenses of the Noah's flood:

William Whiston, **A NEW THEORY OF THE EARTH** (1696)

Thomas Burnet, **THE SACRED THEORY OF THE EARTH** (1690):

<https://archive.org/details/sacredtheoryofea01burn>

<https://archive.org/details/sacredtheoryearth02burn>

Edmund Halley, "Some Considerations about the Cause of the Universal Deluge":



<http://rstl.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/33/381-391/118.full.pdf+html>

I have a fat volume on Genesis by Cotton Mather (Biblia Americana: Volume 1: Genesis. Reiner Smolinski, Ed. Baker Academic, 2010) which engages the intellectual crosswinds of the day.

Consider patristic-era attacks on the historicity of Scripture by Celsus and Porphyry, as well as medieval Muslim attacks on the historicity of Scripture (e.g. Ibn Hazm).

Is Enns really that ignorant of church history? It's not though it was smooth sailing for Christianity until the 19C. There's been fierce intellectual opposition at various times in church history. The Christian faith is a battle-hardened faith.

***First came On the Origin of Species by Charles Darwin, a thesis that called in question the biblical account of human origins.***

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It's true that evolution poses a challenge to the Christian faith. However, the theory of evolution is scientifically controversial. Even within the evolutionary guild, there are skeptics regarding the standard mechanisms.

In addition, evolutionary scientists typically espouse methodological atheism. It's not just the scientific evidence, but a philosophical filter.

*At the same time, scientists were discovering that the universe is infinitely older and more expansive than the biblical narrative would have us believe.*

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**i)** That wasn't at the same time. The New Geology antedated Darwin.

**ii)** In what respect is the universe "more expansive" than the biblical narrative would have us believe? Of course, the Bible was originally addressed to an audience with no knowledge of modern astronomy. They didn't and couldn't have our sense of scale. But how is that a challenge to the Christian faith?

**iii)** It's true that mainstream science presents a challenge to traditional views regarding the age of the universe. One response, championed by Philip Henry Gosse, as well as young-earth creationists, is to defend the traditional interpretation. Another response is to concede mainstream dating and question the traditional interpretation.

There's nothing 19C about the idea of challenging traditional interpretations. The Protestant Reformation challenged medieval interpretations of the Bible. Indeed, challenged the medieval hermeneutic.

*Then archaeologists discovered documents from cultures older than the Bible and concluded that biblical narratives from Noah and the flood to*

*the shape of biblical law were borrowed and adapted from Israel's neighbors. This speculation called the direct inspiration of the Old Testament into question.*

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**i)** That there was an independent flood account was already known to Josephus, church fathers, and later Greek historians via Berosus (c. 239 BC). So there was nothing essentially revolutionary about unearthing the Gilgamesh Epic. Moreover, why not view that as corroborative evidence for the Biblical account?

**ii)** I presume Enns is alluding to the Code of Hammurabi. That raises several issues:

Even if we grant that the Mosaic law is to some degree indebted to the Code of Hammurabi, that's not the same thing as uncritical borrowing. For instance, David Wright argues for the literary dependence of the Mosaic Law on the Code of Hammurabi: *Inventing God's Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi* (Oxford, 2009). However, there's a catch. He considers the Mosaic law to be a polemical response to Hammurabi's code and a replacement for Hammurabi's code. As another scholar notes, the laws of Hammurabi "preserve the status quo and favor those who have wealth and power. This is contrary to the equality described in many of the biblical laws and to the priority given to the poor and vulnerable" R. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Baker 2016), 69.

Conversely, there are scholars who are very skeptical regarding arguments for the alleged literary dependence of the Mosaic law on the laws of Hammurabi. For instance:

<http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/Doc12/polak.pdf>

**iii)** Moreover, Enns completely disregards ongoing archeological confirmation for the OT and the NT.

*Then German academics started digging around in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). These documents, they concluded, were clearly the work of several authors and were probably cut and pasted into their present form during the Babylonian captivity.*

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That's armchair speculation rather than evidence. Moreover, it's ridiculous. For instance:

*I was trained simultaneously in higher criticism and biblical archaeology without at first realizing that the two points of view were mutually exclusive... In the eleventh tablet I could not help noting that the Babylonian account [Gilgamesh Epic] of the construction of*

*the Ark contains the specifications in detail much like the Hebrew account of Noah's Ark. At the same time, I recalled that the Genesis description is ascribed to P of Second Temple date, because facts and figures such as those pertaining to the Ark are characteristic of the hypothetical Priestly author. What occurred to me was that if the Genesis account of the Ark belonged to P on such grounds, the Gilgamesh Epic account of the Ark belonged to P on the same grounds—which is absurd. Cyrus Gordon, "Higher Critics and Forbidden Fruit." Christianity Today 4 (1959 November 23), 131.*

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Gordon was a secular Jew rather than a "fundamentalist".

*Then, in America at least, the plain reading of scripture failed to answer the slavery question. With abolitionists and pro-slavery preachers using holy writ to bolster their positions it became difficult*

***to argue that God's word spoke with one voice.***

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Surely he's kidding. On the one hand there've *always* been disputes over the interpretation of Scripture, stretching back to Second Temple Judaism. On the other hand, mere existence of disagreement doesn't imply that both sides have equally good arguments.

***According to Enns, 19th-century Christians doubled down on certainty, because they were children of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation that replaced the authority of the Church with the authority of Scripture.***

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That's a gross oversimplification. There is no single school of Protestant epistemology. To take a few examples, you have figures like Locke and Butler who stress probability. You have Scottish Common Sense Realism (e.g. Thomas Reid). You have the dispute between Warfield and Bavinck on the nature of apologetics. For instance:

<http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2010/02/warfields-path.html>

Once again, is Enns that ignorant of church history?

*Professor Enns is the product of a very conservative corner of American evangelicalism and therefore he managed to avoid any serious encounter with agnosticism, atheism, non-Christian religions or the physical sciences until he did doctoral work at Harvard in the early 1990s. He was surprised to learn that most of the non-Christians he encountered were genuinely nice people. He also discovered that his Jewish professors in biblical Hebrew didn't read the ancient texts like the Adam and Eve narratives in Genesis the way Enns had learned to read them.*

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That might explain his reaction. But everyone is not as naive as he was.

*Returning to Westminster Theological Seminary (his alma mater) as a professor, Enns attempted, gingerly at first, to loosen things up a bit. Everything was fine at first, but when the professor drafted a peace treaty between Charles*

## *Darwin and Christian orthodoxy things got ugly fast.*

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To my knowledge, that's highly inaccurate. It's a combination of things that got him into hot water. Student complaints. The editorial direction in which he took the **WTJ**. And his **INSPIRATION AND INCARNATION**.

*His fellow professors were supportive, but the administration tightened the screws until Enns had no choice to resign.*

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That's inaccurate. He was given tenure by a split vote: 12-8.

<https://students.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?id=104>

*“These experiences have drawn me out of my safe haven of certainty and onto a path of trusting God — not trusting God that my thinking is correct or soon would be, but trusting God regardless of how certain I might feel.”*

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i) The basic problem with his position is that trust requires a foundation of knowledge. Trust is a combination of



knowledge and ignorance. You exercise rational trust when you rely on a source of information for claims you can't directly verify. Because you have evidence that your source of information is reliable, you view it as a trustworthy source of information concerning claims for which you otherwise lack direct evidence.

What God does Enns trust in? What's his source of information? Clearly not biblical theism. From what I can tell, he regards the OT as pious fiction. He rejects the inerrancy of the Gospels. And he rejects the inerrancy of Jesus. By his lights, the Gospels are inerrant records about an errant Christ.

**ii)** In addition, he only regards certainty as a sin when certainty is vested in biblical revelation. He's certain the Bible is fundamentally mistaken on many issues. He's certain the theory of evolution is true.

*“The idea that the Creator of heaven and Earth, with all their beauty, wonder, and mystery, was at the same time a supersized Bible thumping preacher, obsessed with whether our thoughts were all in place and ready to condemn us to eternity to hell if they weren’t, made no sense—even though that was my operating (though unexamined) assumption as long as I could remember.”*

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It's feeble-mindedness that some people find this comparison plausible. God is too big to be interested in the details of his creation. How does the conclusion follow from the premise? The bigger the God, the greater his mastery of detail.

I'll finish my quoting two Bible commentators, one from the 17C, another from the 18C, to illustrate how Christian intellectuals before the 19C grappled with "scientific" objections to Noah's flood.

Matthew Poole (17C):

1. That the differing kinds of beasts and birds, which unlearned men fancy to be innumerable, are observed by the learned, who have particularly searched into them, and written of them, to be little above three hundred, whereof the far greatest part are but small; and many of these which now are thought to differ in kind, in their first original were but of one sort, though now they be so greatly altered in their shape and qualities, which might easily arise from the diversity of their climate and food, and other circumstances, and from the promiscuous conjunctions of those lawless creatures.

2. That the brute creatures, when they were enclosed in the ark, where they were idle, and constantly under a kind of horror and amazement, would be contented with far less provisions, and those of another sort than they were accustomed to, and such as might lie in less room, as hay, and the fruits of the earth. God also, who altered their natures, and made the savage creatures mild and gentle, might by the same powerful

providence moderate their appetites, or, if he pleased, have increased their provision whilst they did eat it, as afterwards Christ did by the loaves. So vain and idle are the cavils of wanton wits concerning the incapacity of the ark for the food of so many beasts.

3. That supposing the ravenous creatures did feed upon flesh, here is also space enough and to spare for a sufficient number of sheep, for their food for a whole year, as upon computation will easily appear; there being not two thousand sheep necessary for them, and the ark containing no less than four hundred and fifty thousand cubits in it.

The fountains of the great deep, i.e. of the sea, called the deep, Job 38:16, Job 38:30, Job 41:31, Psalm 106:9; and also of that great abyss, or sea of waters, which is contained in the bowels of the earth. For that there are vast quantities of waters there, is implied both here and in other scriptures, as Psalm 33:7 2 Peter 3:5; and is affirmed by Plato in his Phaedrus, and by Seneca in his Natural Questions, 3.19, and is evident from springs and rivers which have their rise from thence; and some of them have no other place into which they issue themselves, as appears from the Caspian Sea, into which divers rivers do empty themselves, and especially that great river Volga, in such abundance, that it would certainly drown all those parts of the earth, if there were not a vent for them under ground; for other vent above ground out of that great lake or sea they have none. Out of this

deep therefore, and out of the sea together, it was very easy for God to bring such a quantity of waters, as might overwhelm the earth without any production of new waters, which yet he with one word could have

created. So vain are the cavils of atheistical antiscipturists in this.

Profane wits pretend this to be impossible, because of the vast height of divers mountains. But,

1. This cannot be thought impossible by any man that believeth a God; to whom it was as easy to bring forth a sufficiency of water, for this end, as to speak a word. And if we acknowledge a miracle of the Divine power and providence here, it is no more than even heathens have confessed in other cases.

2. Peradventure this flood might not be simply universal over the whole earth, but only over all the habitable world, where either men or beasts lived; which was as much as either the meritorious cause of the flood, men's sins, or the end of it, the destruction of all men and beasts, required. And the or that whole heaven may be understood of that which was over all the habitable parts of it. And whereas our modern heathens, that miscall themselves Christians, laugh at the history of this flood upon this and the like occasions, as if it were an idle romance; they may please to note, that their predecessors, the ancient and wiser heathens, have divers of them acknowledged the truth of it, though they also mixed it with their fables, which was neither strange nor unusual for them to do. Lactantius appeals to the heathens of his age concerning it. Nay, there is not only mention of the flood in general, but also of the dove sent out of the ark, in Plutarch, and Berosus, and Abydenus. And the memory of this general flood is preserved to this day among the poor ignorant Indians, who asked the Christians who invaded their land, whether they ever heard of such a thing, and whether another flood was

to be expected? And the Chinese writers relate, that but one person, whom they call Puoncuus, with his family, were saved in the flood, and all the rest perished.

John Gill (18C):

That there was such a flood of waters brought upon the earth, is confirmed by the testimonies of Heathen writers of all nations; only instead of Noah they put some person of great antiquity in their nation, as the Chaldeans, Sisithrus or Xisuthrus; the Grecians and Romans, Prometheus or Deucalion, or Ogyges. Josephus F26 says, all the writers of the Barbarian or Heathen history make mention of the flood and of the ark; and he produces the authorities of Berosus the Chaldean, and Hieronymus the Egyptian, who wrote the Phoenician antiquities, and Mnaseas, and many others, and Nicolaus of Damascus: and there are others that Eusebius F1 makes mention of, as Melo, who wrote against the Jews, yet speaks of the deluge, at which a man with his sons escaped; and Abydenus the Assyrian, whose account agrees with this of Moses that follows in many things; as do also what Lucian F2 and Ovid F3 have wrote concerning it, excepting in the name of the person in whose time it was: and not only the Egyptians had knowledge of the universal deluge, as appears from the testimony of Plato, who says F4, that an Egyptian priest related to Solon, out of their sacred books, the history of it; and from various circumstances in the story of Osiris and Typhon, which name they give to the sea, and in the Chaldee language signifies a deluge; and here the Targum of Onkelos renders the word by "Tuphana"; and the Arabs to this day call the flood "Al-tufan"; but the Chinese also frequently speak of the delugeF5; and even it is

said the Americans of Mexico and Peru had a tradition of it F6; and the Bramines also F7, who say that 21,000 years ago the sea overwhelmed and drowned the whole earth, excepting one great hill, far to the northward, called "Biudd"; and that there fled thither one woman and seven men (whose names they give, see ( Genesis 7:13 ) ) those understanding out of their books that such a flood would come, and was then actually coming, prepared against the same, and repaired thither; to which place also went two of all sorts of creatures (see ( Genesis 6:19 ) ) herbs, trees, and grass, and of everything that had life, to the number in all of 1,800,000 living souls: this flood, they say, lasted one hundred and twenty years (see ( Genesis 6:3 ) ) five months and five days; after which time all these creatures that were thus preserved descended down again, and replenished the earth; but as for the seven men and woman, only one of them came down with her, and dwelt at the foot of the mountain.

according to the Chaldean account by Berosus F24, it was predicted that mankind would be destroyed by a flood on the fifteenth of the month Daesius, the second month from the vernal equinox: it is very remarkable what Plutarch F25 relates, that Osiris went into the ark the seventeenth of Athyr, which month is the second after the autumnal equinox, and entirely agrees with the account of Moses concerning Noah.

` ` there are large lakes, (as Seneca observes F26,) which we see not, much of the sea that lies hidden, and many rivers that slide in secret:" so that those vast quantities of water in the bowels of the earth being pressed upwards, by the falling down of the earth, or by some other cause unknown to us, as

Bishop Patrick observes, gushed out violently in several parts of the earth, where holes and gaps were made, and where they either found or made a vent, which, with the forty days' rain, might well make such a flood as here described: it is observed {a}, there are seas which have so many rivers running into them, which must be emptied in an unknown manner, by some subterraneous passages, as the Euxine sea; and particularly it is remarked of the Caspian sea, reckoned in length to be above one hundred and twenty German leagues, and in breadth from east to west about ninety, that it has no visible way for the water to run out, and yet it receives into its bosom near one hundred rivers, and particularly the great river Volga, which is of itself like a sea for largeness, and is supposed to empty so much water into it in a year's time, as might suffice to cover the whole earth, and yet it is never increased nor diminished, nor is it observed to ebb or flow: so that if, says my author, the fountains of the great deep, or these subterraneous passages, were continued to be let loose, without any reflux into them, as Moses supposes, during the time of the rain of forty days and forty nights; and the waters ascended but a quarter of a mile in an hour; yet in forty days it would drain all the waters for two hundred and forty miles deep; which would, no doubt, be sufficient to cover the earth above four miles high: and by the former, "the windows" or flood gates of heaven, or the "cataracts", as the Septuagint version, may be meant the clouds, as Sir Walter Raleigh F2 interprets them; Moses using the word, he says, to express the violence of the rains, and pouring down of waters; for whosoever, adds he, hath seen those fallings of water which sometimes happen in the Indies, which are called "the spouts", where clouds do not break into drops, but fall with a resistless violence in one body, may properly use that

manner of speech which Moses did, that the windows or flood gates of heaven were opened, or that the waters fell contrary to custom, and that order which we call natural; God then loosened the power retentive in the uppermost air, and the waters fell in abundance: and another writer upon this observes F3, that thick air is easily turned into water; and that round the earth there is a thicker air, which we call the "atmosphere"; which, the further it is distant from the earth, the thinner it is, and so it grows thinner in proportion, until it loseth all its watery quality: how far this may extend cannot be determined; it may reach as far as the orb of the moon, for aught we know to the contrary; now when this retentive quality of waters was withdrawn, Moses tells us, that "the rain was upon the earth forty days" and "forty nights": and therefore some of it might come so far as to be forty days in falling; and if we allow the rain a little more than ten miles in an hour, or two hundred and fifty miles in a day, then all the watery particles, which were 10,000 miles high, might descend upon the earth; and this alone might be more than sufficient to cover the highest mountains.

even it may be allowed fifteen cubits high; nor will this furnish out so considerable an objection to the history of the flood as may be thought at first sight, since the highest mountains are not near so high as they are by some calculated. Sir Walter Raleigh allows thirty miles for the height of the mountains, yet the highest in the world will not be found to be above six direct miles in height. Olympus, whose height is so extolled by the poets, does not exceed a mile and a half perpendicular, and about seventy paces. Mount Athos, said to cast its shade into the isle of Lemnos (according to, Pliny eighty seven miles) is not above two miles in height, nor Caucasus much more; nay, the Peak of Teneriff,



reputed the highest mountain in the world, may be ascended in three days (according to the proportion of eight furlongs to a day's journey), which makes about the height of a German mile perpendicular; and the Spaniards affirm, that the Andes, those lofty mountains of Peru, in comparison of which they say the Alps are but cottages, may be ascended in four days' compass...

## Parsing Ezekiel's temple

*Readers will find themselves embarrassed by these chapters [i.e. Ezk 40-48]. To some extent at least they were presumably presented as normative for the future. Yet the postexilic community, even when adoption of their rulings was within its power, found other models of worship, while the different orientation of the Christian faith has left these chapters outdated. Must one relegate them to a drawer of lost hopes and disappointed dreams, like faded photographs? To resort to dispensationalism and postpone them to a literal fulfillment in a yet future time strikes the author as a desperate expedient that sincerely attempts to preserve belief in an inerrantist prophecy. The canon of scriptures, Jewish and Christian, took unfulfillment in stride, ever commending the reading of them as the very word of God to each*

*believing generation. L. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48 (Word, 1990), 214-15.*

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**i)** This raises a serious issue. Millennial movements and millennial cults routinely make false predictions. What distinguishes a millennial cult from a millennial movement is if the leader and members double down after their predictions fail. To outsiders, Christians who defend the inerrancy of Bible prophecy seem to be guilty of the same special pleading. So we do need to be able to address the challenge.

**ii)** Allen's final sentence is misleading. The canon doesn't take unfulfillment in stride from the canonical standpoint. To the contrary, the distinction between true and false prophets is fundamental to biblical theology.

**iii)** Suppose, for argument's sake, that Ezk 40-48 is a program to replace Solomon's temple. Did exilic Jews really expect that to happen after their repatriation? Solomon's temple, which was far less ambitious, was built by human means. The postexilic community didn't have anything approaching the resources necessary to build the temple complex envisioned by Ezekiel. How could they realistically expect that to happen after returning to Palestine? Wouldn't thoughtful members of Ezekiel's audience find his vision puzzling or idealistic? So that's one of several dubious assumptions underlying Allen's interpretation and assessment.

Barring supernatural intervention, it would require modern construction equipment to build the temple complex envisioned by Ezekiel.

**iv)** Let's consider some other dubious assumptions he makes. A vision of a temple has no date. A vision of a temple doesn't place that structure in the past, near future, or far future. A vision of a temple is neutral on the timeframe.

As a practical matter, Ezekiel's audience could rule out a past realization. But respecting the future, there's nothing in the vision itself that selects for the near-term or long-term. It's just a verbal description of a mental image of a temple complex.

**v)** By the same token, a vision of a temple is not, in itself, a promise, prediction, or building program. Compare it to dreams. Some dreams are ordinary while other dreams are revelatory. But you don't know ahead of time which is which. At best, you only know after the fact if the dream was ordinary or revelatory. If it comes true, then it was prophetic. But that's not something you can discern in advance.

Moreover, the benefit of hindsight works better in the short-term than the long-term. In the case of any true prophecy, there's an interval between the time of the prophecy and the time of fulfillment. Before then, the prophecy was apparently false. Nothing happened...until it happened!

**vi)** Suppose, for argument's sake, that Ezekiel's vision is not a promise, prediction, or building program. Would that still be edifying?

Solomon's temple was destroyed. Ezekiel has a vision of a new temple that, in a sense, will replace it. Even if that's not literal, it could still be meaningful. Not a vision of the future, but a picturesque metaphor or analogy for the future. A way of saying the exilic community has a future.

God will restore the Jews to their homeland. The Mosaic cultus will resume. God hasn't given up on Israel.

## Pretenders and the Parousia

**23 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the messiah!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you beforehand. 26 So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 27 For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man (Mt 24:23-25).**

**i)** The Olivet Discourse is often thought to be an embarrassment for Christian theology because, on one interpretation, Jesus made a false prediction. He synchronized the Parousia and the end of the world with the fall of Jerusalem.

Certainly there are elements to the extended prophecy that suggests events leading up to and including the fall of Jerusalem. Yet on another interpretation, there's a shift from a short-term oracle to a long-term oracle. I myself find that persuasive.

**ii)** But I'd like to make another point. Consider vv23-27. This doesn't fit the fall of Jerusalem. So it suggests that at

this juncture, the oracle is looking beyond the fall of Jerusalem to a more distant denouement.

I take the thrust of vv23-27 to be that Christians won't have to go looking for messiah when he returns. The onus will not be on them to apply criteria to ID the messiah. Rather, when he comes back, the return of Christ will be so unmistakable that this will undoubtedly be the true messiah, in the person of Jesus.

But it's hard to see how the fall of Jerusalem fills the bill. To begin with, Jesus refers to false prophets and messianic pretenders who perform signs and wonders. That's a stock phrase that triggers associations with the miracles of the Exodus. But Jesus said even that's an unreliable indicator. Yet Exodus-redux miracles are far more impressive than what happened at the fall of Jerusalem. So if even miracles on the scale of the Exodus fail to ID the true messiah's return, the fall of Jerusalem would surely fall short. There was nothing supernatural about the fall of Jerusalem. At best, Josephus reports a few miracles. But even if we credit them, those are less spectacular than Exodus-style miracles. If, in the greater case of Exodus-redux miracles, these are unreliable criteria, then a fortiori, the lesser case of Jerusalem's downfall would be even more ambiguous.

## Two-stage prophecies

It appears to me that in Scripture we sometimes encounter the phenomenon of two-stage prophecies. A short-term prophecy followed by a long-term prophecy. Examples include Isa 7-12, Dan 11, and Mt 24. To "skeptics," that explanation looks like special pleading. However, there's a logic to the strategy.

In the nature of the case, we have no direct evidence that a long-term prophecy is true in advance of the fact. That's something we can only confirm after the fact. So what's the evidence that a would-be prophet really knows the future? One strategy is to provide a short-term prophecy. If that comes true, then it establishes his prophetic credentials (assuming the prediction is naturally unforeseeable). Having proven, via short-term prophecy, that he knows the future, that lays the groundwork for long-term prophecy.



## Must purported revelation pass a moral test?

I'm going to comment on this essay:

Morrison, W. (2013) The Problem of Apparently Morally Abhorrent Divine Commands, in **THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL** (eds J. P. McBrayer and D. Howard-Snyder), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Oxford, UK.,ch10

Morrison is an atheist.

*If God is morally perfect, there must be many things that could not be commanded by him, and it might seem to be quite easy to name some of them.*

*William Lane Craig, for example, says that it is absolutely impossible for God to command rape (Craig et al. 2009, 172) or to command us to eat our children (Craig and Antony 2008). David Baggett and Jerry Walls say that it would be impossible for God to command us to “rape and pillage hapless peasants in a rural village of Africa” (Baggett and Walls 2011, 134).<sup>1</sup>*

*“Absolutely impossible” may somewhat overstate the case. Circumstances matter, and an imaginative philosopher might perhaps conjure up a world in which God is morally justified in commanding*

someone to do these things. But even if such a world were genuinely possible, it would bear little resemblance to the actual world. As things actually are, commands like these do not pass moral muster and cannot reasonably be attributed to God. As Robert Adams rightly says, “purported messages from God” must be tested for “coherence with ethical judgments formed in the best ways available to us” (Adams 1999, 284). If someone were to cite a “message from God” as justification for rape or pillage or eating children, we would rightly conclude that he was a charlatan or a madman.

Should this moral test be applied even to biblical reports of divine commands?<sup>2</sup> This is a serious issue, because the biblical record contains a number of divine commands that are – on the face of it – every bit as morally objectionable as those mentioned in the first paragraph. Among the most worrisome passages are those in which God is represented as mandating the extermination of a large number of people.

Adams (1999, 284) quotes with approval the words of Immanuel Kant: “Abraham should have replied

to this supposedly divine voice: ‘That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down from (visible) heaven.’” On the other hand, Adams also says this: “The command addressed to Abraham in Genesis 22 should not be rejected simply because it challenges prevailing values. . . . Religion would be not only safer than it is, but also less interesting and less rich as a resource for moral and spiritual growth, if it did not hold the potentiality for profound challenges to current moral opinion” (Adams 1999, 285). Despite this qualification, one is left with the strong impression that Adams does not believe that God has ever commanded anyone to sacrifice a human life.

These biblical justifications raise new and troubling questions. Are the reasons stated in the terror texts worthy of a perfectly good and loving God? Would commanding the Israelites to kill large numbers of people be a morally acceptable way to prevent them from adopting “abhorrent” religious practices? Would it be morally acceptable to punish the Amalekites of Samuel’s day for what a previous

*generation of Amalekites had done to a previous generation of Israelites?*

*At the very least, those who deny that there are serious moral errors in the Bible must show that it is not unreasonable to believe that the biblical rationale for each problematic command is consistent with God's perfect goodness. In making this demand, we are not asking anyone to read the mind of God. But we are asking that everyone read what the terror texts say about God's actions and about the intentions behind them, and consider whether it is plausible to suppose that they accurately represent the actions and intentions of a God who is perfectly loving and just.*

*Imagine a pastor who is concerned about a local atheist organization that has lured some young people away from his church. He prays for divine guidance, and comes to believe that God wants his church to be the instrument of divine justice. Fresh from this "discovery," he tells his congregants that God has a special mission for them: they are to stop this spiritual infection in its tracks by killing those atheists. Many church members are skeptical, but the Pastor reassures them by pointing out that "our*

*life comes as a temporary gift from God,” that God has a right “to take it back when he chooses,” and that God also a right to commission someone else “take it back for him.”*

*Such a high degree of skepticism about what God might command is surely excessive. The immoral content of the pastor’s “revelation” is a perfectly good reason to reject it. This reason is, of course, defeasible, but in the absence of overriding evidence confirming the veridicality of the pastor’s “message from God,” we should regard it as a matter for the police.<sup>21</sup>*

*I suggest that we should approach the terror texts in the Bible in somewhat the same way. By our best lights, they are morally subpar, and this gives us a strong prima facie reason for believing that they do not accurately depict the commands of a good and loving God. This reason is defeasible, but unless overriding reasons for accepting the terror texts can be produced, they should be rejected.*

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This raises a number of issues:

**i)** Morrison's position is paradoxical. On the one hand, Christians have reason to believe that humans sometimes

have reliable moral intuitions, although our moral intuitions are fallible. On the other hand, a consistent atheist ought to be, at minimum, a moral skeptic. According to naturalism, our moral opinions are hardwired and/or socially conditioned. But there's no presumption that socially conditioned mores are objectively right or wrong. If, moreover, our moral instincts were programmed into us by a mindless, amoral natural process, then there's no reason to think they correspond to objective moral norms. Indeed, it's hard to fathom how there can even be objective moral norms, given those background conditions.

So even if there could be a moral criterion for assessing particular religious claimants or competing religious claimants, that could never rule out religion in general, for moral realism is parasitic on theism.

**ii)** Since, moreover, it's demonstrable that our moral sensibilities are often arbitrary, given the fact that different cultures frequently have different social mores, it follows, even from a Christian standpoint, that we need to make allowance for the very live possibility that what we take to be moral intuitions or moral certainties simply echo our social conditioning, and if we were raised at a different time or place, our moral sensibilities might be very different.

Although Christians shouldn't be wholesale moral skeptics, unlike atheists, a degree of skepticism regarding our prereflective moral sensibilities is warranted and even necessary. Our moral sensibilities need revelatory correction or confirmation.

**iii)** It's possible to confirm or disconfirm a religious claimant on grounds other than morality. Having confirmed a religious claimant on grounds other than morality, you can use that as a benchmark or moral criterion to evaluate

another religious claimant. But for reasons I've given, I seriously doubt you can do that from scratch. I doubt you can jump straight into a moral test. I think we lack independent access to consistently reliable moral intuitions. What we're pleased to call moral intuition is very hit-n-miss.

Indeed, critics who object to OT ethics ironically illustrate that very point. OT writers don't share their outlook. OT writers don't think the allegedly "abhorrent" commands are derogatory to God's goodness. So what's the standard of comparison to referee competing moral opinions?

**iv)** Abraham's situation is different from a messenger. God spoke directly to Abraham. That's disanalogous to a "purported message" from God, which obliges second parties who were not the immediate recipients of the purported message. It's one thing for me to obey a divine command if I hear it direct from God—quite another to obey a reported divine command.

**v)** In the case of Pentateuchal injunctions, although the divine commands were mediated through a messenger, the Israelites had overwhelming miraculous evidence that God spoke to and through Moses.

## Crucifixion of the Warrior God

In the official trailer to Boyd's new book:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fs\\_sOyEBRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Fs_sOyEBRo)

he does a nice job of summarizing the dilemma for his position. On the one hand, OT theism appears to be diametrically opposed to his "cruciform", Anabaptist Christology. On the other hand, the OT, which Jesus endorses as the word of God, attributes violent actions and commands to Yahweh.

In his review of Boyd's book, Olson says:

*...and, in some other cases, God's people's committing the violence and attributing it to God due to their cultural captivity to ancient Near Eastern ideas about God. However, even though he does not believe God, the Father of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, ever commits violence, Boyd does believe God inspired the narratives that wrongly attribute such acts to his instigation. This, he argues, is an example of God's accommodation to people's inability to understand him rightly and of progressive revelation. For Boyd, the Bible must be read backwards, all of it in the light of Jesus Christ*



*who is the crucified God and whose suffering love reveals finally and fully the true character of God.*

*Boyd argues that the Old Testament portraits of God commanding and committing extreme violence against even children cannot be taken at face value even as they must be interpreted seriously as “masks” God allows his fallen people to put on him. Just as God allowed people to crucify him, so God allowed even his own people to blame him for their (or invisible, spiritual cosmic powers’) wicked deeds.*

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<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2017/07/review-greg-boyds-crucifixion-warrior-god/>

Assuming that's an accurate summary of Boyd's position, and Olson is a sympathetic reviewer, Boyd's solution fails to resolve the dilemma he posed at the outset. He conceded that Jesus endorses the OT as the word of God. Yet he says the OT sometimes grossly distorts God's true character. How is that misrepresentation consistent with Christ's endorsement of OT theism?

Boyd has an a priori theory of what God is really like, based on his interpretation of NT Christology. He labors to square that with OT theism, but his effort fails. That should cause him to scrap his "cruciform", Anabaptist Christology. Despite his Herculean efforts, his theory is falsified by the facts.

Boyd has two other hypothetical options: he can say the NT misrepresents Jesus. Jesus didn't endorse the OT as the

word of God. Gospel writers project their own views of OT authority onto Jesus.

But on that hypothesis, we don't know what Jesus really believed. He disappears behind the Gospel writers. We can't go through them or around them to get to the real Jesus.

Or he can adopt a Kenotic Christology. Jesus said the things which Gospel writers attribute to him, yet he was a culturally-conditioned child of his times. But, of course, that destroys Boyd's standard of comparison. He can't then use Jesus as a point of contrast to correct the OT portraiture of Yahweh.

So there's no way out for Boyd except to ditch his "cruciform" hermeneutic.

Finally, it's equivocal to say Jesus "supersedes" OT revelation. Jesus surpassed OT revelation. Jesus represents the culmination of OT revelation. But Boyd means it in the sense that Jesus corrects and abrogates OT revelation. That, however, is a suicidal hermeneutic. The messianic claims of Jesus must be validated by OT messianic descriptors. It must complete OT messianic trajectories. If NT messianism is fundamentally at odds with OT messianism, then that falsifies NT messianism. They must converge, not diverge. If they split off in opposing directions, then Jews are right to reject the messianic claims of Jesus.

## "Texts of terror"

*First, as an evangelical Christian Boyd finds that he cannot simply dismiss the narratives of violence attributed to God (or to God's command) as historically untrue (that is, never happened).*

*Throughout this work he takes the whole Bible seriously without taking all of it literally. While he does not embrace or make use of Origen's allegorical method of interpretation (which he describes in depth and detail), he finds ways to embrace many Old Testament narratives of God's violence as both historical and yet not literally true.*

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<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2017/07/review-greg-boyds-crucifixion-warrior-god/>

Bracketing other problems with Boyd's interpretation, isn't open theist hermeneutics committed to literal interpretation—in contrast to viewing various passages anthropomorphically (a la classical theism)? Isn't his approach to the "texts of terror" diametrically opposed to the general open theist hermeneutic regarding divine

surprise, regret, changing his mind, asking non-rhetorical questions, testing people to learn what they will do?

## Projecting contradictions

An exchange I had on Facebook:

*An example of this is the case of Jesus' anointing at Bethany. John clearly intends to communicate that it took place 6 days before Passover (John 12), whereas Mark clearly intends to communicate that it took place 2 days before the Passover (Mark 14). It is obviously the same event being described. I haven't to-date conceived of a way to harmonize those texts. So here are the options: (1) state that either John or Mark deliberately changed the day of the anointing for some purpose or other (a Licona-style method of harmonization) OR (2) entertain the idea that perhaps this is best explained by variation in eyewitness memory. Personally I opt for the second option. I think the gospel authors intended to communicate true history and that they are substantially trustworthy. I don't think they*

## *deliberately changed things or falsified episodes to suit an agenda.*

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**i)** I don't think commentators are very helpful on this example.

**ii)** I think the impression of a chronological contradiction in this case (and some others) exists in the reader's mind rather than the text. Readers, especially modern readers, bring to the text an unspoken preconception of how books are written. In our experience, an author sits at a table or desk, by himself, and writes continuously until he's completed a section, or until he's tired of writing, or until he must get up to do something else. It's a methodical and solitary process.

But I think that's an anachronistic model of ancient writing. I doubt we should visualize the Gospel authors seated at a desk, by themselves, with pen in hand, committing their memories or "sources" to parchment.

Rather, I suspect it was more of a social occasion, like story-telling at a family reunion. Assuming traditional authorship, John was present, so his account is based on his own recollection.

According to Acts 12:12, Mark was a native of Jerusalem, so it's possible that he was present at the meal. Or else he may have interviewed somebody who was present. Since his home was one of the founding house-churches in Jerusalem, he had access to many eyewitnesses to the public ministry of Christ.

**iii)** Mark doesn't actually say the anointing was 2 days before the Passover. Rather, there's a break between 14:1-2 and 3-9. The anointing is a different topic than 1-2.

Suppose Mark was present at the dinner. Suppose Mark is dictating his Gospel to a scribe. This could well be a social gathering where other Christians are present.

He could begin dictating "holy week" events from memory, then someone asks him a question, which gets him onto the subject of 3-9, then he resumes with 10ff.

That kind of thing happens in oral history. Consider family get-togethers where younger relatives are questioning their grandmother or grandfather about events in their life.

It isn't linear. Their grandmother will begin talking about something from the past, then she may interject something else that happened before then. It isn't sequential. Whatever comes to mind.

Or they may begin talking about something, and a younger relative will ask them a question, which leads to a digression.

Or suppose Mark wasn't at the dinner. Suppose Mark is the scribe, and he's questioning one of the disciples who was there.

Again, though, consider all the TV interviews you've seen in which the interviewer is questioning a guest about events in his life. Consider how it skips about from one thing to another in no particular order. Free association, where a statement about one thing leads to a question about something else.

If that was then edited, it might leave out the questions, but it would still be somewhat jumpy.

Keep in mind, too, that handwritten MSS aren't like word processors where you can erase something or rearrange paragraphs.

This is part of what makes it maddening for modern readers to read Puritans like John Owen. So many digressions. That's because those books weren't written on computer. They wrote down whatever they were thinking about at the moment. It isn't neatly arranged.

I think modern readers perceive chronological contradictions in the Gospels because we imagine the process is more literary and controlled than it actually was. But assuming traditional authorship, the Gospels are transcribed oral histories. That's not planned out and structured in the way a modern historian writes.



## The netherworld

Commenting on the witch of Endor episode, Robin Parry says:

*The direction from which the spirit comes is repeated five times—he arises up from out of the earth. That makes perfect sense because the dead dwell under the earth R. Parry, The Biblical Cosmos (Cascade Books 2014), 80.*

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Parry cites this to show that Biblical writers subscribe to a three-story universe. The realm of the dead is literally a huge subterranean cavern. However, Parry's inference is fallacious on several grounds. Here's the text:

8 So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a spirit and **bring up** for me whomever I shall name to you." 9 The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?" 10 But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." 11 Then the woman said, "Whom shall I **bring up** for you?" He said, "**Bring up** Samuel for me." 12 When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived

me? You are Saul." 13 The king said to her, "Do not be afraid. What do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I see a god **coming up** out of the earth." 14 He said to her, "What is his appearance?" And she said, "An old man is **coming up**, and he is wrapped in a robe." And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage. 15 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by **bringing me up**?" Saul answered, (1 Sam 28:9-14, ESV).

**i)** The narrator doesn't say that that Samuel's ghost "came up". Rather, the narrator quotes three characters who use that terminology. Narrators don't necessarily or even presumptively endorse what they quote other people saying.

**ii)** Underworld imagery is based on the fact that graves are literally underground. Graves lie under the surface of the earth.

**iii)** It's possible that some percentage of people in the ancient Near East actually thought the dead lived on in a vast, gloomy, subterranean necropolis. It's hard from our distance to say whether this is just an extended metaphor.

**iv)** In this context, "bring up" seems to be a necromantic formula based on netherworld imagery. An idiomatic phrase or incantation for summoning the dead.

**v)** Apropos (iv), the medium may well continue to use the "up" language in her description of Samuel's apparition because that's part of the idiom. A linguistic convention for contacting the dead.

In other words, it may be a dead metaphor (pardon the pun). The account begins with a stock formula, used by

both characters (Saul and the medium) for conjuring the dead. And Samuel uses the same idiom.

In addition, the repetition of the phrase makes it a leitwort. The whole account is suffused with the jargon of the trade to give it a particular cast.

**vi)** Finally, if Samuel's ghost wanted to make a visible appearance, and speak to someone, *where* would that happen? Since Saul and the medium are earthlings, a face-to-face encounter requires a ghost to address the embodied human at eye-level. In other words, the ghost will appear, and assume a standing position, or create the illusion that he is standing, on terra firma. What other spatial frame of reference would work? Floating overhead? The encounter must take place at ground level because Saul and the medium are above ground. So we'd expect the surface of the earth to be the spatial frame of reference. What other spatial orientation would be feasible in that setting?

## **Before the Son of Man comes**

Lightly edited exchange I recently had with an unbeliever on Facebook:

**When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes (Mt 10:23).**

*Christians, how might you respond to this? It seems to me there are only two reasonable interpretations.*

*1) Either those being spoken to at that time would see the son of man come before their own individual death*

*Or*

*2) The towns in Israel would not have seen christianity spread to them all long before the son of man comes again.*

*So obviously, both one and two have been fulfilled for well over 1,700 years and probably more like 1,850 years.*

## *Isn't this hard evidence of a failed prophecy?*

---

A few points:

**i)** There's the question of how the narrator (Matthew) understood the prediction. Even if we date the composition of Matthew fairly early, to the 60s, and the original saying was uttered c.30, would it not be easy to visit every town in Israel in the intervening years, with time to spare? Sure 30+ years is more than enough time to do that. All the towns in Israel could be canvassed in far less time than that.

On that window, if it's a failed prophecy, that would already be evident long before the narrator wrote his Gospel. But how realistic is it that the narrator recorded what he himself believed to be a failed prophecy by Jesus?

**ii)** Many readers automatically assume that any reference to Jesus "coming" must be an end-of-the-world prediction. But what about Jesus appearing to people in dreams and visions? That happened to Paul (Acts 9). That happened to John (Rev 1). That's reported throughout church history. We can discount some of those reports, but we don't need to dismiss all of them out of hand.

Especially in the stated context of persecution, Jesus might appear to suffering, threatened Christians to encourage them. Our conceptual resources are too limited if we assume that "Jesus coming" must invariably refer to a one-time, end-of-the-world event. Jesus can come to individuals in need, at different times and places. There's prima facie evidence that happens. Take modern-day Muslim converts to Christianity who say Jesus appeared to them in dreams.

Likewise, Anglican bishop Hugh Montefiore was a Jewish teenager when he had a vision of Jesus, which precipitated his conversion to Christianity.

***On point 1: Fairly likely actually. All empirical evidence shows that the most common reaction to failed prophecies being realized is MORE passionate preaching and more conviction. Oddly enough, end of times predictors react in this way very consistently.***

---

**i)** Bad comparison. If there's a *record* of a "failed" prophecy, then it's too late to deny it, so reinterpretation is the only pious course of action. But here the question at issue is why record it in the first place? Why preserve it for posterity if it's manifestly wrong?

**ii)** A common reaction to failed prophecy is disillusionment. Many people drop out of the movement.

***2) there is little cross textual reasoning to suspect any other meaning than the second coming.***

---

Now you're moving the goal post. Moreover, the other passages you allude to don't have the same specific

benchmark, so it's dubious that you can just extrapolate from this passage to others that lack that benchmark.

***Jesus appearing in dreams or visions wouldn't require moving towns.***

---

You seem to be conflating two different issues: disciples evangelizing Palestine, and Jesus "coming". Jesus "coming" isn't a substitute for their task and duty. Rather, that can be an encouragement to beleaguered missionaries.

***1) I don't see how that is a meaningful difference. The author of mathew could well have already felt it was failed (recognized this) and yet his conviction grew (or hers). Thus the writing is as stands despite a failed prophecy. That's not just unlikely. It's more likely than not if the prophecy was seen as failed."***

---

What would motivate Matthew to perpetuate a failed prophecy in case it would be quickly forgotten otherwise? Remember, this only occurs in one of the Synoptics.

Ironically, you're the one with an unfalsifiable theory. You've concocted an ad hoc explanation to save face, not for the prediction, but for your theory that it *must* be a failed prophecy.

***There's no benchmark lacking in the others either. That's simply not so.***

---

Sure there is: "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel..."

The other passages you allude to don't have that benchmark.

***His coming is supposed to solve persecution***

---

Based on what?

***but the moving is supposed to buy time until then.***

---

They're not simply or primarily on the move to buy time, but to spread the message throughout Palestine.

***Not the leaders. The leaders usually don't fall out.***

---

Once again, you're moving the goal post. You originally said: "All empirical evidence shows that the most common



reaction to failed prophecies being realized is MORE passionate preaching and more conviction. Oddly enough, end of times predictors react in this way very consistently."

Now, however, you've drastically scaled back your original claim, yet you act as if that makes no difference. Once more, you're the one who's resorting to ad hoc explanations to patch up your original allegation. Rather ironic, I'd say.

**i)** Once more, because you can't prove your point using Mt 10:23, even though that was your showcase example, you change the subject to include passages in Luke and Paul. But that just begs the question in reference to those cases.

**ii)** The other passages don't have the same benchmarks, so why assume Mt 10:23 must be referring to the same event as they are?

**iii)** According to v21, some will be martyred before Jesus "comes", so his coming doesn't save them all, or even most of them, from death at the hands of their persecutors.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), why infer that "whoever endures to the end will be saved" refers to salvation *in* this life rather than salvation *from* this life? Matthew has a doctrine of the afterlife. Indeed, that's the primary encouragement to Christians. Everyone dies sooner or later. The question is what happens to them after they die: **"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."**

## Abraham, Isaac, and extraterrestrials

Atheists, as well as "progressive Christians", commonly attack the binding of Isaac (Gen 22). One challenge is to ask, "What would you do if God ordered you to sacrifice your child?"

I've discussed this before but now I'd like to approach it from a different angle. This is not a uniquely Christian dilemma. It's easy to recast the dilemma in secular terms.

For instance, many atheists subscribe to ufology. Ufology is basically a secular hobby. Indeed, a secular alternative to religion. The hope that extraterrestrials will parachute in just the nick of time to save the human race from its self-destructive impulses.

Suppose a secular ufologist begins to hear voices. The voice tells him that he must assassinate the president to avert WWIII. Unless he does so, the president will trigger WWIII, causing a thermonuclear exchange that will plunge our planet into a nuclear winter. Only high-ranking government officials will survive in underground cities, as they, or their descendants, wait for surface radiation to drop to hospitable levels.

Should the ufologist act on what the extraterrestrial voices are telling him? Perhaps an atheist will say the ufologist should ignore the voices. Extraterrestrials aren't really in communication with the ufologist. Rather, hearing voices is symptomatic of psychosis.

Of course, a problem with this response is that a psychotic is in no position to make that evaluation. If he was in his right mind, he wouldn't be hearing voices in the first place.

He lacks that objectivity. The psychotic diagnosis has to be made by a second party who is not psychotic.

Insanity can afflict the religious and irreligious alike. So it's easy to dream of a parallel dilemma for the atheist.

Now let's vary the hypothetical. Suppose that SETI picks up an outer space transmission. This was clearly sent by an extraterrestrial civilization with superior technology. The message tells earthlings that if they summarily execute one billion humans, the other six billion humans will be spared, but if they refuse to do so, the human race will be wiped out.

From a secular standpoint, should we comply with the message? Many atheists espouse consequentialism. Taking the lives of one billion humans to save the lives of six billion humans is morally justifiable according to that ethical calculus. Do we dare to defy the ultimatum of the extraterrestrials, given a credible threat, backed up by their vastly superior technology?

From a secular standpoint, how is that different, in principle, from obeying Yahweh's command to sacrifice Isaac, or Yahweh's command to mass execute the Canaanites if they refuse to evacuate Palestine?

## What's the difference between Peter Enns and William Lane Craig?

I'm reposting some comments I made on Facebook:

How is Craig's position different from Peter Enns? Is it just a difference of degree? What's the difference between evangelicalism and progressive Christianity, if any?

How is the comparison with Peter Enns a red herring? Peter Enns also jettisons OT stories. Is there a line to be drawn between Craig and Enns? Is one acceptable while the other is unacceptable? If so, what's the principle?

Craig said, "Questions about the historical reliability of these ancient Jewish texts just has [sic] no direct bearing on whether God exists..."

What God? The God of the Kalam cosmological argument? I don't object to philosophical and scientific arguments for God's existence, but these should be a supplement to the record of revelation and redemption, not a substitute.

If Craig thinks the God of Adam and Eve may be a fictional character, and if he thinks the God of Noah may be a fictional character, at what stage in OT narrative does Yahweh denote a real individual who says and does what the narratives attribute to him?

Does the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph exist? Or is that a fictional character? What about the God of Moses?

Liberal scholars say the Exodus never happened. So what about the God of the wilderness wandering? What about the God of Joshua and Judges? What about the God of David or Daniel? At what juncture does the real God step into the picture?

Is the God whom Christians worship the same individual as the God of Abraham, David, Asaph, and Isaiah? Or is that a literary construct?

I don't just mean a common object of belief, but whether there's a God who said and did the things that OT narratives attribute to Yahweh in reference to Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, &c. Is there a real continuous referent from OT times to NT times to modern times? Is the God whom Christians pray to the same God who spoke to Noah, Abraham, Moses, &c.? Or is that pious fiction?

Let's briefly review: in my last comment, I asked, given Craig's answer, to what degree OT theism corresponds to the God Craig believes in. After all, when the questioner pointed out how Jesus appeals to certain OT episodes, one of Craig's outs is to compare that to explicitly fictional literature. Where a hypothetical speaker was referring to an incident in Robinson Crusoe.

I didn't *infer* that Craig is prepared to compare "these ancient Jewish texts" to pious fiction. Craig himself specifically presented that as one of his viable options.

But if Gen 2-3 is fictional, then presumably Adam, Eve, and the Tempter are fictional characters. And in that event, Yahweh is necessarily a fictional character in the same story. You can't have a real speaker talking to fictional characters, who respond to a real speaker. Both speakers must either be real or fictional. You can't have a fictional

dialogue with a real interlocutor, or a real dialogue with a fictional interlocutor. So it must be consistently fictional or historical. Same thing with the flood account.

So at what point does Yahweh cease to be an imaginary artifact of the narrator? Is there a sudden shift when we get to the patriarchal narratives? Of the life of Moses? Of the life of David? Where does Craig draw the line? Does he have a principled distinction?

Moreover, on Craig's view, we can't use the example of Jesus to corroborate the historical genre of OT narratives, because another one of Craig's outs is the live possibility that Jesus was a fallible teacher. And that would apply a fortiori to other NT speakers or writers like Paul.

Is there any historical and metaphysical continuity between the God Craig affirms and the God of St. Paul, St. Luke, St. John, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Psalmists, Joseph, Abraham, &c?

## Chuckling the OT

I'm going to comment on a recent response that Craig gave to a questioner:

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/should-ot-difficulties-be-an-obstacle-to-christian-belief>

*When people ask me what unanswered questions I still have, I tell them, "I don't know what to do with these Old Testament stories about Noah and the ark, the Tower of Babel, and so on." So I find myself in the same boat as you, Jon. I don't have any good answer how to resolve these problems. Yet these unanswered difficulties have not kept me from Christian faith or from abandoning Christian faith. Why not?*

---

In one sense there's not much to say by way of response because Craig doesn't specify what in particular he finds problematic about these OT "stories". There is, though, a self-reinforcing factor in his attitude. Because he doesn't feel the need to take them seriously, because they're expendable for him, he hasn't made much effort to work through the perceived problems.

*Well, a large part of the reason, as you note, is that the truth of what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity” doesn’t stand or fall with such questions. “Mere Christianity” denotes those central truths of a Christian worldview.*

---

Although I think there might be some value in "mere Christianity" as a preliminary apologetic overture, mere Christianity is an artificial construct. A man-made sample. It's like the Jesus of scholars who presume to give us their reconstruction of what Jesus was "really" like. Christianity is not in the first instance a set of central truths but a set of central events. Events freighted with theological significance. Events leading up to Jesus, including OT history, as well as the conception and calling of John the Baptist. Then the life, death, resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. As well as apostles and prophets whom he and the Holy Spirit raised up to interpret the events and disseminate the Gospel. It doesn't begin with ideas, but with divine action in history. The truths need to track the events. Truths grounded in events. Events that include divine revelation. That's Christianity in real space and time, as God reveals it through people and events. Not a freeze-dried abstract.

*If a person believes that God exists and raised Jesus from the dead in vindication of his allegedly blasphemous personal claims, then one ought to be a Christian,*



***and the rest is details, a matter of in-house debate among Christians.***

---

So the historical narratives of the OT are merely a detail—a dispensable detail? The history of God's dealings with Israel is just a dispensable detail? The prophetic oracles of the OT are just detail—a dispensable detail? Whether or not God raised up prophets who foresaw the messiah is just a dispensable detail? We can uncouple the NT train from the OT train and leave it behind while we ride off into the sunset? Is that what Craig means? He's so cavalier.

***Questions about the historical reliability of these ancient Jewish texts just has [sic] no direct bearing on whether God exists...***

---

It has direct bearing on whether *Yahweh* exists. On whether God is a God who acted in world history and ancient Near Eastern history. A God who spoke to and through the prophets of Israel.

***...or Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead.***

---

What God raised Jesus from the dead if not *Yahweh*? You know, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. *That* God. And the God of patriarchal history is supposed to be

continuous with the God of prediluvial history. Take the heraldic allusion to the creation account in the prologue to John. The light and darkness motif in Jn 1 hearkens back to the light and darkness motif in Gen 1. The God who made the world now enters the world stage he made. Just as the Creator in Genesis is the light-giver the life-giver, Jesus is the light-giver the life-giver.

***Can you imagine any historian denying the historicity of some event in the Gospels because, say, the story of the Tower of Babel is a myth?***

---

Actually, I can. It's hardly uncommon to see critics dismiss the Gospel narratives because they betray the same supernatural outlook as the OT. The same "mythological," "superstitious" outlook as the OT. Angels, demons, miracles, exorcisms. Heavenly beings "coming down" from the sky and going back "up" to God's celestial abode in the clouds. Wasn't that Bultman's argument?

***The most important move you make dialectically is exploiting the Christological implications of rejecting the historicity of the problematic Old Testament narratives. Your claim is that since Jesus evidently believed in the historicity of these stories, then if we***

***allow that these narratives are not historical, we allow that Christ has erred. But what are the Christological implications of that? Now that's a really good question which theologians need to explore!***

---

Craig acts like that's virgin territory. But this has been going on since Schleiermacher, give or take. There are two stock alternatives. One is appeal to accommodation. Jesus is speaking ad hominem.

Now, there's no doubt that Jesus and other Bible writers sometimes respond to people on their own terms. And you can play along with a falsehood to disprove it. But that's very different than deriving a conclusion from a false premise that you expect the listener to treat as a true conclusion.

The other is kenosis. And Craig toys with that:

***Did Jesus hold false beliefs in his human consciousness? Did he think the sun goes around the Earth? Did he think the Earth was at the center of the universe? Did he think there were any stars beyond those we can see at night? I'm not going to try to answer those questions, but I think***

*they're worth asking. Did God stoop so low in condescending to become a man that he took on such cognitive limitations that Jesus shared false beliefs typically held by other ordinary first century Jews? Since I have good reason to believe in his deity, as explained above, I would sooner admit that Jesus could hold false beliefs (that ultimately don't matter) rather than deny his divinity. Rather than impose on him our a priori conceptions of what divinity implies, we need to be open to learning from the Gospels what the incarnation entailed.*

---

Several problems with that response:

**i)** Isn't this explanation nonsensical given Craig's admittedly Apollinarian Christology? On Craig's view, Christ's consciousness was nothing more or less than pure divine consciousness.

*It seems you're not familiar with my proposed neo-Apollinarian Christology in Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview. It was crafted precisely*

*because I think the usual model tends to Nestorianism for the reasons you mention. On the traditional model the human soul of Christ is not a person, which I find baffling. On my model the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the soul of Jesus Christ. By taking on a human body the Logos completed the human nature of Christ, making him a body/soul composite. So Christ has two complete natures, divine and human.*

---

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/christological-conundrums#ixzz4eeDDRiFo>

**ii)** Although humans are normally fallible, that's only true where unaided reason is concerned. Even a mere human being can be infallible if God protects him from error. Therefore, it doesn't follow, even in reference to Christ's human nature, that he had to be fallible.

**iii)** In addition, there's the question of whether the hypostatic union protected his human nature from error. Even if his human nature was fallible, it wasn't autonomous. His human nature was always under the control of his divine nature. In a union between divine and human, the human will be subordinate to the divine. Even if the human nature entertained false beliefs, it's not as if the human nature acted independently of the divine nature, to which it was linked. Not like multiple-personality disorder where one

personality surfaces, then says and does things at variance with the sublimated personality.

**iv)** The real question concerns the teaching of Christ. For instance, God might allow a prophet to entertain false beliefs. That by itself leads no one astray. If, however, a prophet is speaking in God's name, then it does matter whether his statements are true or false. And a fortiori, that surely applies in the greater case of Christ.

*In any case, I don't feel pushed that far yet.*

---

That far yet. Craig has made statements in the past few years that indicate that he's drifting leftward. Maybe that's because he's retirement age, so he can now collect a pension.

*I think the texts you cite for showing that Jesus held false beliefs about the Old Testament are fairly weak. Mark 10.6-9; Matthew 19.4-5, for example, are just quotations from Genesis about the purpose for which God created man and woman. Making such a theological point in no way commits one to the historicity of the narrative.*

---

Talk about a false dichotomy! How does the theological point survive if the very rationale that Jesus gives is bogus? Christ is grounding his position on marriage and divorce in the history of divine action. But if that's not how it happened, how does his point still stand?

Moreover, his audience would inevitably assume that he took the historicity of the narrative for granted. Did Jesus privately deny it, but pretend that it was factual in public? Is that what Craig is suggesting?

*So your only example of any force is Luke 17:26-7, where Jesus says, “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them.” But this reference, like Jesus’ reference to Jonah, is compatible with citing a story to make one’s point. I might say to someone “Just as Robinson Crusoe had his man Friday to assist him, so I have my wife Jan to help me,” without thinking to commit myself to the historicity of Robinson Crusoe!*

---

That's a blatantly disanalogous comparison. Robinson Crusoe is intentionally fictional. The reader already knows that. Ironically, Craig's comparison is only persuasive because the fictional genre of Robinson Crusoe is agreed upon. But that's surely not how Christ's Jewish audience viewed the Pentateuch. Or Matthew's implied reader.

*We seem to have New Testament examples of this phenomenon. For example, Jude 9 mentions an incident in The Assumption of Moses, an apocryphal work which was never part of the Jewish canon of Scripture.*

---

i) If, for the sake of argument, it came down to a forced option between the inerrancy of Scripture and the canonicity of Jude, why does Craig think the inerrancy of Scripture as a whole is expendable to preserve the canonicity of one rather marginal book? If push came to show, why not say it was a mistake for the church to include Jude in the canon rather than to say the Bible was mistaken?

I'm not saying that's the actual choice which confronts us. I'm just questioning Craig's priorities, on his own grounds. If he's going to promote a mere Christianity about central truths, why not a mere canon of central books? If Jude is less well-attested than other NT books, and if Jude is theologically peripheral compared to the Gospels or Pauline Epistles or Hebrews or 1 John or Revelation, why sacrifice the inspiration of 65 books for the canonicity of one



additional book? Again, I'm not saying we have to make that choice.

**ii)** Fact is, we don't know for sure why Jude cites an apocryphal work. Jude is one page long. Due to its extreme brevity, Jude has almost no context. Commentators strain to divine the audience, the opponents, the occasion, sitz-em-leben. That's very difficult and very uncertain when we have so little to go on. So few clues to work with.

***1 Timothy 3:8 makes a comparison to a couple of characters named in Jewish targums, Dead Seas scrolls, and rabbinic traditions, which were similarly never part of the Jewish canon. Such comparisons do not commit the authors to the historicity of the characters or events.***

---

Jewish tradition invented names for the Egyptian sorcerers. That's simply for ease of reference. It's useful to have something to call them, the way churchmen invented a name for the rich man (Dives) in the parable of Lazarus and the Rich man. That's hardly comparable to relegating OT narratives to legend, myth, or pious fiction.

***We may have something similar in Romans 5.7, where Paul says, "Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous***

*person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.” Simon Gathercole, a fine New Testament scholar, points out that Paul is appealing to a common motif in Greco-Roman culture of someone’s stepping forward to die in the place of another. The most famous example in antiquity was Alcestis in Euripides’ play by that name, who volunteered to die in the place of her husband King Admetus. Alcestis was celebrated for centuries, and her name is to be found even in epitaphs on Christian graves. Gathercole thinks that in Roman 5.7 Paul may actually be thinking of Alcestis. He says, in effect, “Alcestis was willing to die for her beloved husband, but Christ died for his enemies.” So saying would not commit Paul to the historicity of this purely literary figure!*

---

It's just a proverbial truism. That's very different from historical narratives.

*In any case, how can we be sure that the Old Testament stories are false?*

---

Wow. That's a ringing endorsement!

*Several years ago, an article caught my eye about two secular geophysicists who think that the flood of Noah could have been a catastrophic, local event caused when the Bosphorus straits, which were formerly closed, opened up, causing the Mediterranean Sea to spill through and create what is today the Black Sea! I never cared to look into it because, as explained above, I just don't think it matters much. But maybe something of the sort really happened.*

---

His attitude is completely out of alignment with the Jewish milieu of the NT. With their reverence for the OT scriptures.

*The great literature of the world shows us that works which are non-historical, like the plays of Shakespeare or the novels of Dostoyevsky or the fables of*

***Aesop, have important truths to teach us.***

---

Although fiction can be enlightening or edifying, it's useless in a personal crisis because you know it isn't real, so it gives you no encouragement regarding the future.

***I accept historicity as a sort of default position. But I have an open mind.***

---

There's no virtue in having an open mind for its own sake. There's no virtue in having an open mind about everything. Indeed, a Christian is not supposed to have a perpetually open mind, but a made-up mind. He can remain open-minded about some things, of course. But not about biblical revelation.

## Jesus loves me, this I know

William Lane Craig recently defended Andy Stanley against Albert Mohler:

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-bible-tells-me-so-so>

**i)** I think the format was inefficient. An interviewer asked Craig to respond to Mohler's interpretation of Andy. So Craig presumes to speak on Andy's behalf, as Andy's interpreter, explaining what Andy really meant. That's very convoluted. Too many layers. It would be preferable if Craig just stated his own position without the intermediaries. In addition, Craig is far more sophisticated than Andy, so I can't shake the feeling that he's improving on Andy's position. Craig is putting words in Andy's mouth, then criticizing Mohler for failing to engage Craig's reformulation. But, of course, Mohler wasn't responding to Craig, and he couldn't very well respond to something before it was on the table.

**ii)** I found Craig's analysis confused and contradictory. He begins by distinguishing apologetics from theology. Up to a point, there's nothing wrong with that distinction. It's true that in theology we take the authority of Scripture for granted, whereas in apologetics, we assume a burden of proof.

**iii)** That said, what is the task of Christian apologetics if not to defend the subject matter of systematic theology? Sure, when you're discussing Christian theology with an unbeliever, you don't expect them to concede the authority of Scripture, or to stipulate any particular doctrine. But that's why you provide reasons for the authority of Scripture or the doctrine at issue.

**iv)** It's true that when doing evangelism or apologetics, you probably won't lead with Noah's flood, the virgin birth, Biblical creation, or Biblical inerrancy. That's not your opening gambit when initiating a discussion with an unbeliever. If it's just a generic question of the best starting-point, then that's not your first move.

However, it's often the unbeliever who initiates a discussion of Biblical creation, Noah's flood, the virgin birth, or inerrancy in general. In addition, Christian apologetics is hardly confined to pre-evangelism. The jurisdiction of Christian apologetics is to defend the Christian faith on all fronts.

**v)** BTW, one can certainly preach an evangelistic sermon centered on Noah's flood. Indeed, both 1 and 2 Peter outline that approach.

**vi)** There is, moreover, a basic difference between not mentioning biblical creation, Noah's flood, the virgin birth, or inerrancy because that doesn't happen to crop up in the course of a sermon or apologetic dialogue, and telling someone they are not obliged to believe those things to be a Christian. There's a difference between not telling someone something because there was no occasion to mention it, and telling them that they have no duty to believe it. In the former case, it never came up. In the latter case, you bring it up in order to tell someone that's optional.

**vii)** At one point the interviewer recast the issue in terms of the local flood interpretation v. the global flood interpretation. But that's not what Craig said, and it's unlikely that Craig was talking about interpretation. When he mentions the flood in the same breath as inerrancy or

the virgin birth, I think it's clear that he's referring to questions of historicity rather than interpretation.

**viii)** In addition, there's a fundamental difference between rejecting six-day creationism or a global flood because you don't think that's the best interpretation of the text, and rejecting them because you think the text is wrong.

**ix)** Furthermore, even if a person thinks the creation account, flood account, and nativity accounts are intentionally fictional rather than erroneous, that is just as bad in a different way.

**x)** On the one hand Craig indicates that inerrancy is expendable. That belief in the historicity of Noah's flood or the virgin birth is expendable. On the other hand, he says Christians should believe in what Jesus teaches us; as his disciples we accept his teaching regarding Biblical authority. Well, which is it? Optional or obligatory?

**xi)** Finally, he says such issues can be decided later once you've made a commitment to Christ. But what does that mean? Shouldn't conversion involve informed consent? Craig makes it sound like signing a contract before you agree to all the terms. Is this a provisional commitment that's conditional on whether you subsequently resolve those issues to your own satisfaction? Is there an escape clause?

What's wrong with resolving those issues right up front? What makes them unbelievable now, but believable later on?

What does Craig think commitment to Jesus means? Is that a bright line—before and after? As a freewill theist, does he think something happens when you make a commitment to

Christ? Does that change you in some essential respect? Or is commitment a continuum? Degrees of commitment or gradations of belief? What's the difference between Craig's view and Peter Enns? A difference of kind or difference of degree?

**xii)** It's important to explain to unbelievers that Christianity claims to be a revealed religion. God spoke to and through the prophets. And Scripture is the revelatory record. You can take it or leave it but it's a package deal.



## Putting all your chips on the Resurrection

I've discussed this before, but I'd like to address it in more detail. Nowadays there are prominent Christian apologists who say that if the Resurrection happened, then Christianity is true even if some things in the Bible are false. But I've never seen them spell that out.

Here's the most charitable interpretation of that basic approach. As I recall, back in the 70s, John Warwick Montgomery used to present a multistaged argument like this:

We don't have to begin with the inerrancy of Scripture. Rather, the Gospels are demonstrably historically accurate in general. The Gospels record the Resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus rose from the dead, then he must be divine. And the divine Jesus vouches for the historicity of the OT, as well as promising that the disciples will enjoy inspired recollection of everything he said. (I'm summarizing his argument from memory.)

This seems to be what gave rise to the current approach. And I think there's some merit to Montgomery's argument. Mind you, I don't quite agree with his argument as it stands, because the Bible doesn't treat the Resurrection as direct proof for the deity of Christ. Rather, the Bible typically says the Father raised Jesus from the dead.

Perhaps, though, we could modify the argument by saying the Resurrection is an indirect proof for the deity of Christ. It would be counterproductive for God to raise a false Messiah from the dead, since people would naturally take that as evidence of divine approval. The more so if the

claimant predicted his resurrection, because that would be prophetic fulfillment.

If, therefore, Jesus claimed to be divine, if the Gospel narrators claim Jesus is divine, and if the Father raised him from the dead, then he must be divine. And I think there's a good potential argument there, although it has to be fleshed out.

However, that's not the kind of argument that the apologists I allude to are using. They've made a crucial change. Montgomery appealed to the Resurrection to prove the inerrancy of Scripture. By contrast, more recent apologists are doing just the opposite: they appeal to the Resurrection to prove the expandability of Biblical inerrancy. Yet there are major problems with that position:

**i)** If Jesus routinely appeals to the OT as unquestionably true, then you can't simultaneously affirm Jesus and disaffirm the Bible. That's incoherent, for they rise and fall together:

*Let us examine then, first of all, His attitude to the historical narratives of the Old Testament. He consistently treats them as straightforward records of facts. We have references to: Abel (Lk. xi. 51), Noah (Mt. xxiv. 37-39; Lk. xvii. 26, 27), Abraham (Jn. viii. 56), the institution of circumcision (Jn. vii. 22; cf. Gn. xvii. 10-12; Lv. xii. 3), Sodom and Gomorrah (Mt. x. 15, xi. 23, 24; Lk. x. 12). Lot (Lk. xvii. 28-32), Isaac and Jacob (Mt. viii. 11; Lk. xiii. 28), the manna*

(in. vi. 31, 49, 58), the wilderness serpent (Jn. iii. 14), David eating the shewbread (Mt. xii. 3, 4; Mk. ii. 25, 26; Lk. vi. 3, 4) and as a Psalm-writer (Mt. xxii. 43; Mk. xii. 36; Lk. xx. 42), Solomon (Mt. vi. 29, xii. 42; Lk. xi. 31, xii. 27), Elijah (Lk. iv. 25, 26), Elisha (Lk. iv. 27), Jonah (Mt. xii. 39-41; Lk. xi. 29, 30, 32), Zachariah (Lk. xi. 51). This last passage brings out His sense of the unity of history and His grasp of its wide sweep. His eye surveys the whole course of history from 'the foundation of the world' to 'this generation'. There are repeated references to Moses as the giver of the law (Mt. viii. 4, xix. 8; Mk. i. 44, vii. 10, x. 5, xii. 26; Lk. v. 14, xx. 37; Jn. v. 46, vii. 19); the sufferings of the prophets are also mentioned frequently (Mt. v. 12, xiii. 57, xxi. 34-36, xxiii. 29-37; Mk. vi. 4 (cf. Lk. iv. 24; Jn. iv. 44), xii. 2-5; Lk. vi. 23, xi. 47-51, xiii. 34, xx. 10-12); and there is a reference to the popularity of the false prophets (Lk. vi. 26). He sets the stamp of His approval on passages in Gn. i and ii (Mt. xix. 4, 5; Mk. x. 6-8.)

Although these quotations are taken by our Lord more or less at random from different parts of the Old Testament and some periods of the history are covered more fully than others, it is evident that He

*was familiar with most of our Old Testament and that He treated it all equally as history. Curiously enough, the narratives that proved least acceptable to what was known a generation or two ago as 'the modern mind' are the very ones that He seemed most fond of choosing for His illustrations.*

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[https://www.the-highway.com/Scripture\\_Wenham.html](https://www.the-highway.com/Scripture_Wenham.html)

**ii)** Likewise, Christianity can't be true if OT Judaism is false. To be true, Christianity must fulfill the OT. Christianity can't be true unless OT Judaism is true.

But Judaism can't be true if the call of Abraham is fictional, if the Akedah (Gen 22) is fictional, if the Abrahamic covenant is fictional, if the Joseph cycle (Gen 37-50) is fictional, if the call of Moses is fictional, if the Exodus is fictional, if the Davidic covenant is fictional, &c.

So where do these apologists draw the line? Their position is ominously similar to "progressive Christians" who say you can discount most of the reported miracles in Scripture. The only miracles you really must profess to be a Christian are the Incarnation and Resurrection.

**iii)** In addition, the Christian faith isn't based on bare events, but interpreted events. Not surprisingly, the NT contains extensive theological interpretation regarding the significance of the Resurrection. What's the divine purpose behind that event—as well as other events in the life of Christ (e.g. the Crucifixion)?



## Collective judgment

A brief debate I had on Facebook:

*I'm open to a designer of this nature. But if that's the case it would blow apart Clay Jones's articles on God's order for soldiers to kill babies.*

*Jones touts 400 years as a reasonable metric as God "waits patiently for all people to turn to him." He is "slow to anger" after all.*

*But a designer of the wonders described in Shapiro's article works methodically, millennia upon millennia. It seems absurd for a being of that nature to give a "point of no return" to a culture after 400 years. And grievously absurd to mark that anniversary with mass slaughter.*

*If you're given to a designer of wonders, that's great. If you're given to capital punisher that includes infants, that seems weird. But it is truly inconsistent to try reconciling one with the other.*

---

The fundamental issue isn't so much how or when people die, but human mortality in general. Whether that's by

divine command or divine providence isn't a morally all-important distinction.

*There seems to be a distinction between adult punishment after choosing poor paths, and infants being slaughtered by soldiers.*

*If there wasn't a moral distinction between these two concepts, Clay Jones wouldn't have written on the topic so extensively.*

---

You seem to be assuming that the death of children by divine command is punitive. If so, that doesn't follow.

Because humans are social creatures, adults cannot be harmed without harming children who depend on adults (or elderly relatives who depend on able-bodied grown children to care for them).

What's the alternative? Leaving the children orphaned, to fend for themselves? To die of starvation?

The death of children is a side-effect of executing their adult caregivers. Keep in mind, too, that this is because the Canaanites didn't self-evacuate.

As a former Marine, when you kill adult combatants, there will often be innocent people who suffer as a result. People who were dependent on fathers and sons who died in combat. Unless you think your former profession was immoral, you yourself admit that it isn't always possible to draw nice distinctions.

BTW, Jonathan's post has nothing to do with the fate of the Canaanites. And even if you wish to drag that red herring into the discussion, there's no reason we have to frame the issue in just the way Clay Jones does. (Which is not necessarily a criticism of his approach.)

*If we want to marvel at a designer who spends millennia building DNA, it seems inconsistent to imagine that same designer ordering mass baby slaughter, especially in the form of telling adult human soldiers to do it.*

*I'm testing for consistency, and the parameters from Shapiro's article do not seem to match the parameters from Jones's.*

*As for whether the mass baby slaughter was punishment, I'm not necessarily assuming punishment. I'm just saying the mere act of soldiers slaughtering babies seems out of line of a designer of DNA.*

*And yes, I was a former Marine. And yes, there are often non-combatant casualties. But there is still a moral distinction between that and soldiers actively targeting babies.*



***I used Clay Jones because Jonathan posted it the other day. I try to keep my critique limited to material posted by this page.***

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You yourself raised an ethical objection, but then you duck the implications of your own position. Suppose a Marine kills an enemy combatant. Presumably, you believe there are situations where that's justifiable.

But in some, or many cases, by killing the combatant, you deprive his wife of a husband, deprive his kids of a father, and deprive his parents of a son they were counting on to care for them in their old age.

So the distinction between "actively targeting" innocents and the inevitable consequences of harm to innocents isn't morally clear-cut.

***I'm not defending collateral innocent deaths at war. But I am saying there's no wiggle room for targeting all the babies in a city specifically to kill them all.***

***And this is not about me. I'm a person. This is about how a designer of the universe would treat infants.***

---

What do you mean when you say you're not defending collateral innocent deaths in war? Presumably you're not a pacifist. So you regard that as morally defensible—a tragic, but necessary side-effect of winning a just war.

You've asserted that there's no wiggle room, but your distinction is ad hoc. You're not engaging the counterargument.

How is the fact that you're a person germane? God is a personal agent, too.

***I'm just not allowing you to change the argument. You don't have to address my original argument if you don't want.***

***I'm seeing a lack of consistency between claims. That's all.***

---

I addressed your original argument by demonstrating that your original argument overlooks moral complications. It's your position that lacks internal consistency.

***I expect me to be inconsistent. I would not expect a designer of the universe to be inconsistent.***

---

What's that supposed to mean? If your objection is inconsistent, then why should that be taken seriously?

Whether the designer of the universe is inconsistent is the very issue in dispute. I've presented several

counterarguments to your position, which you continue to duck.

## Huns and Canaanites

A stock objection to the Bible is the divine command to execute the Canaanites if they didn't self-evacuate. Atheists make a big deal about this, even though atheism has no basis for human rights. You also have professing Christians who either agonize over this command or simply deny it.

Here's a striking comparison:

*Some of us were sickened by Sir Arthur's unrelenting ferocity. But our feelings of revulsion after the Dresden attack were not widely shared. The British public at that time still had bitter memories of World War I, when German armies brought untold misery and destruction to other people's countries, but German civilians never suffered the horrors of war in their own homes.*

*I remember arguing about the morality of city bombing with the wife of a senior air force officer, after we heard the results of the Dresden attack. She was a well-educated and intelligent woman who worked part-time for the ORS. I asked her whether she really believed that it was right to kill German women and babies in large numbers at that late stage of the War. She answered, "Oh yes.*

*It is good to kill the babies especially. I am not thinking of this war but of the next one, 20 years from now. The next time the Germans start a war and we have to fight them, those babies will be the soldiers.” After fighting Germans for ten years, four in the first war and six in the second, we had become almost as bloody-minded as Sir Arthur.*

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<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/406789/a-failure-of-intelligence/>

I'm not suggesting that ipso facto justifies the carpet bombing of civilian population centers, or the OT command to execute the Canaanites en masse. But it does show how personal experience can dramatically affect or alter our moral intuitions.

It's easy for people living in peacetime, writing from the safety of their laptops, to decry OT warfare. Lots of cheap virtue signaling on OT ethics.

But for people who've been ground down by cycles of war, who've buried their own children because an enemy won't relent, they understandably have a very different outlook.

## Automatic writing

**1.** I'd like to consider two related objections to the historicity of Scripture.

### **i) PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS**

In Biblical narratives we have many instances of what appear to be private conversations. A prima facie objection to the historicity of these conversations is that no witness was present, much less a stenographer, to take down what was said at the time. So how is the narrator privy to that information?

The "skeptical" explanation is that these are fictional conversations which the narrator put on the lips of the characters.

### **ii) LONG SPEECHES**

Biblical narratives sometimes contain long speeches. The Sermon on the Mount is a case in point. How could the narrator or his source have verbatim recollection of a long speech he heard just once? People normally remember the gist of what was said.

**2.** Now let's consider some natural explanations:

### **i) PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS**

In some cases, these may not be private conversations. When relaying a conversation, historians typically focus on the principals. That doesn't mean there weren't other people in attendance.

So in some cases, anonymous informants would be available. People in the entourage of the royal court, priestly establishment, and so forth, who are closet Christians, but keep their heads down to avoid having their heads unceremoniously separated from their bodies. Servants and courtiers who privately disdain their employers, and are only too happy to leak unflattering information about their employers.

A more specific example might be the Beloved Disciple (John). He normally prefers to remain in the background rather than drawing attention to himself. He only comes forward at strategic points in the narrative to offer his eyewitness confirmation.

There are concentric social circles in the Fourth Gospel. You have an outermost circle of general followers. Then a smaller circle of the Twelve. Then an inner circle of Peter, James, and John. Then the inmost circle of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple. Apparently, John was Christ's most trusted confidant.

So even in scenes where only Jesus and someone else are mentioned, John may be a lurker. He generally maintains a low profile in the narrative to keep the focus on Jesus.

Regarding the Sermon on the Mount, I doubt Jesus said all that at one time. Jesus was an expert communicator, and that's just too much for an audience to absorb in one sitting.

Matthew has a habit of grouping related material. I think Jesus engaged in public teaching on that occasion, and Matthew used that as a hook to combine it with other things Jesus said on other occasions.

An advantage of writing is that you can reread the material. And it's easier to locate the material if it's grouped together by topic.

**3.** However, there are other cases where natural explanations don't seem to be as plausible. For instance, take conversations involving the patriarchs. There were no witnesses. No transcript which a later writer could consult. Perhaps, though, some of this might be passed down in family lore. Oral history.

Besides the Sermon on the Mount, another example is the farewell discourse, followed by the lengthy prayer of Jesus. That runs roughly from Jn 13:31 through the end of Jn 17. (Scholars disagree on where, exactly, it begins.)

That's a long, dense, dry speech (apart from the true vine parable). Not the kind of thing a listener could normally recall in detail from one hearing.

What about supernatural explanations? Christians can appeal to visionary revelation (which may include auditions), inspired memory, and verbal inspiration. And I think those are viable explanations. Now I'd like to briefly explore a neglected possibility.

According to some conventional definitions, automatic writing is writing produced without conscious intention as if of telepathic or spiritualistic origin, or writing produced by a spiritual, occult, or supernatural agency rather than by the conscious intention of the writer.

Assuming that the record of long speeches and private conversations can't be accounted for by natural means, suppose these are examples of automatic writing, inspired



by the Holy Spirit? That wouldn't require the Bible writer to remember or know about the event.

**4.** Now let's consider some objections to that explanation:

**i)** It's special pleading. Why not just admit these are fictional speeches?

But is it special pleading? I didn't concoct a novel theory to defend the historicity of Scripture. Automatic writing is a well-documented phenomenon. I'm applying that preexistent phenomenon to these particular examples, as a possible explanation.

**ii)** Automatic writing is occultic!

It's true that automatic writing is associated with people who dabble in necromancy. However, just because there are ungodly examples of something mean there can't be godly examples of the same thing. The existence of false prophets doesn't taint true prophets. The existence of demonic miracles doesn't taint divine miracles. If lesser spirits can produce automatic writing, surely the Spirit of God is able to produce automatic writing. If evil spirits can produce automatic writing for evil purposes, surely the Holy Spirit can produce automatic writing for holy purposes.

**iii)** Automatic writing has a naturalistic explanation.

That objection conflicts with (ii). They can't both be right. At least, not across the board.

There's the question of whether "automatic writing" is loosely used to cover disparate phenomena. It's true that depth psychologists may say this is just a case of a human

being naturally tapping into his subconscious. And, indeed, that may happen.

But automatic writing often takes place in the context of people who are striving to channel the dead. They endeavor to contact the dead. They open themselves to that influence. They wish to play host to that source.

So it's hardly a stretch to interpret the result as a case of possession by a supernatural agent. That interpretation lies on the face of the phenomenon.

(Which is not to deny that charlatans fake channeling the dead.)

**iv)** To invoke automatic writing is ad hoc. Where do you draw the line?

As with any explanation, you use it when it's necessary or reasonable to account for something that can't be as easily accounted for by some other explanation.

There are different modes of inspiration. The organic theory of inspiration will suffice for many examples of Scripture. But sometimes direct revelation is required. Sometimes visionary revelation is the source. By the same token, why not automatic writing in some instances?

Take visionary revelation. A seer will experience an altered state of consciousness. But that doesn't mean he always, or even usually, operates in that mindset. He couldn't function if he did. That's just when the Spirit comes upon him.

The Spirit can operate in more subtle and subliminal or more dramatic ways. It ranges along a continuum. At one end, an inspired writer may not be conscious of his

inspiration. That's the organic theory of inspiration (e.g. Warfield).

At the other end, consider revelatory dreams and visions, where the Spirit takes possession of the human imagination. In that condition, the human agent is basically a passive recipient.

That would be analogous to the Spirit taking temporary control of a Bible writer to produce a text via automatic writing. That would be a type of verbal inspiration. Verbal inspiration in general doesn't require that. But it's a kind of verbal inspiration.

## Stop the clock

**Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Mt 16:28, par. Mk 9:1; Lk 9:27).**

**i)** "Skeptics" think Jesus mispredicted the end of the world. In this post I won't attempt to discuss what I think Mt 16:28 means. Rather, I'll discuss what it can't mean. My argument doesn't depend on explaining what I think it means. Rather, it's enough to show what it can't mean.

**ii)** Many scholars think Mt 10:23 & 24:34 refer to the same event as 16:28. Let's grant that for discussion purposes.

**iii)** Minimally, Jesus appears to be saying that some of his contemporaries will still be alive at the time of the "coming" (whatever that means). It's possible that his statement has a narrower scope—in reference to the disciples—rather than his contemporaries in general.

**iv)** "Skeptics" think the "coming" denotes the end of the world. The problem, though, is whether that's how Mark, and especially Matthew and Luke understood the prediction. Let's say Jesus uttered this prediction c. 30. Conservatives generally date Mark to the 50s, while dating Matthew and Luke to the 60s. That would mean Matthew and Luke were written over a generation after Jesus uttered that prediction.

Liberals generally date Mark to the 70s while dating Matthew and Luke to 80-100. That would mean Matthew

and Luke were written two or three generations after Jesus uttered that prediction.

That, however, generates internal tension for the liberal position. At the time of writing (80-100), how many of Christ's contemporaries were still alive? How many people who were standing there, some 70 years earlier, were still alive? How many people who were old enough to follow him around and hear that prophecy were still alive at the time Matthew and Luke were composed, according to liberal dating schemes?

What would motivate Matthew and Luke to copy a prophecy from Mark which appeared to be untenable by the time they got around to composing their Gospels? What gives? Did they understand this to be an end-of-the-world prophecy? Sometimes Matthew and Luke edit Mark, so they don't feel compelled to reproduce what they find in Mark.

**v)** If, moreover, they thought the end of the world was just a few years away, why even bother to write such lengthy Gospels? Their Gospels are stuffed with material that's pretty pointless if there's just minutes remaining on the timer before the bomb goes off.

Why do people need to know all that? When will they be able to make use of that?

Indeed, that's a distraction. If their readers are down to the wire, then clogging the Gospels with all this extraneous material is counterproductive. You need to warn people clearly and succinctly how to get right with God. Cluttering the Gospels with so much diverse material impedes the urgency of the warning, if the world is about to end.

By contrast, Matthew and Luke read very much like they were written for the long haul. Written for posterity.

## Does Jesus know more than science?

I'll comment on this doozy by Peter Enns:

<http://www.peteenns.com/does-jesus-know-more-than-science-or-grappling-with-a-truly-fully-human-jesus-of-nazareth/>

*I believe that evolution explains human origins, even if there is always more to learn. I believe this for the same reason I believe the earth is round and billions of years old, the universe is immense and billions of years older, that there are atoms and subatomic particles, that galaxies number in the billions with billions of stars in each, that it takes light from the sun 8.3 minutes to reach us. And so on.*

---

Even supposing that evolution is true, the evidence for evolution is quite different from the evidence for the rotundity of the earth, the existence of subatomic particles, or the speed of light. The direct reasons for believing these things are independent of each other. So they can't be the same reason. Not in terms of reasons for the claim itself.

*I believe that evolution is one of the things that science has gotten right, along with many other things we take for granted every day, because this is the resounding conclusion of the scientific community, including Christians trained in the sciences.*

---

There's nothing inherently wrong with appeal to expert witnesses and the argument from authority. But secular science preemptively discounts divine agency as a legitimate explanation, even if that's the right explanation. So, by process of elimination, only naturalistic explanations are even considered. That's like proving all marbles are white by first removing all the black and blue marbles. Sure, that's what you end up with, by discarding evidence to the contrary.

*The stories of origins in Genesis (Chapter 1 and chapter 2) are not competing “data sets” to scientific models of cosmic and human origins. These stories were written somewhere between 2500 and 3000 years ago, and clearly reflect cultural categories older still. I don't expect Genesis or any other Bronze or Iron Age text to answer the kinds of*



*questions we can answer today through calculus, optical and radio telescopes, genomics, or biological and cultural anthropology.*

---

That's very logical...if you're an atheist. If you deny the existence of a revelatory God. If you operate with a closed-system worldview.

If, on the other hand, Gen 1-2 were revealed by a timeless God, then it doesn't matter how long ago it was written. What difference does the first or second millennium BC make to God? If God is outside time, and God is the source of Gen 1-2, then the antiquity of Gen 1-2 is irrelevant to its veracity. If God disclosed the origin of the world to a Bronze Age narrator, the narrator's time-frame is secondary to God's timeless perspective.

*However we define these terms, the Bible is not something dropped out of the sky. Rather these writings unambiguously reflect the various cultural moments of the writers. The Bible speaks the “language” of ancient people grappling with things in ancient ways, and therefore what the Bible records about creation or the dawn of humanity needs to be understood*

*against the cultural backdrop of the biblical writers. Any viable notion of the Bible as inspired or revealed needs to address the implications of a culturally situated Bible.*

---

That's such a canard. For instance, Warfield didn't think the Bible dropped out of the sky. He articulated the organic theory of inspiration.

*True, Jesus alludes to the Adam and Eve story (Genesis 2:24; see Matthew 19:5), and in doing so seems to take that story literally—at least some would argue that. I do not think this allusion establishes anything of the sort, but even if it did, Jesus's words still do not trump (forgive the poor word choice 2 weeks before election day) evolution as being true.*

---

i) Really? He honestly doesn't believe Jesus thought Gen 1-2 was historical? Christ's argument against lax divorce laws is based on a contrast between the Mosaic Law, which represents a postlapsarian concession—and the creation of Adam and Eve, which represents a prelapsarian standard of comparison. If, however, there was no first couple, then

that cuts the ground out from under his argument. Christ is contrasting the status quo with the prototype. But if the prototype never existed, there's no basis of comparison.

**ii)** Moreover, how can you argue for monogamy from evolution? Does Enns think hominids were monogamous? If evolution is true, surely our protohuman ancestors were promiscuous. Indeed, Darwinians are wont to say that men are naturally promiscuous while women are naturally monogamous. Men are programmed to mate with many women to up the chances that at least some of their offspring will survive to sexual maturity and repeat the cycle. Women are programmed to seek a dependable mate who will stick around to protect and provide for the mother and kids, as well as to helping raising them. So you have this tug of war between competing instincts.

*Expecting the words of Jesus to settle the evolution issue shows an insufficient grappling with the implications of the incarnation. Actually, it betrays how uncomfortable and “irreverent” (to borrow C. S. Lewis’s description) a doctrine the incarnation is —ironically, including for Christians.*

*For Jesus to be fully human means not abstractly “human” but a human of a particular sort, fully participating in the Judaism of the 1st century. The incarnation leaves no room whatsoever for the idea that Jesus in any way kept his distance from participating in that particular humanity. That*

*means, among other things, that Jesus was limited in knowledge along with everyone else at the time.*

---

i) I don't know if this is just tactical, or if Enns is really that dense. On the one hand, he may just be saying that to put faithful Christians on the defensive. Turning tables on them by pretending that *they* are the ones whose orthodoxy is suspect. It's a transparent ploy, but it's the best he can do.

On the other hand, maybe he's really that superficial and uncomprehending. It's funny how, when people like Enns talk about the Incarnation, they always talk about it in this one-sided fashion. But the Incarnation doesn't accentuate the humanity of Christ. According to the Incarnation, Christ is equally divine and human. So there's no differential stress one way or the other. The Incarnation doesn't emphasize the humanity of Christ while deemphasizing the divinity of Christ. It's not as if Jesus is two parts human to one part divine.

The Incarnation doesn't mean Jesus has finite knowledge *rather* than infinite knowledge. Rather, it means *both* are true. Yes, in one respect the Incarnation means Jesus doesn't know everything, but in another respect it means Jesus does know everything! This is, after all, a *divine* incarnation. Enns singles out the human side of the Incarnation while blanking out the divine side of the Incarnation. But who or what became Incarnate? The divine Son. It isn't simply God *Incarnate*, but *God* Incarnate. God united to a body and a rational soul. The Incarnation entails something that's distinctively divine as well as something that's distinctively human. The result of the Incarnation will have properties of both.

Is Enns so theologically inept that he doesn't grasp the rudiments of orthodox Christology? Even if he doesn't believe it, he should be able to accurately state the idea.

**ii)** In addition, although the divine and human natures are metaphysically separate and compartmentalized, the two natures are not epistemically separate and compartmentalized. On the one hand the divine nature knows everything the human nature does. On the other hand, the divine nature shares some of its supernatural knowledge with the human nature. In the Gospels, Jesus sometimes exhibits superhuman knowledge. He has natural human knowledge, but even in his humanity he also has a degree of supernatural divine knowledge. He knows some things that only God would be in a position to know—even in reference to the human mind of Christ. That's because the divine mind imparts some of its supernatural knowledge to the human mind. (For convenience, I'm casting this in terms of a two-minds Christology. I've offered more detailed analogies elsewhere.)

So in that respect, they're not equally balanced. Rather, it tilts in a divine direction.

**iii)** Incidentally, I'm not convinced that Enns even believes in the Incarnation or Resurrection. To begin with, why would he still believe in greater miracles when he rejects lesser miracles? How can greater miracles be believable when lesser miracles are unbelievable? If, moreover, he ceased to believe in the Incarnation and Resurrection, he'd have a lot to lose if he said so in public.

*That may sound irreverent or offensive,  
but it is an implication of the incarnation.*

## *Jesus wasn't an omniscient being giving the final word on the size of mustard seeds...*

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It's striking how many people trip over that little mustard seed. Yet as Gundry noted in his commentary, "The mustard seed was the smallest seed of Palestinian seeds that could be seen with the naked eye and had become proverbial for smallness" (267). In his commentary, Keener supplies documentation from Jewish and Greco-Roman sources (387-88).

Does Enns think Jesus should reference an invisible seed to illustrate his point? How would a seed so tiny that no one could see it illustrate his point? They wouldn't know what he's talking about!

Enns has no categories for hyperbole or proverbial expressions in his conceptual toolkit. Does he bring the same exquisite sensitivity to other comparative idioms like "light as a feather," "flat as a pancake," "a stone's throw," "a day late and a dollar short"?

## *...mental illness*

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That's an allusion to Gospel accounts of Jesus as an exorcist. Enns insinuates Jesus was mistaken in believing that they were possessed. Yet the Gospels treat the exorcisms of Jesus as evidence of his messiahship.

*...or cosmic and biological evolution. He was a 1st century Jew and he therefore thought like one.*

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According to the Incarnation, although Jesus was a 1C Jew, he wasn't *just* a 1C Jew. He remained the antemundane Creator of the world. In one respect he thought like a 1C Jew. In another respect, he thought like God.

## Bible background

**1.** I was asked to comment on the idea of knowing culture background to better understand the Bible. It's hard to give a general answer to that question. On the one hand, there are certainly many instances where background knowledge aids the reader in understanding the text. For instance, books like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and 1-2 Kings are full of references to the international politics of the day. Much of this is obscure or opaque to a modern reader. So it's useful to fill in the background.

Likewise, knowing about the nature of Egyptian religion can help the reader understand how the miracles in Exodus are sometimes an attack on the pretensions of Egyptian religion. The cult of Pharaoh. The sun god Ra. The role of the cobra. The "divine" Nile river, as a personification of the god Hapi.

By the same token, knowing that ancient Israel had an agrarian economy, common property, tribal social structure, knowing about the climate and topography, can help explain the function of some of OT laws.

In addition, this can sometimes be useful in terms of genre criticism and literary conventions.

I'd add that the OT is often countercultural. It doesn't just mirror the ANE, but often provides a corrective.

**2.** However, when scholars like John Walton, Peter Enns, Kenton Sparks, Kyle Greenwood, Bill Arnold, Charles Halton et al. talk about the need to read the OT in the original context, they have something additional in mind. They mean Bible writers rely on obsolete conceptual categories.



Bible writers unwittingly posit as true what we now know to be false. Carried to a logical extreme, this leads to atheism. The view that the whole notion of external divine intervention from a God (or angels) who exists beyond the earth is part of this (allegedly) antiquated cosmography.

They think they are viewing the OT through ancient Near Eastern eyes. Up to a point, that's a good objective. We should attempt to read the OT as the original audience understood it. However, I don't think the scholars in question are actually viewing it through ANE eyes. Rather, they are viewing it through the eyes of Western high-tech urbanites who are out of touch with the experience of ancient Near Easterners.

The exercise is potentially circular, for unless you know how ancient people viewed the world directly, you can't say how literary or pictorial depictions of the world were meant to reflect the world. Let's take a few comparisons, moving back in time.

**3.** Suppose a scholar inferred from Holman Hunt's **THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD** that Victorian Christians thought Jesus knocks on everybody's front door. Of course, that's a fallacious inference.

**4.** Suppose a scholar wrote a monograph on Verne's cosmography. He cited **JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH** to demonstrate what 19C Europeans thought about the earth's interior. But, of course, Verne's story is fictional.

Perhaps someone would object that that's an equivocal comparison. We classify his work as fiction because a scientifically educated man of his era would know that's not

what the earth's interior is like. By contrast, the same thing can't be said for ancient Near Easterners.

However, I doubt that at the time of writing (1864), Europeans knew that much about the earth's interior. Not to mention that Verne wasn't even a geologist. Moreover, he's writing in a genre that had been around for a while. There were literary precedents. Consider earlier examples like Casanova's **ICOSAMÉRON** (1788) and Niels Klim's **UNDERGROUND TRAVELS** (1741). How much did 18C literati know about the earth's interior?

5. Suppose scholars inferred from spirituals that black slaves thought that at the moment of death your soul was transported to Palestine, where you had to ford the river Jordan to enter Beulah land?

6. Suppose a scholar wrote a monograph on Buyanesque cosmography. He cited **THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS** to demonstrate that 17C Englishmen thought heaven was a place on earth. Heaven lay just beyond the Delectable Mountains. You could walk to heaven on the King's Highway, although you had to ford the Thames to reach the Celestial City. The scholar produces a roadmap with landmarks and place names to document the state of 17C English cosmography.

But, of course, that's a fallacious inference. Bunyan's work is fictional.

7. Suppose a scholar wrote a monograph on Dantean cosmography. This seems like a more promising example. Dante's **COMEDY** is cobbled together from Aristotelian

physics, Ptolemaic astronomy, and Greco-Roman depictions of the Netherworld. Dante believed the underlying science was true. And you can certainly map out the world of the **COMEDY**.

That said, did Dante really think Purgatory a mountain? Moreover, even if he thought the scientific underpinnings of the story were true, he knew that he was inventing the details every step of the way. The landscape of hell, and the climate of hell, with boiling rivers of blood, sleet, brimstone, deserts of burning coals, bleeding trees, &c., is a figment of his imagination.

Furthermore, there's a major plothole running through the entire story. The character of Dante is still alive. He has a physical body. But most of hell's denizens are discarnate spirits: ghosts and demons. If hell is physical, how can it contain and confine discarnate spirits? If hell is physical, how can the sleet, brimstone, boiling rivers, &c., have any affect on them?

In theory, it could be like a psychological simulation. A stable, collective nightmare. But in that event, the character of Dante would be outside the dreamscape, not inside the dreamscape.

So there's this constant paradox. If the character of Dante can interface with hell, then most of the inhabitants cannot. If most of the inhabitants can interface with hell, then his character cannot. It requires the willing suspension of disbelief.

**8.** Suppose a scholar wrote a monograph on Homer's oceanography. He cited **THE ODYSSEY** to demonstrate what ancient Greeks believed about the nature of their world.

But there are problems with that inference. In **THE ODYSSEY**, the action is set around the Mediterranean, Aegean sea, Ionian sea, Strait of Messina. Sicily, Ithaca, the Peloponnese, &c. The travelogue of Odysseus includes encounters with the Calypso, Circe, Sirens, Cyclops, Laestrygonians, &c.

Surely, though, ancient Greek mariners who were familiar with the harbors and islands along his route. Yet they never encountered anything like he relates. Wouldn't Greek sailors be skeptical about these tales?

I can't give a firm answer. My point is that it doesn't even occur to scholars like John Walton, Peter Enns et al. to ask questions like that when they make assumptions about ancient Near Easterners.

## How did Judas die?

The death of Judas is a familiar crux. We have two accounts in Matthew and Acts. At least superficially, these seem to describes two different ways of dying.

How these are two be harmonized is anyone's guess. My own theory is that Judas hanged himself, then animal scavengers yanked his body down (e.g. dogs, jackals, a bear, a lion).

This is easy to visualize for anyone who's seen nature shows in which wildlife photographers string meat from a tree, then photograph predators attempting to pull it down. So I think that's an economical explanation.

However, an unbeliever will object that I'm guilty of special pleading. If it was anything other than the Bible, I'd just admit we have discrepant accounts.

So let's take a comparison. Mattathias Antigonus was the last Hasmonean king. He was predecessor to Herod the Great. Depending on how you count them, we have three or four different accounts of his demise:

***These people Antony entrusted to a certain Herod to govern; but Antigonus he bound to a cross and flogged, — a punishment no other king had suffered at the hands of the Romans, — and afterwards slew him. Dio Cassius, Roman History, 22:6.***

*Now when Antony had received Antigonus as his captive, he determined to keep him against his triumph; but when he heard that the nation grew seditious, and that, out of their hatred to Herod, they continued to bear good-will to Antigonus, he resolved to behead him at Antioch, for otherwise the Jews could no way be brought to be quiet. And Strabo of Cappadocia attests to what I have said, when he thus speaks: "Antony ordered Antigonus the Jew to be brought to Antioch, and there to be beheaded. And this Antony seems to me to have been the very first man who beheaded a king... Josephus, Antiquities ,15.1.2 (8-9).*

*and he deprived many monarchs of their kingdoms, as, for instance, Antigonus the Jew, whom he brought forth and beheaded, though no other king before him had been so punished. Plutarch, Life of Antony, 36.11.*

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As you can see, Plutarch, Josephus, and Strabo (according to Josephus) all say that Marc Antony had Mattathias Antigonus beheaded. By contrast, Dio Cassius says Marc Antony had him crucified.

Now, these aren't strictly contradictory. Dio Cassius doesn't exactly say Mattathias Antigonus *died* by crucifixion. It

indicates that he was slain after he was crucified—which is rather vague.

If, however, we approach these accounts with the same skepticism that unbelievers apply to Scripture, we wouldn't try to harmonize them. For one thing, isn't crucifixion and decapitation overkill? Moreover, why dispatch him before he dies from crucifixion? The whole point of scourging and crucifixion is to make your enemy die a slow, excruciating. To behead him before he succumbs would be counterproductive. Finally, his death by decapitation is multiply-attested, whereas Dio Cassius is the only source who says he was crucified. What are the odds that a man would both be crucified and beheaded?

Ah, but here's where the story gets even more interesting. We aren't confined to literary notices. There's archeological evidence that, as a matter of fact, Mattathias Antigonus did undergo both crucifixion and decapitation. In 1970, an ossuary was discovered in the Abba cave. The remains were identified as belonging to none other than Mattathias Antigonus.

On the one hand, the cut jaw and severed second vertebra indicate decapitation. On the other hand, the ossuary contains three hooked nails (used in crucifixion) with traces of human calcium.

Recently, that's has been confirmed by Yoel Elitzur and Israel Hershkovitz. As one scholar (Greg Doudna) summarizes the evidence:

*There are the very clear and specific indications that this individual was both*

*beheaded and nailed through the hands at the time of death. As I understand it, very few nails have been found inside any ossuaries (with the bones) in any case, and in no other case have nails been found attached to hand bones in an ossuary. And this particular individual was also fairly clearly beheaded (possibly with the executioner whacking twice to complete the job, per P. Smith's analysis). The extremely unusual combination, with no other known parallel, of nails attached to hand bones and beheading corresponds specifically and exclusively to dual traditions of Antigonus Mattathias being hung up on a cross and flogged (Dio Cassius), and beheaded (Strabo). While that particular combination may have been done by Romans in cases not known to history, Antigonus Mattathias is the only case in which these dual traditions of these two particular kinds of death are recounted for the same person—the exact combination that turns up on a set of*



*bones in an ossuary of a tomb with an  
Inscription referring to bones of one  
MTTY, of the approximate time as  
Antigonus Mattathias as independently  
established on dating grounds.*

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<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/04/zia388008.shtml>

Now, the death of Antigonus Mattathias is at least as convoluted and antecedently unlikely as harmonizing the death of Judas in Matthew and Acts. Yet there's both documentary and paleoforensic evidence that that's what happened.

Incidentally, the reason Antigonus Mattathias might have been beheaded after he was crucified was to expedite his death. Unless a corpse was buried before sunset, it defiled the land (Deut 21:22-23). Marc Antony may have been forced to accede to Jewish sensibilities in that respect.

## Inerrancy and evangelism

Increasingly, there seems to be a sentiment in some "evangelical" circles that we should downplay inerrancy because that drives people away from the faith. But if you unpack it, what does that mean?

It means we shouldn't insist that people need to believe the Bible to be Christians. Insisting that they have a duty to believe the Bible deters them from becoming Christian.

Okay, but since they already disbelieve the Bible, if you tell them it's okay to disbelieve the Bible, then they're in exactly the same situation they'd be if you "drove them away" by telling them it's not okay to disbelieve the Bible. What are you keeping them from by telling them it's wrong to believe the Bible? You're not driving them away from Christian belief, since they already lack Christian belief. That's where they're at. And if you tell them it's okay not to believe the Bible, then they can just stay put. That's where they're at already. They no longer need to become anything different, because you told it's okay not to believe the Bible, and guess what?—they don't believe the Bible!

If anything, it's the person who tells them that inerrancy is optional who's driving them away or keeping them away, since in that event, there's no reason for them to change.

The only way to change the status quo is by telling them they have a duty to change—as in...believing the Bible!

## Licona on verbal inspiration

Muslim propagandist Yahya Snow has been posting some edited videos of Michael Licona. Normally, Snow isn't even on my radar. I only become aware of his stuff when someone else draws my attention to it. That said, I'll comment on two videos.

**1.** I'd like to begin with a general comment. To judge by three videos I've seen, Licona isn't good at answering off-the-cuff questions. He stumbles and flails around when ad libbing answers.

By itself, that's not a personal criticism. However, Licona is a well-known Christian apologist. As a public spokesman for the Christian faith, he has a responsibility to carefully articulate the Christian faith. It does a disservice to the cause of Christianity when he gives these half-baked answers. He should desist from answering questions in this forum. That's not his strong suit. It's a poor representation of the Christian faith. To judge by his performance on these occasions, he should confine himself to prepared answers.

Note: I'm not faulting him for his lack of improvisational skills. Rather, I'm faulting him for putting himself in that situation to begin with. He blunders through these questions. Since he's not good at winging it, he shouldn't even try.

**2.** Regarding the Trinity:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cYAIQF829k>

**i)** We need to draw an elementary distinction between what's essential to be a Christian and what's essential to

Christianity. Christian theology is based on many revealed truths and redemptive events. For Christianity to be true, it's necessary that these things be the case.

However, you don't have to be a systematic theologian to have saving faith. Take Christian parents of a grown child with Down Syndrome. Someone with Down Syndrome can have saving faith in Jesus, even though their theological grasp is rudimentary, at best.

**ii)** There's a difference between having an inchoate understanding of the Trinity and consciously rejecting the Trinity.

**3.** Regarding inerrancy:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B\\_rbp4NEBeE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_rbp4NEBeE)

**i)** Licona rejects the verbal inspiration of Scripture. He classifies that as "rigid" inerrancy. God wasn't concerned with "peripheral details".

He suggests that God merely put concepts in the minds of prophets and Bible writers—who then convey these inspired ideas in uninspired words.

But that completely disregards the Biblical distinction between true and false prophets. True prophets speak "words" which God gave them, not merely "ideas" which God gave them.

**ii)** Licona talks as though he never had any thorough grounding in systematic theology. He rightly rejects the dictation theory, but he seems to equate the dictation theory with verbal inspiration, as if that's the only possible mechanism for verbal inspiration.

Evidently, it doesn't occur to him that God can inspire people at a subliminal level. A prophet or Bible writer needn't be conscious of divine inspiration. In Scripture, there are many examples of God working behind-the-scenes to cause a person to say or do something. The person himself is unaware of that ulterior dynamic.

By the same token, exponents of verbal inspiration like Warfield operate with an "organic" theory of inspiration, which includes divine providence.

**iii)** Licona attacks the distinction between inspired autographa and uninspired copies. In fairness, he's responding to Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe. But that's a poor frame of reference.

**iv)** Is the Bible I'm holding in my hands the inerrant word of God? It's inerrant insofar as the critical editions of the Greek and Hebrew preserve the original readings. Most of the text of Scripture is not in serious doubt.

**v)** Not only is there a factual distinction between originals and copies, but an inerrant original is important even if it no longer exists. To take a comparison, a doctor writes a prescription which a pharmacist fills. Sometimes a pharmacist misreads the prescription. He may give the customer the wrong dosage or the wrong medication. But imagine if a pharmacist didn't even have the doctor's prescription to guide him.

Likewise, suppose a pharmacist inputs the prescription into his computer. Suppose he then discards the paper copy. Although the original no longer exists, the computer entry is based on the original. It's not something the pharmacist make up whole cloth.

**vi)** I think some puzzling numbers in Scripture are the result of scribal error. Indeed, it's pretty inevitable that scribes will sometimes miscopy numbers. It's easier to miscopy numbers than words or sentences, because numbers aren't meaningful in the same way that words and sentences are meaningful. If you inadvertently use the wrong word in a sentence, you can usually tell that something went wrong, because the sentence won't make sense. But a sentence will often make sense even if the wrong number is used.

**vii)** However, I don't think all or most of the puzzling numbers in Scripture are the result of scribal error. I think this is often based on idioms or numerology, and modern scholars sometimes lack the background knowledge to decode it. Consider some modern idioms:

half a mind

cut both ways

zero in

one step ahead

one-horse town

all in one

back to square one

one of these days

on the one hand

one for the road

not one iota

two's company, three's a crowd

two strikes

two minds

two bricks shy of a load

two cent's worth

stand on two feet

put two and two together

play second fiddle

think twice

the third degree

three cheers

three sheets to the wind

fifth wheel

deep six

six degrees of separation

six feet under

six of one, half a dozen of another

roll a hard six

at six and sevens

seventh heaven

nine-day wonder

a stitch in time saves nine

on cloud nine

nine times out of ten

cat has nine lives

at the eleventh hour

a dime a dozen

forty winks

hundred to one shot

a thousand times

bat a thousand

never in a million years

feel/look like a million bucks

million-dollar question



a million miles away

one in a million

I think we should make allowance for the possibility that when we run across puzzling figures in Scripture, they may be idiomatic. It's like a foreigner who's bewildered by the idiomatic expressions of another language. They make perfect sense to a native speaker, but a foreign speaker lacks the original context.

## Was Mark confused?

I was asked to comment on this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UPg-QpBxq8>

### 1. Feeding the 5000 thousand

To summarize Licona, there are some apparent discrepancies in the feeding of the 5000 and the aftermath. Luke says the miracle took place in Bethsaida or thereabouts. Yet Mark says Bethsaida was their intended destination after they left the location of the miracle (which Mark doesn't specify). How can your destination be the same place as your starting-point?

Moreover, Mark says they wound up in Capernaum rather than Bethsaida. Conversely, John says Capernaum was their intended destination (Jn 6:17).

Licona then discounts efforts to harmonize the different descriptions as "hermeneutical gymnastics."

So what are we to make of this?

**i)** In terms of Muslim apologetics, it's suicidal for Muslims (e.g. Yahya Snow) to attack the credibility of the Bible. That's because Muhammad staked his own claim on the credibility of the Bible. He said his revelations were a confirmation of former revelations. He told doubters to consult Jews and Christians. This assumes the Bible was reliable during Muhammad's lifetime. And some of our MSS for the NT antedate Muhammad. So you can't claim the text was altered after the fact.

**ii)** Richard Bauckham has defended the general reliability of Mark's geography:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4THNI0CxbE>

He says Mark is operating with the idea of a 'mental map.' The way we construct our spatial environment in our minds is very different from the maps we see on paper or on screen. A close look at Mark's geography shows that it makes very good sense if it reflects the mental map of a Galilean fisherman based in Capernaum.

**iii)** To say attempts to harmonize the accounts amount to "hermeneutical gymnastics" poisons the well. That's a prejudicial characterization.

**iv)** Assuming for the sake of argument that one of the Gospel writers was confused (which I deny), it's odd that Licona would say Mark was confused rather than Luke. On a conventional solution to the Synoptic Problem, Luke is literarily dependent on Mark at this point, not vice versa. Therefore, if anyone is confused, we'd expect that to be Luke rather than Mark insofar as Luke is getting his information from Mark.

**v)** The location of Bethsaida is uncertain. For one thing, the name simply means Fishing Village (lit. house of fishing or fisherman's house). So that's not necessarily its official name. Rather, that could be a descriptive designation for one of several fishing villages on the shores of the lake—just as we might refer to a "river camp" or "lake camp".

**vi)** The descriptions may be confusing because the disciples in the boat were genuinely confused. They got off to a late start. It was already dark when they launched. When, hours

later, Jesus met them on the lake, it was still in the wee hours of the morning (c. 3:00-4:00 AM).

This is the 1C. Their rowboat wasn't equipped with searchlights, radar, or GPS chartplotters. Fishing villages ringing the shoreline didn't have city lights. It would be very easy to get hopelessly lost or row in circles. Put yourself in their situation. Imagine navigating a boat at night in pitch black conditions. You can't see where you're going. You can't see ahead. You can't see the shoreline. Only at first light would conditions of visibility begin to improve. For several hours they were sailing blind.

It doesn't even seem to occur to Licona to imagine how disorienting their situation would be.

**vii)** Mark's terminology is ambiguous:

*If in [Mk] 6:53, "crossed over" refers to a return after a period of time to the western side of the Sea of Galilee, there is no need to accuse Mark of ignorance concerning the geography of Galilee. R. Stein, Mark (Baker, 2008), 322.*

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**viii)** The original text is unsettled:

*Luke's description would place the miraculous feeding to the east of the general vicinity suggested in the other*

*Gospels, near "a city called Bethsaida" (v10). Luke's geography is thus more precise, but its textual attestation is uncertain. See Metzger, TCGNT, 123. J. Edwards, The Gospel According to Luke (Eerdmans, 2015), 265.*

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**ix)** The verb (erchonto) in Jn 6:17 doesn't imply that Capernaum was their original destination. While it could mean they were trying to go there, it could also mean they were on their way to Capernaum. Cf. C. K. Barrett, **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN** (Westminster Press, 2nd ed., 1978), 280.

Keep in mind that while this is describing an event that was future to the disciples, it was written after the fact, and therefore reflects the narrator's retrospective viewpoint regarding the outcome. The narrator knows something they don't. What's future for them is past for him. So it's only natural that he describes the event with the benefit of hindsight. But when the disciples embarked, they didn't have that perspective.

**x)** As, moreover, one scholar notes:

*A contradiction has been alleged between Mk 6:45 ("to Bethsaida") and Jn 6:17 ("to Capernaum"), but if the disciples were setting out from due east of the Sea of Galilee, both cities would be to the*

*northwest, with the former as possibly a stopping point en route to the latter. The storm, as it turns out , blows them far enough south so that they actually land at Gennesaret (Mk 6:53), more directly to the east. C. Blomberg, Jesus and the Gospels (B&H, 2009), 316n64.*

*But the two can be harmonized, since a small bay at the north end of the Sea of Galilee would have allowed for the feeding miracle to occur in the hilly country northeast of Bethsaida and for the disciples to set off for home in the direction of Capernaum, with Bethsaida en route. The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel (IVP, 2001), C. Blomberg, 121n154.*

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**xi)** Carson takes the view that they first went to Bethsaida, waited for Jesus, then when he didn't meet them, proceeded to Gennesaret Cf. "Matthew," EBC (Zondervan, 2nd ed., 2010), 9:392-93.

## **2. Infancy narratives**

Here's what Pennington says:

*But even in the accounts that do give a birth narrative—Matthew and Luke—there is almost no overlap at all. Matthew*

*traces Jesus's lineage through Joseph's Davidic line. Then he gives us a whole raft of little stories concerning Joseph's plans to divorce Mary, the mysterious magi from the East who arrive a couple of years after Jesus's birth. Herod's paranoia and slaughter of children, and the holy family's flight to and return from Egypt. Luke has none of this but traces Jesus's lineage back to Adam. He also includes a rather lengthy cycle of stories about the miraculous birth of Jesus's kinsman John, the visit of angels to Zechariah and Mary, Joseph and Mary's census-forced journey to Bethlehem, an angelic visit to some nondescript shepherds on the night of Jesus birth...If Jesus did not appear as the named figure in both of these accounts, one would never suspect they were stories about the same person. J. Pennington, Reading the Gospels Wisely (Baker, 2012), 55-56.*

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That's a misleading comparison:

**i)** To begin with, there's a dilemma. If two Gospel accounts overlap, critics discount their historicity because one is dependent on the other for his source of information. Conversely, if two Gospel accounts are independent, critics discount their historicity due to lack of overlap.

**ii)** It overlooks what they have in common:

**a)** In both accounts, Jesus has the same parents.

**b)** In both accounts, Jesus is a Davidic messiah.

**c)** Both accounts have angels.

**d)** Both accounts have the Virgin Birth.

**e)** In both accounts, his birth is heralded by portents and prodigies.

**f)** In both accounts, he is born in Bethlehem.

**g)** In both accounts, he grows up in Nazareth.

**h)** Moreover, although John the Baptist doesn't figure in Matthew's nativity account, he certainly figures in the public ministry of Christ. So Pennington artificially separates the two in that respect.

**3.** Details in Resurrections narratives difficult to harmonize.

I've discussed this on various occasions. The Resurrection accounts are selective. Different people arrive at different times. Moreover, there's no reason to assume each person only went there once. If you were there, wouldn't you be inclined to go back to see the empty tomb more than once?



Imagine four different people attending the same high school reunion, then making a diary entry after they return home. There might be little if any overlap because they arrive at different times, leave at different times, and chat with different classmates.

## War grooms

**i)** Atheists like to quote Deut 21:10-14 as a case of Scripture sanctioning rape or sex slavery. I've discussed this before. The passages makes provision for war brides, not sex slaves.

**ii)** In addition, it's fallacious to infer that a law code condones whatever it regulates. For instance, a libertarian legislator might propose a law to decriminalize possession of Marijuana, not because he approves of potheads, but because he thinks the "war on drugs" is more detrimental than letting people smoke pot.

**iii)** The contention that this is rape or sex slavery is based on the fact that it's a forced marriage. However, one problem with that objection is that it disregards the circumstances in which this issue crops up. The setting involves a warrior culture in which the able-bodied men were killed in combat, thereby widowing their wives. The women no longer have any men to protect them or provide for them, which is a dire situation for women in the ancient Near East.

So it's a question of how to play the hand you were dealt. We are often "forced" into situations we dislike, "forced" to make decisions we dislike, due to onerous circumstances beyond our control.

**iv)** However, I'd like to approach the issue from a different angle. Suppose the scenario involved war grooms rather than war brides. Suppose you have a queen. The army fights at her behest. Her army defeats the enemy. Some of the war captives are handsome men. She wants to marry one of them, and she exercises her royal prerogative to do

so. The male war captive is "forced" into a marriage with the queen.

Is that rape? If they were honest, I doubt people would characterize the arrangement in those terms because they don't think men must be forced to have sex.

Or let's vary the illustration. Suppose the queen adds some of the handsome male war captives to her harem. They are her sex slaves. They are available for her pleasure.

Is that rape? The male war captives didn't choose to be harem boys to service the lascivious monarch. But even if they find the prospect distasteful, is it rape?

This poses a dilemma for atheists. Many atheists pride themselves on their egalitarian views of men and women. They champion feminism. If they think men and women should be treated alike, if they don't think a queen who has sex with a harem boy is raping him, then the war bride scenario isn't rape.

If, on the other hand, they admit that men and women are wired differently in this regard, then they must forfeit their feminism. Opt for one or the other: you can't have both!

## Saving Christianity from itself

There are "progressive Christians" who view their vocation in life as a valiant effort to save Christianity from itself. Rescue Christianity from the clutches of the "fundamentalists". This has been going on since Schleiermacher. Theirs is often a lonely, thankless calling, yet they soldier on in their heroic mission to reinvent Christianity.

But what are they saving Christianity from? Christianity is worth saving if Christianity is true, but these are people who regard much of Scripture as pious fiction. They think the Gospels contain a fair amount of pious fiction.

Are they saving *Christianity*? If they save Christianity by radical surgery, by drastically redefining Christianity, then what are they saving? Have they saved *Christianity*, or have they recanted the Christian faith to replace it with something foreign to Christianity, something they regard as newer and better than the obsolete original?

Why do they feel the need to reconstruct Christianity when they have so little faith in the original? Why do they constantly denounce Christians who wish to remain faithful to the original?

Where do they draw the line? *Do* they draw a line? For them, what is *not* Christian? You can't say what Christianity *is* unless you can say what it's *not*.

At what point do they conclude that there's nothing worth salvaging? Where's the tipping-point? At what juncture would they concede that they were vainly laboring to

remodel a fundamentally flawed paradigm? Why haven't they reached that crossroads already?

Rather than retrofitting the Christian faith to accommodate modernity, why don't these people simply renounce the Christian faith? Why do they cling to the semblance of Christianity? If they feel the incessant need to make ad hoc renovations to Christianity, is there not a point beyond which they should admit, from their own perspective, that it's time to ditch an irredeemably timebound, culturebound, all-too-human religion and start from scratch?

There's a sense in which forthright apostasy is more intellectually honest. Why don't they say they used to be Christian, they were raised in the Christian faith, they gave it their best shot, but in the end they just don't find central planks of the Christian faith credible, so the time is past due to make a clean break? Become secular humanists. Would that not be more consistent?

## **Biblical superheroes**

**5 Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. 6 Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done (Judges 14:5-6).**

**4 So Samson went and caught 300 foxes and took torches. And he turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails. 5 And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain, as well as the olive orchards (15:4-5).**

**14 When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. 15 And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand**

and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men (15:14-15).

18 And he was very thirsty, and he called upon the Lord and said, “You have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?” 19 And God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came out from it. And when he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore the name of it was called En-hakkore; it is at Lehi to this day (15:18-19).

3 But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron (16:3).

17 And he told her all his heart, and said to her, “A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.”

**20 ...But he did not know that the Lord had left him.  
21 And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison. 22 But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved (16:17,20-22).**

**i)** I'm going to comment on the credibility of Samson's exploits. There must be people, including Christians, who read the accounts of Samson and can't help thinking that they move in the same mythological world as Gilgamesh, Hercules, Perseus, Theseus, Homeric heroes (Iliad), Jason & the Argonauts (Argonautica)–or Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. Likewise, we have lots of comic book superheroes. Some of these make their way into blockbuster films. So is that a legitimate comparison? Is Samson a legendary superhero, on a par with these other figures?

**ii)** As a basis of comparison, let's begin by raising some naturalistic objections to his exploits:

**a)** Even if a man had the physical strength to tear a lion apart with his bare hands, how would he be able to get past the teeth and claws in order to get a good grip on the lion? Couldn't a lion disembowel him with its claws?

**b)** Wouldn't catching 300 foxes (or jackals) be extremely time-consuming?

**c)** You can only strike your foes down one at a time. If you're surrounded by hundreds of soldiers, they can attack



you from all sides. And they don't have to get within striking distance. They can spear you with a javelin.

**d)** Isn't water from the rock a rather frivolous miracle in this situation? For that matter, why does God protect Samson when he indulges in so much sinful, egotistical behavior?

**e)** The human body can't be muscular beyond an upper limit. There must be a balance between muscle mass and bone density, as well as the bond between bones, ligaments, and tendons.

**iii)** Having set the stage, let's respond. Paul Bunyan and his blue ox are consciously fictional.

**iv)** Demigods have innately superhuman abilities, because they are, indeed, superhuman. A hybrid. But Samson is merely human. His superhuman exploits aren't an innate ability. Rather, this represents divine empowerment or enablement. His hair is just a token of divine enablement.

It might be objected that in the Iliad, the gods sometimes come to the aid of combatants. But the combatants aren't doing anything humanly impossible. Rather, this is a case of the gods taking sides, tipping the scales.

**v)** Samson isn't just a muscleman like Hercules. Samson is very clever. Take his riddles. Or the way he sets fire to the grain fields.

vi) There's an intentionally comical element to some of Samson's exploits. The reader is meant to find some of this humorous. It's a mistake to read the accounts too straight. God is using Samson to mock the Philistines.

**vii)** Although Samson is very cocky, he pays dearly for his impiety and impudence.

**viii)** The problem with naturalistic objections is the assumption that all the natural objects retain their natural properties. That all the interactions between natural objects operate according to normal physics. That all the standard dynamics were kept in place.

But there's no reason to impose that rigid framework on the accounts. God needn't empower Samson directly. God can locally suspend certain physical constants to bring about these feats. It doesn't even require direct contact. For instance:

**a)** The weight of the city gates depends on the gravity. What if God levitates the gates? Reduces their weight by reducing the gravitational force at that particular point? Like an astronaut in space.

Or what if God grants Samson temporary psychokinetic abilities? The narratives don't attribute his phenomenal feats to phenomenal musculature. That interpretation is based on supplementing the accounts with a mental picture of Steve Reeves in **HERCULES**, or beefcake actor Victor Mature.

But the narratives say nothing about his physique. He could be the proverbial 90-pound weakling.

Rather, it comes and goes, based on the Spirit "coming upon him" or "leaving" him. Not a permanent endowment, but temporary enduements to do what's required at the time.

**b)** Did God strengthen Samson or weaken the lion?

**c)** God can prompt the foxes (or jackals) to congregate, making them easier to catch.

**d)** There's the thorny issue of how to construe large numbers in the OT.

**e)** How Samson struck down so many soldiers depends in part on how we visualize the scene. Suppose he leads them or lures them into a narrow passageway (e.g. crevice) where they must approach him single file. This isn't groundless speculation. The account mentions a rocky location in reference to the miraculous spring.

It forces them to form a line. Those behind can't spear him with a javelin because it's blocked by a soldier ahead of them. They must climb over a mounting heap of bodies to get to him, which makes them even more exposed. Fighting at close quarters in a bottleneck, they can never put sufficient distance between Samson and themselves to take advantage of their superior numbers.

Or God may disorient them. The OT gives examples.

When we read a passage like this, we tend to fill in the details by forming our own mental picture. Nothing necessary wrong with that. But there are many different ways it could happen. Our imagination has to supply what's missing, which may be wide of the mark.

## Why some people lose faith

Why do folks like Bart Ehrman lose their faith? There are different reasons people lose faith. In some cases, it's due to a personal tragedy, or succumbing to sexual temptation.

According to Ehrman:

*A turning point came in my second semester, in a course I was taking with a much revered and pious professor named Cullen Story...we had to write a final term paper on an interpretive crux of our own choosing. I chose a passage in Mark 2...*

*In my paper for Professor Story, I developed a long and complicated argument to the effect that even though Mark indicates this happened "when Abiathar was the high priest," it doesn't really mean that Abiathar was the high priest, but that the event took place in the part of the scriptural text that has Abiathar as one of the main characters. My argument was based on the meaning of the Greek words involved and was a bit convoluted. I was pretty sure Professor Story would appreciate the argument, since I knew him as a good Christian scholar who obviously (like me) would never think there could be anything like a*

*genuine error in the Bible. But at the end of my paper he made a simple one-line comment that for some reason went straight through me. He wrote: "Maybe Mark just made a mistake." I started thinking about it, considering all the work I had put into the paper, realizing that I had had to do some pretty fancy exegetical footwork to get around the problem, and that my solution was in fact a bit of a stretch. I finally concluded, "Hmm . . . maybe Mark did make a mistake."*

*Once I made that admission, the floodgates opened. For if there could be one little, picayune mistake in Mark 2, maybe there could be mistakes in other places as well. B. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (HarperCollins, 2005), 8-9.*

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However, there's something fishy about that explanation. As he says elsewhere:

*When I went to Wheaton, I was warned not to go to Princeton Theological Seminary — a Presbyterian school training ministers — because “there aren’t any Christians there.” Really. I did*

*indeed know that my faith would be challenged there, because it was “liberal” (REALLY liberal for my tastes).*

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<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

But if he knew ahead of time that his Princeton profs. rejected the inerrancy of Scripture, how can he honestly say "I was pretty sure Professor Story would appreciate the argument, since I knew him as a good Christian scholar who obviously (like me) would never think there could be anything like a genuine error in the Bible"?

Given what he knew about Princeton's reputation, why would Story's remark knock him off his pins? Indeed, didn't he have reason to *expect* that his Princeton profs. would impugn the inerrancy of Scripture?

Which brings me to another point: Some people lose faith when they first encounter objections to Scripture or Christian theology. Say, their freshman year in college. Or reading a book by an atheist. Or browsing an atheist website.

But then you have people like Ehrman who lose their faith much later in the educational process. In graduate or post-graduate school. By that stage, this is hardly the first time they've run across these challenges. The stock objections aren't surprising anymore. So is there some other factor? Some new factor? Consider this statement:

*I began my teaching career in a very different context, at a secular research university in New Jersey: Rutgers. After teaching there for four years, in 1988 I moved to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, one of the truly great state universities in the country. My colleagues in both places have been specialists in a wide range of academic disciplines: classics, anthropology, American studies, philosophy, and lots of other disciplines, especially history. I live with and move among people who do serious historical research for a living. That's what they have done for their entire academic lives. It's not a Christian school context, but the context of a purely academic, research institution.*

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<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

Here I think he unwittingly tips his hand. There are two related reasons a person might lose their faith in graduate or post-graduate school. Both of them involve an inferiority complex, but this can take different forms.

There's a social inferiority complex. Take the social climber. Have you noticed how often people move left to move up? They move in two directions simultaneously. According to Ehrman:

*My father was a salesman for a corrugated box company; my mother was a secretary.*

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<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

So by going to Moody, then Wheaton, then Princeton, then becoming a college prof., he was moving up the social ladder. But what if acceptance in elite circles induces you to share their outlook? You want to fit in. Be one of them. So you curry favor. Avoid incurring their disapproval. They are the gatekeepers of elite society.

Just see how flattered he feels to "live with and move among people who do serious historical research for a living."

He "made" it. He's arrived! As Sinatra would say, "I want to find I'm number one, top of the heap, top of the list, king of the hill".

Some people don't suffer from a social inferiority complex, so they aren't susceptible to that kind of compromise. There can be different reasons for that. Some people just don't care about status. Impressing strangers. They don't feel they have anything to prove to others.



Then you have some people who were born into elite society. They don't *aspire* to that status. They already have it. So they aren't overawed by members of the elite. For them, that's ordinary. Nothing special.

In addition, there's an intellectual inferiority complex. People like Bart Ehman and Peter Enns aren't overly-bright. I don't mean they're unintelligent. But they're not men of outstanding intellect.

By contrast, you have some very gifted moderate to conservative scholars who don't need their self-esteem stroked by members of the guild. Most of their colleagues are not their intellectual peers. So they are unimpressed by liberal scholarship. Too independent to take liberal groupthink seriously.

It would, of course, be better for all concerned parties to base their self-esteem on what God thinks of us in Christ.

## How to harmonize

[Metaphor alert: this post contains an overabundance of metaphors.]

**1.** I normally avoid debates over evidentialism because I think that's usually a cul-de-sac. Since, however, that's how Lydia McGrew has framed the issue on Gospel harmonization, I'll bite.

**2.** One objection to inerrancy is that commitment to inerrancy is a house of cards or row of dominoes. Or like pulling a thread. It only takes on error for the house of cards to topple and the dominoes to tumble. When that happens, Christians lose their faith.

Evidentialism is said to be more stable. A protective against apostasy. Because evidentialism only requires Scripture to be generally reliable, the faith of an evidentialist can survive Biblical errors.

This is often combined with a Resurrection apologetic. If Jesus rose from the dead, then Christianity is true regardless of whatever else is false. If Jesus rose from the dead, then Christianity is true, even if Adam and Eve never existed, Abraham never existed, Noah's flood never happened, the Exodus never happened, &c. (I'm not attributing that position to Lydia.)

I sometimes wonder how evidentialists like that would ever witness to an orthodox Jew.

To use yet another metaphor, we might compare evidentialism to the "web" of belief—popularized by Quine. A spider web has redundant structural integrity. You can snip

a strand here or there, but the web will retain its form and function. Some strands are central while others are peripheral.

**3.** Now, what I found curious about Lydia McGrew's position concerning Gospel harmonization is that it seems like the weight of even one or two stock examples will collapse the evidentialist web, depending on the harmonistic strategy.

I understand what she's opposed to with respect to Licona, because she's spelled that out. She's also given some examples of what she considers to be acceptable harmonizations. For instance:

*Jairus is distraught, he knows that even coming to Jesus has taken some time and that the child was dying when he left, and he says something to Jesus like, "My daughter is on the point of death. By this time, I'm sure she is dead! But come and lay your hand on her and she will live." One gospel reports "on the point of death" and the other reports "is dead." This is an economical and not at all implausible harmonization.*

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[http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2016/02/gospel\\_fictionalization\\_theory.html](http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2016/02/gospel_fictionalization_theory.html)

However, much of the discussion suffers from an abstract, hypothetical quality, due to the absence of actual, concrete examples from writers other than Licona. At the risk of using another metaphor, I don't know where all the tripwires are planted in her position. I know she thinks Licona stepped on a tripwire. But that represents one extreme. I'd like to probe the boundaries of her position. The inner and outer limits. What's the spread of acceptable harmonistic strategies?

I'm going to quote some notable inerrantist scholars on three representative examples she mentioned. Does she think their harmonizations step on the tripwire? Dropping the metaphor, does she think their harmonizations, if true, would render the Gospels untrustworthy? If that's what the Gospel writer were really up to, would that destroy their historical credibility? Let's get very specific.

### CENTURION'S SERVANT

Matthew has the centurion speaking to Jesus directly, while Luke has Jewish emissaries speaking to Jesus, and the centurion never talks directly with Jesus. So what is taking place here?

Two things are happening at once. The cultural context of the sent emissary (shaliach) and literary compression are both in play. Matthew often compresses accounts. For example, his telling of the healing of Jairus's daughter is more compact, as is his telling of the triumphal entry...Luke, given his concern for Jew-Gentiles relations, offers more detail by noting the representatives. When the shaliach, as an emissary, spoke on behalf of someone, it was as good as that person speaking. Jesus said as much of his disciples when he said that to accept the disciples was to accept him

(Jn 13:20; also 2 Kgs 19:20-34). A modern analogy would be how a press secretary speaks for the White House and the president. So Luke gives us the detail of the event, and Matthew simplifies its telling by compressing things literarily. Each account is accurate, but Luke's is more precise. D. Bock, "Precision and Accuracy: Making Distinctions in the Cultural Context," J. Hoffmeier & D. Magary, ed. *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?* (Crossway, 2012), 373-74.

A more recent scholar, R. T. France, writes as follows: His [Matthew's] omission of the means of the centurion's approach to Jesus is a valid literary device to highlight the message of the incident as he sees it (on the principle, common in biblical and contemporary literature, that a messenger or servant represents the one who sent him to the point of virtual identity).<sup>9</sup>

As a further illustration of the principle, Craig Blomberg points to Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15.<sup>10</sup> Both verses report that Pilate scourged Jesus; but, given the social and military protocol of the Roman world, Pilate would not have taken up the scourge in his own hands. The verses mean that Roman soldiers would have physically handled the scourge, acting on Pilate's orders. That is to say, the Roman soldiers represented Pilate because they acted under his authority. Pilate did scourge Jesus, though he did not do it "in person" but through representatives acting on his behalf. Likewise, the centurion really did address Jesus, but he did it by means of persons acting under his authority and on his behalf—the elders and friends represented him.

We have the accounts in Matthew and Luke, which are inspired by God. They are what God says and are therefore trustworthy. That is the conviction we have and the basis on which we work. But we do not have a third account, also

inspired, to tell us exactly how the original two accounts fit together. We make our own reasoned guesses, but they are fallible. We do not have complete information. Our reconstruction, though it may be plausible, is subordinate to the Gospel accounts as we have them. V. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels* (Crossway, 2012), 21-22.

A careful reading of the text raises the question, "Who actually spoke to Jesus? Was it the centurion as Mt 8:5-9 records or was it the elders of the Jews and the friends as Lk 7:3,6 claim?...The problem can be resolved by the use of a present-day example. If a conversation between the President of the United States and the Premier of Russia were reported, it could be described in at least two ways. First, the president says in English to his interpreter, "A". The interpreter then says in Russian to the premier, "A". The premier says in Russian to his interpreter, "B", and the interpreter says in English to the president, "B". Second, the president says to the premier, "A". The premier responds "B". Both descriptions are correct! The last account, which every newspaper report follows, chooses to omit for brevity's sake the role of the interpreter.

The apparent disagreement between Matthew's and Luke's versions disappears when it is understood that Matthew eliminates the reference to the messengers from his account...Matthew may have done this for the sake of brevity. He had other materials that he wanted to include in his Gospel. The length of a papyrus was limited...Both Matthew and Luke would take up an entire scroll.

Which is correct? Both are correct, for both accurately report what happens between the centurion and Jesus. To be disturbed by Matthew's omission would be to require greater historical exactness in this account than in present-day reports. Neither Matthew nor Luke err in their reports of

this incident. It is important to understand how they tell their story of this incident and not demand that they do so in a specific format. R. Stein, *Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament* (Baker, 1996), 35-38.

Common to modern Western and ancient Eastern cultures is the habit of speaking about people as acting for themselves even when they use intermediaries. A news reporter may state flatly, "the President of the United States today announced," when in fact it was his press secretary who spoke on his behalf, and quite possibly a speechwriter who composed the words, yet non-one accuses the commentator of inaccurate reporting...This type of linguistic convention undoubtedly explains the differences between Matthew's and Luke's narratives of the Capernaum centurion. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 2nd ed., 2007), 176.

### RAISING JAIRUS' DAUGHTER

The more challenging difficulty has to do with when the daughter died. In Matthew Jairus says, "My daughter has just died" (Matt. 9:18). In Mark and Luke we have two stages. First, Jairus asks Jesus to come because "my little daughter is at the point of death" (Mark 5:23). Next, while Jesus is saying his final words to the woman healed from her bleeding, someone comes from Jairus's house announcing, "Your daughter is dead" (5:35).

Here it may be useful to remember Matthew's tendency to compress material. We saw compression clearly in the opening genealogies. In this account of Jairus's daughter, Matthew's is the shortest of the three accounts, both in the number of verses and in the number of words. He has nine verses compared to twenty-two in Mark. Matthew omits the

name Jairus. He mentions that the father is a “ruler,” but omits the detail of what he is a ruler of—“a ruler of the synagogue.” He omits the crowd around Jesus. He omits the second stage in which someone comes to say that the daughter has died. He omits the mention of Peter, James, and John. He omits the parents’ going into the room with Jesus. He omits Jesus’s direction to give the girl something to eat. He omits the charge to tell no one.

The collapse into one stage—the daughter has died—is in harmony with the kind of thing that Matthew indicates in his opening genealogy. It is compression.

Matthew makes a choice to give us a compressed narrative. How much can a person say once he has chosen this kind of option?...If the narrative is going to unfold two distinct stages, there needs to be something that intervenes to differentiate them. In practice, this differentiation requires not only more specific information about timing of various events, but also the addition of a report to Jairus, so that Jairus comes to know of his daughter’s death. So a commitment to narrating two stages leads to the inclusion of an explicit mention of people from Jairus’s house who deliver the message to Jairus and to Jesus. Some complexity must be added to the narration.

But then, if a person has decided to give a compressed narrative, it does not really leave space for a full explanation. The narrator must be content with a summary... Compression reduces the number of options available. Hence, Matthew’s account, which wraps together what in Mark and Luke are two stages in Jairus’s interaction with Jesus, does not contradict Mark and Luke. He is not making a contrastive assertion that stands over against (“contrasts” with) a two-stage narration.



The ancient context did not have special apparatus from modern medical technology to determine the exact moment of death. Even with our technology, there is a region of uncertainty, since, for example, it takes some time for cells in the brain to die after the heart stops beating. V. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels* (Crossway 2012), 206-209,211.

The problems that Matthew's account raises can be resolved once the literary style of Matthew is recognized...Matthew obviously abbreviates the story by omitting the following details...It is clear that Matthew has a tendency to abbreviate the various accounts he incorporates into his Gospel...In his desire to include additional material Matthew was concerned with the limitation of his scroll. Our present Gospel of Matthew contains about much material as a single scroll could contain.

Matthew summarized the story of Jesus' raising of Jairus's daughter. He records that a ruler of the synagogue comes to Jesus for help concerning his daughter and that Jesus goes to his home and raises her from the dead. What he omits are various interesting but unnecessary details such as that when Jaurus first arrives his daughter is not yet dead. R. Stein, *Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament* (Baker, 1996), 40-42.

Perhaps the most perplexing differences between parallels occur when one Gospel writer has condensed the account of an event that took place in two or more stages into one concise paragraph that seems to describe the action taking place all at once. Yet this type of literary abridgment was quite common among ancient writers (cf. Lucian, *How to Write History* 56), so once again it is unfair to judge them by modern standards of precision that no-one in antiquity required. The two most noteworthy examples of this

process among the Gospel parallels emerge in the stories of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter and cursing the fig tree.

In the first story, Matthew drastically abbreviates Mark's three-part account, which includes (1) the initial summons for Jesus to come to Jairus' home before the girl dies, (2), the intervening delay while he heals the hemorrhaging woman, and (3) his climactic arrival after the death of the daughter, and her subsequent revivification (twenty-three verses compressed into nine). As a result, Matthew omits the initial appeal "my daughter is dying", and has Jairus in stage 1 declare that she has just died. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 2nd ed., 2007), 177.

### TEMPLE CLEANSING

On the other hand, there is the possibility that this event took place only once. If so, it is likely that what John did was move it forward as a type of foreshadowing capsule of Jesus' conflict with the leadership and their failure to appreciate his authority. In favor of this view might be the point that 2:23 alludes to numerous signs that Jesus had done in Jerusalem when none have yet been described in John. D. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* (Baker, 2002), 427.

The Synoptics make it clear that Jesus' cleansing the temple proved to be "the last straw" for the Jewish authorities, sealing his imminent doom (Mk 11:18), so a convincing harmonization would require John to be the Evangelist who has relocated the passage. The strongest evidence in support of this is twofold. First, Jn 2:13-25 is the only passage in the opening four chapters of John not linked to what precedes or follows it by an explicit reference

to chronological sequence. Second, many commentators recognize a major division in John's Gospel between chapters 11 and 12, and chapter 12 introduces the second "half" of the gospel with a chronologically dislocated passage (see p219). One could therefore assume that the cleansing of the temple introduces the first "half" the same way, with the six-day sequences of 1:1-2:12 as an introduction. On the other hand, it is at least possible that Jesus cleansed the temple twice. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 2nd ed., 2007), 216-17.

Perhaps we read John and picture the cleansing described in John 2:14–15 in immediate connection with the preceding and following parts of John's narrative. We picture it as occurring near in time to the "first of his signs" narrated in 2:11. We picture it near the beginning. But this is a mental picture, not necessarily reality.

We have to ask whether John or any of the synoptic accounts make contrastive claims about temporal location. John 2:13 says, "The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." Which Passover? We are not told. It is natural for readers to see this going up to Jerusalem as proceeding from the location last mentioned, namely Capernaum, where Jesus stayed a few days (John 2:12). But John does not explicitly tell us about a direct temporal succession here. The "hint," if there is one, is simply the juxtaposition of two episodes in the written neighborhood of one another. But might John have had other reasons for a juxtaposition like this one?

Do we get any help from what follows the cleansing of the temple? What follows is John 3:1ff., the passage about Nicodemus. Thematically, it is connected with the general

statement in John 2:25 that Jesus “knew what was in a man.” But there is no explicit temporal connection. We do not get information about the chronology of events. The placement of the episode in the text is, in my opinion, chronologically flexible. V. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels* (Crossway, 2012), 137.

## Historicity and harmonization

Lydia McGrew's comments have been piling up in response to two of my posts. I'll consolidate them and respond to them here:

*On the cleansing of the Temple, your hypothesis (if I understand you correctly) seems to be that John is \*not\* trying to give the impression that it took place early in Jesus' ministry.*

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True.

*Now, I disagree with this fairly strongly, but more importantly, it must be sharply distinguished between saying that John moved the cleansing of the Temple *\*to the beginning of Jesus' ministry\**. The two hypotheses are, in fact, in complete contradiction to one another! The latter says that John was attempting to write as if the Temple cleansing took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, even though he knew that this was not the case! Your*

*hypothesis, in contrast, interprets John as \_not\_ implying that the cleansing took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.*

---

I don't see how that follows. In principle, John could relocate the temple cleansing without implying that it took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry—or intended to make it look that way. Gospel writers can rearrange events without implying that their narrative sequence is chronological.

*Now, I disagree with this. For one thing, we don't have nearly the evidence for John in other, uncontroversial places, that we have for Matthew that he arranges non-chronologically, so why think he is making such a major non-chronological move here?*

---

Because, unless we think one or more of the Gospels is either mistaken or fictional in this case, we need to harmonize their respective reports of the temple cleansing in one way or the other. And that's one option. It wasn't pulled out of thin air.

*More specifically, the narrative of the Temple cleansing in John is flanked on*

*either side with geographical markers that are far more reasonably interpreted by holding this to be a chronological narrative. Just before, Jesus is in Capernaum, following which he goes "up" to Jerusalem (not meaning north, of course) for the Passover. In the next chapter we find him apparently still in Jerusalem and visited by Nicodemus by night, following which he has a baptizing ministry in Judea, leaving Judea only at the beginning of chapter 4. All of this makes sense as following upon the Passover recounted along with the temple cleansing in chapter 2.*

---

I don't see how your supporting argument selects for your conclusion. John records three passovers. The temple was in Jerusalem, so any temple cleansing would require a trip to Jerusalem from wherever Jesus happened to be living or ministering at the time.

*The end of chapter 2 says that many were believing on him during that Passover because of miracles he was doing during that Passover and then only*

*that he "did not entrust himself to them because he knew what was in man." As a description of passion week, this seems quite implausible. Mark's detailed discussion of Passion week gives no such picture.*

---

Well, the only recorded miracle in Jn 2 is at the wedding of Cana, not in the temple complex, so I don't see how you derive your conclusion from John's narrative. As for Mark's, you have the cursing of the fig tree.

*It seems to me extremely strained to try to make the cleansing of the Temple in John be occurring during Passion week and merely for (largely unknown and necessarily highly conjectural) thematic reasons of some kind or other narrated at this point in John's gospel. And, strangely and coincidentally enough, connected up with a Judean ministry immediately thereafter!*

---

There are good scholars who think positing two temple cleansings to harmonize the Gospels is "extremely strained". The problem, such as it is, isn't generated by a



particular harmonization, but by the data to be harmonized. Scholars didn't create that difficulty.

*However, if you \_do\_ take that position, you are \*at least\* not saying that John was \*trying\* to imply that this Temple cleansing happened early in Jesus' ministry. So that theory should \*not\* be described by saying that John knowingly and deliberately "moves the Temple cleansing to the early part of Jesus' ministry."*

---

Again, that's a non sequitur, which trades on an equivocation between "moving the temple cleansing to the early part of Jesus' ministry" and moving the temple cleansing to the early part of John's narrative. You illicitly conflate narrative sequence with chronological sequence, but that's the very issue in dispute. To relocate an incident doesn't ipso facto insinuate that that's when it really took place. Where it occurs in the plot and where it occurred in real time are not interchangeable concepts. Take movies with flashbacks and flashforwards.

I'm not saying John consciously relocated the temple cleansing. I'm just saying that even if he did, your conclusion is fallacious.

*Again, that is a \_much\_ more problematic theory from the perspective of John's trustworthiness as a narrator.*

---

I disagree.

*I think it would be helpful for you to disambiguate the term "relocate" as you use it between*

*1) John wishes to give the impression that the cleansing did take place early in the ministry, though he knows it didn't,*

*2) John doesn't mean to give the impression that the cleansing took place early in the ministry.*

---

That's a valid and useful distinction. However, I put it that way because you and Licona use "relocate" the same way, and so I preserve the ambiguity in the interests of consistency.

*Do you intend to use "relocate" throughout the post to refer to #1, or might it refer to either? For example, you say that John may have "put it there simply because that's what he was*

*thinking about on the day he dictated that section of his Gospel," but in that case by "put it there" do you mean just "put that material at that point in his narrative" or "tried to relocate the incident in his narrative so that it actually appeared to happen at that time"?*

---

Several issues:

**i)** You're shadowboxing with Licona, which is fine, but that's not my position.

**ii)** There's a distinction between a writing giving a false impression and leaving a false impression. In the former case, he intends to create a false impression in the mind of the reader. That isn't inherently wrong, although it can be. Take the author of a Whodunit who confuses the reader by giving clues that point in the direction of the wrong suspect. To build suspense, the author tries to throw the reader off the scent with decoys. Make a reader finger the wrong character. Now, these clues aren't false. They happen to be true of the character. Yet they are intentionally misleading.

But in the course of the novel, the author will correct the reader's misimpression. By providing the reader with additional evidence, the reader will see that his initial suspicions were premature. Sometimes a writer will withhold information in order to subvert the reader's initial

impressions. In a sense that's deceptive even though all the information he provides is true, and by the end of the mystery the reader will understand who did what.

Incidentally, we have something like that in the Joseph cycle, where Joseph's premonitory dream appears to be thwarted by events, but as it turns out, the same events which initially seemed to scuttle the premonitory dream are the very means by which the dream is fulfilled.

I'm not saying this is directly applicable to the Gospels. I'm just making a point of principle.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), writers don't necessarily have a duty to avoid all possibility that a reader will mistake what they meant. Indeed, any statement, however qualified, can be misconstrued. And it would be very pedantic and cumbersome to write in a way that tries to forestall the possibility of a reader drawing a false impression of what was written.

On the one hand, the writer did not intend to give the reader a misimpression. On the other hand, a writer may not go out of his way to avoid the possibility of misconstrual, both because the effort would distract from his main point, and because the misimpression would be innocuous. No matter how careful a writer is, he can't prevent some readers from mistaking what he meant, but it may be a harmless inference, because it wasn't important for the reader to know that.

This isn't just hypothetical. Take the way Matthew and Luke simplify Mark's Holy Week chronology.

**iv)** Incidentally, putting words in the mouth of a speaker isn't necessarily fabrication. For instance, Bible translators

must decide what to do with Biblical idioms that have no direct counterpart in the receptor language. If they substitute a different, but conceptually equivalent, idiom, they are putting words in the mouth of the speaker. But that's different than fabrication or falsification.

v) Likewise, if a Gospel writer summarizes a speech by Jesus, his paraphrase may use words Jesus didn't use, but so long as he accurately captures the sense of what Jesus said, that's true to what Jesus said. That's a trustworthy record.

*"It's unclear why defenders of the two-cleansings view think it's okay for Matthew and John to give the reader the impression that it happened on a different date than Mark, but misleading for John to give the reader the impression that it happened on a different date than the Synoptics."*

*Because a difference of a day is much easier to leave out without being willfully misleading than a difference of three years.*

---

Which may be a valid objection to Licona, but in general that's a prejudicial way of framing the alternatives.

Moreover, you're guilty of special pleading. If Matthew and Luke change the Holy Week chronology, that's innocent, but if John changes the Holy Week chronology, that's willful deception which makes him historically unreliable. You have your thumb on the scales.

*Because the evidence is much stronger that John intended to say that Jesus cleansed the temple early in his ministry than that Luke and (especially) Matthew intended to say that Jesus cleansed the temple on the same day he arrived. (For example, there is also, in John, the geographical evidence that gives a sequence of Jesus' movements to and away from Judea for the Passover in which he cleanses the Temple.)*

---

I've discussed that above.

*"This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days. The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." One would have to postulate a completely unheralded break of \*three years\* at vs. 13. Moreover, get this: John gives this "beginning of miracles" (water into wine) in*

*chapter 2. Then, not only are Jesus' movements within and then out of Judea described \*after\* the cleansing of the temple in chapters 3 and 4, including more material involving John the Baptist, but we have this in John 4:54: "This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee."*

*These are clear tie-ins of the whole sequence of events with chronology and place this whole trip to Jerusalem, which includes the cleansing of the Temple, into that chronology early in Jesus' ministry.*

---

You seem to be assuming that every anecdote between chap. 2 and chap. 5 must be part of a continuous chronological sequence. That's a very novelistic approach to the Gospels, as if John's Gospel is a carefully planned, tightly integrated literary production. But I think oral history is a more realistic model of how observers remember and report incidents they witnessed. A smooth storyline with carefully coordinated plot elements is what we associate with good fiction, rather than a string of autobiographical recollections. Compare the autobiographical novels of Mark Twain with his actual autobiography. The organization of the latter is much looser than the former.

*In contrast, there are no such positive statements in Matthew concerning the second cleansing of the temple that clearly place Jesus' second cleansing on the day of the triumphal entry. There is merely a failure to relate a day's break, and this is consistent throughout Matthew's relation of Passion week that he does not bother to count off all the days like Mark does.*

---

No one who just read Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John would have any reason to suppose there was more than one temple cleansing. No one who just read John would have any reason to think there was a temple cleansing at the end of Christ's public ministry. No one who just read the Synoptics would have any reason to think there was a temple cleansing at the beginning of Christ's public ministry. No one who just read Matthew would have any reason to think Jesus cleansed the temple the day after he arrived in Jerusalem.

On your own view, there are multiple opportunities for readers to draw the wrong impression of when or where the incident occurred. But that's innocuous, because the Gospel writers don't intend to be exhaustive or rigidly linear.

*Notice that once we admit as remotely plausible the hypothesis that John \*deliberately\* implied,*



*\*though he knew it was false\*, that Jesus cleansed the Temple at the beginning of his ministry, then one can simply say that all the arguments from differences in purpose, setting, etc., were part of John's clever work in moving the account! In other words, once we admit the hypothesis of deliberate falsification, John the evangelist becomes a lot like Descartes' imaginary Deceiver. Whatever one might point to as evidence that the event really happened early in Jesus' ministry is turned into so-called "evidence" of John's literary abilities in making it look like it happened early in the ministry even if it didn't!*

*In contrast, an approach to the text that assumes that the gospel writers are telling the truth as they remember it is able to take seriously the obvious evidential impact of considerations like the differences between the accounts. Those considerations should cause us to consider that there may well have been two cleansings, but if one thinks that John was a deliberate falsifier of the timing of events, one loses the correct evidential impact of those considerations. One just says, "Yes, yes, of course that's all there, of course John is*

*making it look like it took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He's \_moving\_ the cleansing of the Temple to early in the ministry."*

*This is not only a problem theologically. It's a huge problem epistemically. Like all ad hoc theories, conspiracy theories, etc., such a theory of an (in effect) Deceiver John will make it impossible to see the effect of evidence aright.*

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**i)** You're shadowboxing with Licona, which is fine. But in doing so, you typically impose an artificial constraint on the available alternatives.

**ii)** Redaction criticism usually presumes that differences between Matthew and Mark (to take one example) must be theologically motivated. I think that's rarely the case. For instance, I suspect Matthew generally simplifies Mark for the prosaic reason that he needed to free up space to make room for his own independent additions, while making the narrative fit onto one scroll. Ancient books were often not preserved because they were too long, because they required two or more scrolls.

**iii)** Likewise, I don't assume that John consciously relocated the temple cleansing. It may just be, as I said, that that's the order in which he remembered events on the day he dictated those anecdotes to a scribe. I don't know for a fact that he used a scribe. But that's a reasonable hypothesis.

**iv)** Even if he did consciously relocate the temple cleansing, that doesn't necessarily (or even probably) mean he was

deliberately making the reader think there was only one temple cleansing, which occurred at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Rather, as I've said, that could function as a flashforward. A preview of the end.

**v)** Matthew's simplified chronology makes it look like the temple cleansing happened on the same day as Jesus arrival in Jerusalem—even though it didn't. Mark's chronology is likely more precise at this juncture. So we need to distinguish between the effect of what he wrote and the intent of what he wrote. Which is applicable to John.

**vi)** In addition, the average Bible reader doesn't engage in the kind of systematic comparative analysis of the Gospels that harmonists and redaction critics do. Indeed, that's an artificial way of reading the Gospels. They weren't designed to be read side-by-side. They were meant to be read lengthwise, not horizontally, with an eye to the other Gospels.

**vii)** The problem with Lydia's Cartesian analogy is that she thinks there are probably errors in the Gospels. But if God allows undetectable mistakes to creep into the Gospel accounts, doesn't that make God a Cartesian Deceiver? Nearly all our information for these incidents comes from the Gospels. We have no independent source and standard of comparison. How is a reader in a position to distinguish truth from error under that scenario?

## Is inerrancy an Enlightenment construct?

Critics of inerrancy often claim that inerrancy is an "Enlightenment" construct. Supposedly, Christians before the Enlightenment didn't espouse the inerrancy of Scripture.

I've never see critics who make this historical claim bother to document their claim. Rather, it seems to be a postmodernist trope. Inerrancy is associated with a modernist view of truth. Modernism is equated with the Enlightenment. That's the slack reasoning.

It's striking to compare their claim with this recent book:

**Matthias Henze (ed.)**

***A Companion to Biblical Interpretation in Early Judaism***

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.

This is a very useful volume about Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles. The introductory chapter by James Kugel describes the origins of biblical interpretation in post-exilic Israel. Interestingly enough he points out that **all biblical interpreters, despite their diversity, shared four basic tenets:** (1) The Bible is a cryptic document that needs to be explained; (2) The Bible is a book of instruction; **(3) The Bible is perfectly consistent and free of error or contradiction; and (4) Every word of Scripture comes from God.**

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2015/07/book-notice-a-companion-to-biblical-interpretation-in-early-judaism/>



## Adam, inerrancy, and Arminianism

Here's part of a review of Walton's new book by a prominent Arminian site:

*The suggestion that Adam and Eve could have existed as two advanced hominids in a long evolutionary chain will seem compromising to some...But, for the vast majority of Christians who think the whole science-religion war is an unnecessary war with far too many casualties, Walton presents a middle way forward. His book, no doubt because of both his scholarly credentials and his obvious evangelical conviction, will be well received amongst the majority of those who want a thoughtful and, yet, traditional approach towards science and the Bible.*

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<http://seedbed.com/feed/did-adam-and-eve-exist/>

On a related note, take this review at a prominent Arminian site:

*I'll go a little further ... Not only is the gospel clear, but the historical Adam isn't important to it at any level. It is Jesus Christ who assures us that we are justified before God. It is Jesus Christ who advances the missionary work of the church. It is Jesus Christ who secures our hope in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. A Christian who never hears about Adam, but is taught the life, death, and resurrection of Christ lacks nothing. Getting our priorities straight does matter.*

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<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/07/16/why-does-it-matter-rjs/>

On a related note:

*There has been a major shift within the Wesleyan Theological Society concerning its position on inerrancy. In the first issue of the Wesleyan Theological Journal, Kenneth Geiger, former president of the National holiness Association, wrote that the inerrancy of the original autographs of Scripture was the official position of the National*

*Holiness Association and “quite uniformly the view of Wesleyan-Arminians everywhere.” [1]*

*In its first four journals, the doctrinal position of the Wesleyan Theological Society stated that the Old and New Testaments were inerrant in the originals. This statement no longer appeared after 1969.*

*However at least nine Wesleyan scholars signed the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy on January 1, 1979: Allan Coppedge, Wilbur T. Dayton, Ralph Earle, Eldon R. Fuhrman, Dennis F. Kinlaw, Daryl McCarthy, James Earl Massey, A. Skevington Wood, and Laurence W. Wood.[2] [Emphasis added by editor]*

*The last Wesleyan Theological Journal article in support of biblical inerrancy appeared in 1981.[3] In 1984, Kenneth Gilder expressed the hope that as the Wesleyan Theological Society began its next twenty years that it would do its homework and not accept the agenda of Calvinistic evangelicalism. [4] Since then the doctrine of biblical inerrancy has been labeled as anachronistic to Wesley’s day, Calvinistic, and a fundamentalist doctrine.*



***In the Fall 2011 issue of the Wesleyan Theological Journal, Stephen Gunter declared that inerrancy is not the issue for evangelical Wesleyans.***

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<http://defendinginerrancy.com/wesleyan-arminians-inerrancy/>

These examples illustrate a point I've made from time to time: the Arminian center of gravity is to the left of Calvinism.

## The Bible and violence

Nowadays, there are many readers who take offense at Biblical violence. In this respect, I think many modern Western people read the Bible differently than their forebears. Several reasons come to mind:

**i)** Due to general affluence, our lives are more comfortable.

**ii)** Apropos (i), we benefit from modern medical science. Anesthesia. Painkillers. Cures for many diseases. Surgery that brings symptom relief.

**iii)** We typically feel safer. We don't fear a civil war, coup d'etat, military invasion, or martial law. We don't fear famine or epidemics.

Childhood mortality is low. Most people die in their 70s-80s or beyond.

**iv)** We've delegated violence to a professional army and police force.

But in the not so distant past, and in many parts of the Third World today, life is brutal. As a result, people have (or had) a tough-minded outlook.

And the Western world is teetering on the brink of reverting to the harrowing conditions that our ancestors took for granted.

## Voluntary slavery

**21** “Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. **2** When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. **3** If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. **4** If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. **5** But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ **6** then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever (Exod 21:1-6).

**i)** One stock objection which unbelievers raise is the fact that the OT regulates slavery rather than abolishing slavery.

Of course, unbelievers have no basis to condemn slavery in the first place—as I've often discussed.

**ii)** You might think "voluntary slavery" is an oxymoron. Who would anyone choose to be a slave if they could avoid it? If the existence of a slave is so wretched, nobody would

choose that over freedom. That's the unquestioned assumption of the moral objection.

Yet the Mosaic law makes provision for a temporary debt slave to become a permanent slave.

Now, it might be objected that there's a coercive element. It's a choice between going free, but leaving his family behind, or staying with his family.

However, he knew, going in, that this was just a six-year stint. He could wait it out. Moreover, most indentured servants were married before becoming contract employees. In that case (most cases), they'd take their wife with them—no strings attached. If their wife followed them into slavery, their wife would follow them out of slavery.

**iii)** So why would an indentured servant extend his bondage? Why would he choose to become a slave for life?

Because, even though it was a very unenviable situation to be in, the alternatives could be worse. Life in the ANE was very precarious for many people. Famine. Grinding poverty. It's a tradeoff between freedom and security.

A Hebrew slave enjoyed free room and board, plus spending money. Even a wife! Financial security and stability.

It's like volunteering for the military. Some people reenlist. They exchange freedom for security. For the benefits that come with military service.

It's better to be rich, but if you can't be rich, it's a choice between being free but poor, or enslaved, but having all your necessities provided for.

That's not a great deal, but life was tough back then. It was hard to scrape by.

Sure, God could create a different kind of world, but you and I would not exist in a different kind of world. That would be a world with a whole different history.

BTW, "love" in this passage doesn't mean "affection."  
Rather, it's ANE legal jargon for declaring one's allegiance.

## Typhoid Mary

**i)** When Christians defend OT holy war, they sometimes justify the execution of child by appeal to original sin. Every human is guilty is Adam.

**ii)** Now, I think that's theologically true. However, I don't think that's the best way, or even the right way, to defend OT holy war.

To begin with, original sin is just as controversial as holy war. People who find holy war morally offensive find original sin morally offensive. When you defend holy war by appeal to original sin, that just pushes the argument back a step, because you have to defend original sin. You're defending one thing by appeal to something else you must defend. But in that case, what's the advantage? Why not defend holy war directly?

Someone might object that original sin is true regardless of whether critics find that appeal convincing. No doubt. But if you're going to fall back on an argument from biblical authority, you could just as well say the holy war commands are morally justifiable regardless of whether critics find the appeal to biblical authority persuasive.

**iii)** But besides the tactical problem, there's a substantive problem. The OT holy war commands and holy war accounts don't ground the ethics of holy war in original sin. So there's no reason to presume the Adamic guilt of children is a necessary condition to warrant their liability to be killed. Indeed, that argument may well be a blind alley.

**iv)** Let's consider a different principle. Take the case of an asymptomatic carrier. By that I mean a person who harbors

a contagious disease, but is immune to the disease. The carrier is infectious.

Suppose the carrier is host to a highly contagious disease with a high rate of mortality. Suppose the disease has a long incubation period.

The carrier may infect hundreds of people, who in turn infect hundreds of people, and so on. The disease is communicated at an exponential rate. By the time the disease manifests itself, it is unstoppable.

What should be done to the carrier? Through no fault of his own, the carrier is host to a deadly contagious disease. Although the carrier may be personally blameless, that doesn't change the fact that he poses a dire threat to public safety.

Should he be quarantined? That's unfair to the carrier. He's done nothing intentionally wrong. But even so, he puts the entire population at risk.

Moreover, is that a solution? Even in quarantine, even in solitary confinement, he's dangerous. He must be fed. Must be guarded. Any direct contact with the carrier is fatal.

Furthermore, he's a flight risk. What if he tries to escape? After all, his isolation is unbearable. How can he stand to be cooped up year after year?

**v)** Under the circumstances, would it be permissible to kill him? Should his life imperil a million other lives?

My objective is not to answer that question. I'm not making a case for that claim.

But unless you're a Kantian deontologist, it's not unreasonable. And I daresay most infidels who attack OT holy war aren't moral absolutists.

If, in principle, it is sometimes morally licit to take innocent life, then critics of OT holy war can't attack it on those grounds as a matter of principle.



## Recurring mistakes in debating the historical Adam

I'm going to comment on a recent post by Peter Enns:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2015/05/11-recurring-mistakes-in-the-debate-over-the-historical-adam/>

**1. It's all about the authority of the Bible.** I can understand why this claim might have rhetorical effect, but this issue is not about biblical authority. It's about how the Bible is to be interpreted. It's about hermeneutics.

It's always about hermeneutics.

I know that in some circles "hermeneutics" is code for "let's find a way to get out of the plain meaning of the text." But even a so-called "plain" or "literal" reading of the Bible is a hermeneutic—an approach to interpretation.

Literalism is a hermeneutical decision (even if implicit) as much as any other approach, and so needs to be defended as much as any other. Literalism is not the default godly way to read the Bible that preserves biblical authority. It is not the "normal" way of reading the Bible that gets a free pass while all others must face the bar of judgment.

So, when someone says, "I don't read Genesis 1-3 as historical events, and here are the reasons why," that person is not "denying biblical authority." That person may be wrong, but that would have to be judged on some basis other than the ultimate conversation-stopper, "You're denying biblical authority."

The Bible is not just "there." It has to be interpreted. The issue is which interpretations are more defensible

than others. Hence, appealing to biblical authority does not tell us how to interpret the Bible. That requires a lot more work. It always has.

"Biblical authority" is a predisposition to the text. It is not a hermeneutic.

**i)** That's a half-truth. To begin with, there's a common calculated ploy on the part of "progressive Christians" to recast the issue of Biblical authority in terms of hermeneutics. The ruse is typically used by theological revolutionaries whose agenda is to secularize Christianity and redefine the church from within. They don't begin by openly attacking the authority of Scripture. That would be too provocative. That would trigger instant opposition.

Instead, they resort to a softening up exercise. They insist that this is not about the inspiration of Scripture, but the interpretation of Scripture. They don't really believe that, but it's a useful tactic. It dupes the unsuspecting. There are many examples. Take the claim that Paul doesn't really condemn homosexuality.

**ii)** Enns is, himself, a purveyor of this tactic. Take his infamous book on **INSPIRATION AND INCARNATION**. Now, that was already bad enough. But I always figured that he was saying less than he really believed when he wrote it. The book was a trial balloon. If he got a favorable reception, then he'd feel free to stake out an even more radical position.

And, in fact, after he was fired from WTS, he openly denied the historicity and inerrancy of Scripture. Although his attack was originally masked in "hermeneutical" categories, that was a decoy.

I'm not saying the distinction between authority and interpretation is inherently suspect. That can be a legitimate distinction. But it's often abused—and deliberately so—to conceal an ulterior agenda.

**iii)** In addition, the way he frames the issue is deceptive. For liberals typically read Gen 1-3 just as "literally" as conservatives. Liberals typically think the narrator intended to recount historical events. They just think he was mistaken. He didn't know any better. He *couldn't* know any better. Let's quote two liberal scholars on Genesis:

Etiology may be defined as "a narrative designed in its basic structure to support some kind of explanation for a situation or name that exists in the time of the storyteller." The term "etiology" may thus be applied to any narrative giving the past, historical reason for a present reality (the present of the author)...Often in Genesis, an episode is concluded with an etiological connection that helps the reader understand why something is as it is, and secondarily prepares the reader for the next unit of the book. So, for example, the Privemal History uses etiologies to explain sabbath law (2:1-3), marriage (2:24), serpentine locomotion (3:14), human hatred of snakes (3:15), pain in childbirth (3:16), and many others. B. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge 2009), 10-11.

Over the last 10 to 15 years this term has been embraced by evangelical Christians who also accept biological evolution. Of course, the issue of Adam is a point of disagreement. Some who identify themselves as "evolutionary creationists" accept that there was a historical Adam. In other words, they tack Adam on the tail end of evolution.

But I disagree with this approach. It would be similar to attaching a 3-tier universe at the end of cosmological evolution. I doubt anyone wants to do that. Why? It's categorically inappropriate. We cannot mix modern science (biological evolution and cosmological evolution) with ancient science (de novo creation of Adam and a 3-tier universe).

Those who pin Adam to the tail end of evolution are scientific concordists because modern genetics offers no evidence for his existence. Their belief in Adam comes from Scripture, not science. And from my perspective, scientific concordism always falls short. Now there are some who attempt to argue that Adam was taken from a population of humans and that he was the first person to be in a relationship with God. The analogy used is that Adam is like Abraham in that he was called by God. However, this is definitely not in the Bible. Genesis 2 does not talk about Adam being called from some group of humans. Genesis 2 is a creation account and clearly states that the Lord made Adam de novo from the dust of the ground.

<http://biologos.org/blog/interpreting-adam-an-interview-with-denis-lamoureux-part-2>

De novo creation is the ancient conceptualization of origins found in the Bible. This term is made up of the Latin words de meaning "from" and novus "new." Stated more precisely, it is a view of origins that results in things and beings that are brand new. This type of creative activity is quick and complete. It appears in a majority of ancient creation accounts and it involves a divine being/s who act/s rapidly through a series of dramatic interventions, resulting in cosmological structures (sun, moon, stars) and living

organisms (plants, animals, humans) that are mature and fully formed.

Considering the limited scientific evidence available to ancient peoples, this conceptualization of origins was perfectly logical. As with all origins accounts, including those held by us today, the ancients asked basic etiological questions (Greek *aitia*: the cause, the reason for this). These included: Where did these things or beings come from? Why are they this way? Who or what is responsible for their origin? There was no reason for ancient peoples to believe the universe was billions of years old, and they were unaware that living organisms changed over eons of time as reflected in the fossil record. Instead, the age of the world was limited to the lengths of their genealogies, many of which were held by memory, and therefore quite short. Biological evolution was not even a consideration because in the eyes of the ancients, hens laid eggs that always produced chicks, ewes only gave birth to lambs, and women were invariably the mothers of human infants. Living organisms were therefore immutable; they were static and never changed. In conceptualizing origins, ancient people used these day-to-day experiences and retrojected them back to the beginning of creation (Latin *retro*: backward; *jacere*: to throw). Retrojection is the very same type of thinking used in crime scene investigations. Present evidence found at the scene is used to reconstruct past events. In this way, the ancients came to the reasonable conclusion that the universe and life must have been created quickly and completely formed not that long ago. And this was the best origins science-of-the-day.

Grasping the notion of *de novo* creation is one of the keys to understanding Genesis 1 and the origins debate. This creation account refers 10 times to living

creatures reproducing “according to its/their kind/s.” Young earth creationists and progressive creationists argue that this phrase is incontestable biblical evidence against biological evolution, because God created separate groups of organisms. They term these groupings “created kinds” or “baramins” (Hebrew *bārā’*: to create; *min*: kind). However, this popular anti-evolutionist belief that the Creator intervened dramatically in the creation of individual groups of plants and animals fails to appreciate the ancient mindset and its intellectual categories. The phrase “according to its/their kind/s” reflects an ancient phenomenological perspective of living organisms (Note: this is not to be confused and conflated with our modern phenomenological perspective. What the ancients saw, they believed to be real and actual, such as the literal movement of the sun across the sky. In contrast, what we see today, we understand to be only apparent and a visual effect, such as the “movement” of the sun). Ancient people always saw that birds reproduce birds, which reproduce birds, which reproduce birds, etc. They retrojected this experience back into the past and came to the logical conclusion that there must have been some first or original birds that the Creator had made *de novo*. Thus, the *de novo* creation of living organisms, such as birds in Genesis 1, is based on the classification of life in static or immutable categories, as perceived by ancient peoples like the Hebrews. More specifically, it reflects an ancient biology; and in particular, an ancient understanding of taxonomy.

<http://biologos.org/blog/was-adam-a-real-person-part-i>

Notice that Denis Lamoureux and Bill Arnold both think Genesis was meant to be a book of origins. A book of firsts. The narrator intended his account to explain the source of many familiar and fundamental, present-day aspects of human experience by tracing them back to their historical point of origin. Where did the world come from? Did it always exist? Or did it begin to exist? Where did plants and animals come from? Where did humans come from? Why do humans die? Why do humans suffer?

That understanding of Genesis doesn't require any prior commitment to the veracity of the account. Rather, it assumes the viewpoint of the narrator for interpretive purposes. It understands the text on its own terms, according to the assumptions and intentions of the narrator.

So Enns has the relationship precisely backwards. The authority of Scripture *is* the bone of contention—*not* hermeneutics. Liberals like Arnold and Lamoureux construe Genesis in the same basic way as conservatives. The parting of the ways comes downstream. They feel free to reject what the text asserts to be the case.

**2. You're giving science more authority than the Bible.** This, too, may have some rhetorical effect, but it misses the point.

To say that science gives us a more accurate understanding of human origins than the Bible is not putting science "over" the Bible—unless we assume that the Bible is prepared to give us scientific information.

There are numerous compelling reasons to think that Genesis is not prepared to provide such information—namely the fact that Genesis was written at least 2500 years ago by and for people, who, to state the obvious, were not thinking in modern scientific terms.

One might respond, "But Genesis was inspired by God, and so needs to be true."

That assertion assumes that "truth" is essentially synonymous with historical accuracy and that a text inspired by God in antiquity would, by virtue of its being the word of God, need to give scientific rather than ancient accounts of origins.

One basic problem with this formulation is that it misdefines the issue. The question at issue is not whether Gen 1-3 is written in scientific terms, but whether it makes factual claims.

***4. Both Paul and the writer of Genesis thought Adam was a real person, the first man. Denying the historicity of Adam means you think you know better than the biblical writers.***More

rhetorical punch, but this assertion simply sidesteps a fundamental interpretive challenge all of us need to address on one level or another.

All biblical writers were limited by their culture and time in how they viewed the physical world around them. This is hardly a novel notion of inspiration, and premodern theologians from Augustine to Calvin were quite adamant about the point.

No responsible doctrine of inspiration can deny that the biblical authors were thoroughly encultured, ancient people, who spoke as ancient people. Inspiration does not cancel out their "historical particularity," no matter how inconvenient.

Any notion of inspiration must embrace and engage the notion that God, by his Spirit, speaks within ancient categories.

We do indeed "know more" than the biblical writers about some things.



Notice that in #'s 2 & 4, Enns implicitly contradicts what he said in #1. Now he's admitting that this really is about Biblical authority. He thinks the narrator was ignorant. He thinks the account is erroneous.

Or course, that's only possible if he himself interprets the account "literally" in the sense that he thinks the narrator intended to record historical events. If the narrator never meant his account to be about real people, real places, and actual events in the past, then what he wrote couldn't be wrong even in principle. A necessary precondition of historical error is the determination to make statements that match reality.

This may be a hermeneutical issue in abstraction, but at a concrete level, Enns has resolved the hermeneutical questions to mean that Gen 1-3 makes factual claims. He simply thinks the author got it wrong. Either Enns is prevaricating, or he's so conditioned by his polemical tactics that he fails to recognize his contradictory objections.

***5. Genesis as whole, including the Adam story, is a historical narrative and therefore demands to be taken as an historical account.*** It is a common, but nevertheless erroneous, assumption that Genesis, as a "historical narrative," narrates history.

Typically the argument is mounted on two related fronts:

(1) Genesis mentions by name people and places; we are told that people are doing things and going places. That sounds like a sequence of events, and therefore should be taken as "historical."

(2) Genesis uses a particular Hebrew verbal form (waw consecutive plus imperfect) that is used throughout Old Testament narratives to present a string of events—so-

and-so did this, then this, then went there and said this, then went there and did that.

As the argument goes, we are bound to conclude that a story that presents people doing things in a sequence is an indication that we are dealing with history.

That may be the case, but the sequencing of events in a story alone does not in and of itself imply historicity. Every story, whether real or imagined, has people doing things in sequences of events.

This does not mean that Genesis can't be a historical narrative. It only means that the fact that Genesis presents people doing things in sequence is not the reason for drawing that conclusion.

The Lord of the Rings masterfully records in great and vivid detail people (and others) doing things in sequence. But is it still pure fiction. A Tale of Two Cities does the same, but that doesn't make it a reliable guide to historical events.

**i)** To begin with, that oversimplifies the conservative position. It's not merely a sequence of events, but a *causal* sequence of events. Genesis says some things happened at a later date because other things happened before then. Historical causation. For instance, humans die because they were denied access to the tree of life when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden. Later humans are linear descendants of the first breeding pair. God sent the flood because humanity was engulfed in depravity. And so on.

**ii)** Enns is correct that, in theory, a fictional history can have the same format. But notice how radical that is if systematically applied. The conservative argument is that it's artificial to sequester Gen 1-3 from the rest of Genesis, or the rest of the Pentateuch. This unit is part and parcel of a continuous narrative. Indeed, this is what initiates the aftermath. If, therefore, you regard Gen 1-3 as fictional,

then, to be consistent, you should treat Gen 4-11 as fictional, or the calling of Abraham, or the calling of Moses, or the 10 plagues, or the wilderness wandering. Enns is probably prepared to take that to its logical extreme. But when he's in attack mode, keeps his cards closer to his vest.

***7. Since Adam is necessary for the Christian faith, we know evolution can't be true.*** Evolution causes theological problems for Christianity. There is no question of that. We cannot simply graft evolution onto evangelical theology and claim that we have reconciled Christianity and evolution.

The theological and philosophical problems for the Christian faith that evolution brings to the table are hardly superficial. They require much thought and a multi-disciplinary effort to work through. For example:

Is death a natural part of life or unnatural, a punishment of God for disobedience?

What does it mean to be human and made in God's image?

What kind of God creates a process where the fittest survive?

How can God hold people responsible for their sin if there was no first trespass by a first human couple?

A literal, historical, Adam answers these and other questions. Without an Adam, we are left to find other answers. Nothing is gained by papering over this dilemma.

But, here is my point: The fact that evolution causes theological problems does not mean evolution is wrong. It means we have theological problems. Normally, we all know that we cannot judge if something is true on the basis of whether that truth is disruptive to us. We know it is wrong to assume one's

position and then evaluate data on the basis of that predetermined conclusion.

We are also normally very quick to point out this logical fallacy in others. If an atheist would defend his/her own belief system by saying, "I reject this datum because it does not fit my way of thinking," we would be quick to pounce.

The truth of a historical Adam is not judged by how necessary such an Adam appears to be for theology.

**i)** Enns takes the truth of human evolution for granted, but that's hotly contested. Indeed, even some very prominent Darwinians concede that the theory of evolution has failed, thus far, to identify mechanisms adequate to generate the outcome.

**ii)** Because Enns is intellectually superficial, he fails to appreciate the skeptical consequences of evolutionary psychology for the reliability of human reason. You can't remove the Creator and leave the creature intact. You undermine human rationality in the process.

Theistic evolution can attempt to salvage human reason by positing a guided or directed process. But one issue is whether that's a makeshift position.

**iii)** Actually, it's perfectly logical to say that if Christian theology is true, and evolution conflicts with Christian theology, then that falsifies evolution. Whatever you take to be true forms the frame of reference. So Enns's position is logically reversible. It all depends on your standard of comparison.

To be a Christian is to evaluate claims from a Christian perspective. By definition, a Christian will assume a Christian position. A Christian will assume the truth of

Christian theology. Otherwise, he wouldn't be a Christian believer.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), the problem with how he frames the issue is that a Christian believer is someone who already crossed that checkpoint. The question of whether or not Christian theology is true is now behind him. He wouldn't be a Christian believer in the first place unless he had already resolved that question in his mind, and resolved it in favor of Christianity. This is not the situation of an agnostic who's considering the Christian faith. For a Christian believer, the truth of Christian theology *is* a "predetermined conclusion" at *that* stage of his deliberations.

At best, Enns's only makes sense in reference to professing Christians who are revisiting that question, who are now questioning their Christian faith. It's no longer settled in their minds. They have reopened the inquiry. They may conclude that Christian theology is unbelievable.

To accept a tenet that doesn't fit a Christian way of thinking is to cease thinking like a Christian. At that point he's no longer operating within a Christian framework. That's not a choice between two different ways of conceiving Christian theology, but a choice between accepting or rejecting Christian theology.

## Bible dates

**i)** One stock objection to the historicity and inerrancy of Scripture is the allegation that Biblical chronology is erroneous. This can involve the allegation of internal contradictions in Biblical chronology, or the allegation that Biblical chronology contradicts extrabiblical dates for the same events.

If Bible writers were eyewitnesses to the events they recount, they wouldn't make these mistakes. Such blunders indicate that the account were written decades or centuries after the event by someone who didn't know any better. So goes the argument.

**ii)** This allegation contains dubious, unspoken assumptions. To begin with, we need to distinguish between wrong dates and imprecise chronology. A writer may present an imprecise chronology of events. He just doesn't give any dates. So a reader can't tell how much earlier or later one incident was in relation to another. However, not giving the date is different from giving the wrong date.

**iii)** In terms of chronology, there is often a paradoxical relationship between biographies and autobiographies. One task of a scholar who's writing a critical biography of a famous figure is to work out a consistent chronology of events in the life of his subject. To date various incidents.

That's important because what the subject did at a later time may be dependent on something that happened to him at an earlier time. To explain his motivations and choices, you need to know when and where something happened in relation to something else. That's the nature of historical causation.

What's frustrating for a biographer is how often autobiographers are very inattentive to dates. And there's a reason for that.

If I learn about an event by looking it up in a history book or encyclopedia, the source will give the same. If, however, I observe the event in question, or if it happens to me, then I don't necessarily register the calendar day on which it occurred.

An autobiographer is generally writing from memory. Writing from experience. He knows what happened to him, and he knows the relative sequence of events without having the dates at his fingertips. That's unnecessary.

Certain days, or parts of days, stand out in our recollection. I remember hundreds, maybe thousands, of days in my life, but I rarely recall the date. I didn't have occasion to make a mental note of the date.

When I was a boy, my parents got me a dog. I remember the day, but not the date. Likewise, I remember the day when we had to put her to sleep. But I don't remember the date. Although the days were significant to me, the dates were not.

I remember when Richard Nixon fired Archibald Cox, but I don't recall the date. In the age of the Internet, it would be easy for me to check the date. But before the advent of the internet, that would require a trip to the library.

Another reason why autobiographers are often indifferent about dates is that it can be very difficult and time-consuming to pin down the date for some incident in their lives. Usually, there's no public record of events that are

personally significant to you and me. The only way to get a fix on the date is to associate it with some public event that happened around the same time. Something in the newspaper.

But there are large gaps in our recollection. I remember a particular day, but I don't remember many of the preceding or succeeding days. That's because nothing memorable happened to me weeks or months before or after the memorable day. So I may lack the continuous context to reconstruct the date. I lack a larger frame of reference. There are no chronological landmarks.

For instance, the Battle of Gettysburg was a famous turning-point in the Civil War. It happened between July 1-3, 1863.

If, however, you were to ask soldiers on July 2 what day it was, I wouldn't be surprised if they couldn't tell you. Knowing the date was probably the farthest thing from their minds. They were preoccupied with just trying to stay alive. Keep your head down! Look around! They weren't reading the daily newspaper.

So there's the paradox: people closest to the events, active participants, may only have a sketchy sense of when it happened, in calendar time. The difference between clock time and event time.

By contrast, in part because he's writing years after the fact, safely detached from the fog of war, a historian may have a more accurate sense of timing. In addition, a historian has more chronological clues. He has so many sources. Reports from every day of the conflict. That gives him a larger framework, a continuous context, to work out a relative chronology and absolute chronology.



You can only experience events at one time and place at a time, whereas a historian enjoys an aerial view (as if were). Because he wasn't there, he can, in effect, be everywhere. He is collating reports from many witnesses at different times and places.

So the truth of the matter is nearly the opposite of what Bible critics allege. Observers can have a very accurate recollection of what happened—where and how, by whom, and to whom—but fuzzy recollection of when it happened. That doesn't mean their recollection of when it happened was faulty. Just that they didn't glance at a calendar at the time, or they can't place it at a particular point in time because the preceding and succeeding days were so forgettable. It's not because he was far removed from the event, but was—to the contrary—immersed in the event.

It's a snapshot, not a motion picture. At most, individual frames in sequence, with many missing frames.

## Shooting stars

*In Apocalyptic Writings. The conception of fallen angels—angels who, for wilful, rebellious conduct against God, or through weakness under temptation, thereby forfeiting their angelic dignity, were degraded and condemned to a life of mischief or shame on earth or in a place of punishment—is wide-spread. Indications of this belief, behind which probably lies the symbolizing of an astronomical phenomenon, the shooting stars, are met with in Isa. xiv. 12 (comp. Job xxxviii. 31, 32; see Constellations).*

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<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5998-fall-of-angels>

The writer seems to be saying that the tradition of fallen angels has its origin in the personification of meteors. Ancient observers saw shooting stars. By process of legendary embellishment, they interpreted that phenomenon as gods or angels who, having lost the war in heaven, were cast down to earth.

Now, it's true that Scripture uses meteoric imagery to depict or illustrate the fall of angels. But that can be used to explain how belief in fallen angels developed in the first place?

Let's begin by citing some other material:

*Primitive man everywhere used meteoric iron in the earliest stage of his mental culture...The Sumerian name for iron was an-bar, meaning "fire from heaven." The Hittite ku-an has the same meaning. The Egyptian name, bia-en-pet, has been variously translated; probably the first meaning of bia was "thunderbolt," and pet stands for "heaven," so there was have plain intimation that the earliest iron was of celestial origin. A Hittite text says that whereas gold came from Birununda and copper from Taggasta, iron came from heaven. Likewise the Hebrew word for iron, parzil, and the equivalent in Assyrian, barzillu, are derived from barzu-ili, meaning "metal of god" or "of heaven." Even today the Georgian name for a meteorite is tsis-natckhi, meaning "fragment of heaven."*

**T. A. Rickard, "The Use of Meteoric Iron,"  
The Journal of the Royal Anthropological  
Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, vol.  
71, no. 1/2 (1941), 55.**

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*The most ancient name for iron was 'Metal of Heaven.' In the hieroglyphic language of the ancient Egyptians it was pronounced ba-en-pet, meaning either stone or metal of Heaven.*

*This ancient history of iron is also found in the cuneiform language of Assyria and Babylonia, pronounced par-zillu. It is the same in the language of Sumeria and Chaldea; barsa, barsal and barzel, and again in the Hebrew language where the name is the same as it is in the Assyrian. All of these translate to mean 'Metal of Heaven.' We can say the first iron was undoubtedly meteoric, as is shown by these ancient names.*

*Even across the globe, evidence of iron in prehistory was found when Spanish explorers discovered the Aztecs in the 1500s. They found objects made with this iron-nickel alloy as well. When asked, the Aztec claimed the metal fell from the sky. For centuries*

afterward, farmers and rural folk had claimed to have occasionally come across metallic rocks made mostly of iron that fell from the sky, and for centuries 'rational' scientist dismissed these claims as superstitious. We now know these objects as meteorites. G. F. Zimmer, *The Antiquity of Iron* (1915).

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When Cortez enquired of the Aztec chiefs whence they obtain their knives they simply pointed to the sky.

The peoples of the ancient Orient in all probability shared similar ideas. The Sumerian word *an.bar*, the oldest word designating iron, is made up of the pictograms "sky" and "fire." It is usually translated "celestial metal" or "star-metal." Campbell Thompson renders it "celestial lightening (of meteorite)."

The term *biz-n.pt*, "iron from heaven," or more exactly, "metal from heaven," clearly points to their meteorite origin...We find the same situation with the Hittites: a fourteenth-century text declares that the Hittite kings used "black iron from the sky."

**The "celestial" origin of iron is perhaps attested by the Greek sideros, which has been related to sidus, -eris, meaning "star." M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (U of Chicago 1978), 21-23.**

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There's the danger of the etymological fallacy. But in this case, since the designations are factually accurate, it seems reliable. Meteoric iron was given these names because it did, in fact, fall from the sky.

Considered in isolation, one might speculate that ancient people identified shooting stars with gods or angels who lost the war in heaven. Since, however, we have diverse lines of evidence that ancient people associated iron with shooting stars, the angelic interpretation is untenable. Iron meteorites aren't godlike or angelic. Rather, these are inanimate objects, which were hammered into weapons.

What they thought fell from the sky wasn't gods or angels, but metal chunks. Same thing with stony meteorites. Even if an aéroite became a cult object (e.g. Acts 19:35), at best it *represented* celestial beings. It was not, itself, divinity.

## Conflicting accounts

Whenever Bible history is thought to conflict with extrabiblical historical sources, unbelievers just assume the Bible must be wrong. Can't be the extrabiblical sources.

In this post I'm going to briefly discuss two conflicting accounts regarding the semantic origins of information theory. It's a question of no great intrinsic importance, but it nicely illustrates the difficulty, in the case of conflicting accounts, of determining which account is correct—or if both accounts get some things right and some things wrong. How does a historian sift through conflicting evidence?

During this meeting, Tribus queried Shannon as to his reason for choosing to call his information function by the name 'entropy', the details of which were first made public in Tribus' 1971 article "Energy and Information", wherein he states: [4]

"What's in a name? In the case of Shannon's measure the naming was not accidental. In 1961 one of us (Tribus) asked Shannon what he had thought about when he had finally confirmed his famous measure. Shannon replied: 'My greatest concern was what to call it. I thought of calling it 'information', but the word was overly used, so I decided to call it 'uncertainty'. When I discussed it with John von Neumann, he had a better idea. Von Neumann told me, 'You should call it entropy, for two reasons. In the first place you uncertainty function has been used in statistical mechanics under that name. In the second place, and more importantly, no one knows what entropy really is,

so in a debate you will always have the advantage.”

Tribus, in his 1987 article “An Engineer Looks at Bayles”, recounts his discussion with Shannon on this question as follows: [5]

“The same function appears in statistical mechanics and, on the advice of John von Neumann, Claude Shannon called it ‘entropy’. I talked with Dr. Shannon once about this, asking him why he had called his function by a name that was already in use in another field. I said that it was bound to cause some confusion between the theory of information and thermodynamics. He said that Von Neumann had told him: ‘No one really understands entropy. Therefore, if you know what you mean by it and you use it when you are in an argument, you will win every time.’”

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<http://www.eoht.info/page/Myron+Tribus>

## Thermodynamics and entropy; cryptography

**Shannon:** Well, let me also throw into this pot, Szilard, the physicist. And von Neumann, and I'm trying to remember the story. Do you know the story I'm trying to remember?

**Price:** Well, there are a couple of stories. There's the one that Myron Tribus says that von Neumann gave you the word entropy, saying to use it because nobody, you'd win every time because nobody would understand what it was.

Shannon:[laughs]

**Price:** And furthermore, it fitted  $p \cdot \log(p)$  perfectly. But that, but then I've heard . . .

**Shannon:** von Neumann told that to me?

**Price:** That's what you told Tribus that von Neumann told that to you.

Shannon:[laughs – both talking at once]

**Price:** Bell Labs too, that entropy could be used. That you already made that identification. And furthermore in your cryptography report in 1945, you actually point

out, you say the word entropy exactly once in that report. Now this is 1945, and you liken it to Statistical Mechanics. And I don't believe you were in contact with von Neumann in 1945, were you? So it doesn't sound to me as though von Neumann told you entropy.

**Shannon:**No, I don't think he did.

**Price:**This is what Tribus quoted.

**Shannon:**Yeah, I think this conversation, it's a very odd thing that this same story that you just told me was told to me at Norwich in England. A fellow —

**Price:**About von Neumann, you mean?

**Shannon:**Yeah, von Neumann and me, this conversation, this man, a physicist there, and I've forgotten his name, but he came and asked me whether von Neumann, just about the thing that you told me, that Tribus just told you, about this fellow. . .

**Price:**That was Jaynes, I imagine the physicist might have been [Edwin] Jaynes.

**Shannon:**Yes, I think it was, I think so. Do you know him?

**Price:**Well, he's published in the same book as Tribus, you see. This is a book called The Maximum Entropy Formalism. You've probably seen that book, but they have chapters in it, and Jaynes, the physicist —

**Shannon:**Now, I'm not sure where I got that idea, but I think I, somebody had told me that. But anyway, I think I can, I'm quite sure that it didn't happen between von Neumann and me.

**Price:**Right. Well, I think that the fact that it's in your 1945 cryptography report establishes that, well, you didn't get it from von Neumann, that you had made the  $p \cdot \log(p)$  identification with entropy by some other means. But you hadn't been —

**Shannon:**Well, that's an old thing anyway, you know.

**Price:**You knew it from thermodynamics.

**Shannon:** Oh, yes, from thermodynamics. That goes way back.

**Price:** That was part of your regular undergraduate and graduate education of thermodynamics and the entropy?

Shannon: Well, not in class, exactly, but I read a lot, you know.

[http://www.ieeeeghn.org/wiki/index.php/Oral-History:Claude\\_E.\\_Shannon](http://www.ieeeeghn.org/wiki/index.php/Oral-History:Claude_E._Shannon)

**i)** In the first account, Myron Tribus says Claude Shannon told him that von Neumann advised him to choose the word "entropy."

In the second account, when Shannon was queried on that story, he denies it. So who is right?

**ii)** Consider the abstract possibilities:

**a)** Shannon misremembered

**b)** Tribus misremembered

**c)** Shannon misspoke

**d)** Shannon misunderstood the question (by Tribus)

**e)** Tribus misunderstood the answer (by Shannon)

**f)** Shannon lied

**iii)** Even though these two accounts conflict, they also intersect. The interview mentions Edwin Jaynes as somebody who asked Shannon the same question.

And the first account includes several references to Jaynes, including a tribute to Jaynes by Tribus.

It seems likely that Tribus told Jaynes what he thought Shannon told him. In other words, Jaynes is not an independent source. This isn't multiple attestation. Rather, Jaynes was apparently dependent on Tribus for that information—or misinformation (as the case may be).

**iv)** Another oddity is that Shannon did, of course, use "information" to label his theory. So it's not as if he used "entropy" as a preferred alternative to "information." Both were used.

**v)** Did he lie? Was he too proud to give von Neuman any credit? Seems unlikely. This isn't like giving credit or sharing credit for a scientific theory or scientific discovery. Rather, this is just a question of what to name it. Shannon's reputation doesn't rise or fall on the purely semantic issue.

Moreover, Shannon admits that he may have gotten the idea from somebody else—just not von Neumann.

Unless there was bad blood between the two, there's no reason Shannon would lie about it—that I can see.

**vi)** Did Shannon misremember? Suppose he was becoming forgetful at the time of the interview.

**vii)** To begin with, there are two different issues:

**a)** Did he learn about the word from von Neumann?

**b)** Did he choose that word to label his theory on advice from von Neumann?

It seems clear that he knew the word before he ever met von Neumann. "Entropy" was a commonly used word in his field of studies.

**viii)** The question of whether he misremembered is complicated by the fact that he recalls a much earlier conversation (with Jaynes) on the very same subject. Even if he was forgetful at the time of the interview (which may or may not be the case), presumably he wasn't forgetful years earlier when that prior conversation took place.

If he misremembered, it wasn't due to the aging process. Rather, he didn't remember the original conversation (with Tribus) correctly in the first place. Not that the details become fuzzy in the intervening years.

**ix)** Assuming that we've eliminated some possibilities, it's harder to narrow down the list any farther. At least, based on what I quoted, I don't know who is right. Clearly there was some confusion somewhere along the line, but the evidence is insufficient to say which account is correct.

At the time of writing, Tribus is still alive. In principle, one could ask him to clear it up. However, he's in his 90s. He's now much older than Shannon was during the interview. And his recollection hasn't improved with the passage of time.

Of course, I don't think Scripture is ever in doubt. My point, though, is that even if we bracket inspiration, the partisan bias of the critics is unwarranted. At the very least, they should suspend judgment.

## Jude, 1 Enoch, and 2 Peter

**i)** Jude's use of apocryphal material in v9 & vv14-15 raises a familiar conundrum, which I've often discussed. I'll take a someone different tack in this post.

This post will be organized like those movies that begin with a cliff-hanger ending, then—through a series of flashbacks—show the audience how the action got to this point, before resolving it.

I'm going to work through a series of positions I reject. By process of elimination, I will arrive at my own position.

**ii)** A critic might contend that it's special pleading for Christians to canonize Jude, but refuse to canonize 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses. If Jude makes positive use of these sources, and we venerate Jude, then we ought to share his high view of these sources.

Conversely, if we think the sources are unreliable, then we should downgrade our view of Jude. If it was right to canonize Jude, then it would be right to canonize 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses. Conversely, if it would be wrong to canonize 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, then it was wrong to canonize Jude.

**iii)** And the argument (such as it is) logically extends to 2 Peter. Inasmuch as Peter makes positive use of Jude, he is, for better or worse, implicated in the fortunes of Jude.

**iv)** Let's consider the first horn of the alleged dilemma. Even if (ex hypothesi) the church should have canonized Jude's sources, that's no longer a viable option at this late date.

**a)** There are no extant copies of the Assumption of Moses. And the Testament of Moses only exists in translation in one 6C Latin MS. Moreover, the relationship between the Assumption of Moses and the Testament of Moses is difficult to untangle, given the fragmentary state of the evidence.

**b)** We don't have 1 Enoch in the original. The full text of 1 Enoch exists in a Ethiopic translation of a Greek translation of an Aramaic original. There are some Greek fragments, as well as some Aramaic fragments.

How can the church trust the reliability of a translation of a translation? Moreover, the textual transmission of 1 Enoch is ferociously complex.

**c)** A related complication is how much of 1 Enoch we're supposed to canonize. 1 Enoch is a composite book. Even within that anthology, the Book of the Watchers is a composite work. 1 Enoch has a very complex editorial history.

Even if the church should have canonized 1 Enoch, that's a lost opportunity. It's too late to rectify that judgement call.

**v)** Let's consider the second horn of the alleged dilemma. Suppose the church was mistaken in canonizing Jude?

**a)** It won't do for Catholics to exclaim: "We told you so! This is why the Protestant canon is so unstable. That's what happens when you don't have a Magisterium."

But on the hypothetical I'm discussing (for the sake of argument), the church of Rome made the same mistake. So either Rome never had a divine teaching office or the man in charge was asleep at the switch.

**b)** In principle, Christianity could certainly survive the loss of Jude. In terms of historical theology, Jude is a marginal book. The same could be said for 2 Peter. Neither book supplies the backbone of historical Christian theology.

**c)** At the same time, that's too facile. The problem is not so much with the loss of Jude (or 2 Peter), but whether the entire canon would begin to unravel once we begin to tug at certain threads.

In principle, Christianity could still survive. It would have to contract into a core canon. The core canon would be defended on evidentialist grounds. The books which have the best claim to historicity. Testimonial evidence.

But if God allowed every Christian denomination to mistakenly canonize Jude, then that would introduce a serious degree of uncertainty into the Christian faith. It wouldn't be the end of the world, but it would be damaging.

Again, these are counterfactuals. I propose them to dispose of them.

**vi)** I think a key lies in the relationship between 2 Peter and Jude. Most scholars think Peter uses Jude. I won't rehearse the evidence.

Assuming that's correct, it's instructive to compare and contrast the parallel passages where Jude is clearly using apocryphal sources.

**a)** 2 Pet 2:11 paraphrases Jude 9, but eliminates the identifiable references to the Testament/Assumption of Moses by recasting the statement in more generic terms.



2 Pet 2:18 repeats the boastful motif in Jude 16, but eliminates the quote from 1 Enoch (in vv14-15) which forms the lead-in to the boastful motif.

A number of scholars think Jude 6 alludes to 1 Enoch, and 2 Pet 2:4 parallels and paraphrases Jude 6. If, however, Jude is alluding to 1 Enoch, that's far more oblique than the sources in v9 & vv14-15. So Peter doesn't need to omit that or recast it in generic terms, since the underlying source is already pretty obscure.

Mind you, I agree with Daryl Charles that this is not an allusion to 1 Enoch.

**vii)** To judge by how Peter edits Jude, Peter suppresses the references to apocryphal literature—by paraphrase or outright omission. How are we to interpret his redactional practice?

**a)** One possibility is that he's correcting Jude. However, I think that's implausible. If he thought Jude was so lacking in critical discernment, why would he make such extensive and positive use of Jude in the first place?

**b)** Another possibility is that he thinks Jude's sourcing would be misleading for Peter's audience. Peter may have felt that if he simply quoted Jude, Peter's audience would draw a false inference regarding the authority of the apocryphal sources. So he protects his audience from treating 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses as inspired scripture.

Jude's letter may have been a very in-house affair. Jude may be manipulating this material for polemical purposes. His audience understood that. But in shifting to a different audience, the ad hominem context might be lost sight of.

**viii)** Assuming this explanation is correct, then Peter validates Jude without validating his sources. Peter intentionally distinguishes Jude, which he reaffirms, from his apocryphal sources, from which he distances himself.

In that case, it is not inconsistent for Christians to grant the canonicity of Jude even though they disassociate themselves from Jude's sources—except in the polemical vein that Jude may have exploited them. 2 Peter set the precedent.

**ix)** If so, that's analogous to how Matthew and Luke sometimes edit Mark. Assuming that Matthew and Luke are literarily dependent on Mark for some of their material, they sometimes redact Mark. There are various reasons. To polish the language. To say the same thing in fewer words. To adapt the material to their own audience.

But in some instances, it seems to be a case where they thought Mark's way of putting things might be misleading. To forestall confusion, they reword it. That doesn't mean they were critiquing Mark. But in using and reusing a source, they enjoy the license to edit the source. Every historian does that.

## **Some standing here will not taste death**

**27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. 28 Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Mt 16:27-28).**

**12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands,**

**the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Rev 1:12-16,20).**

Mt 16:28 is a familiar "problem passage." Did Jesus mispredict the future?

It's instructive to compare the Matthean prediction with Rev 1. John was one of the disciples whom Jesus addressed on that occasion (in Mt 16). Before John died, Jesus came to him. His appearance is glorious. There's even the angelic motif. Jesus comes with angels (i.e. stars=angels).

This is a personal appearance. But it is, of course, distinct from the Second Coming—which is a global, one-time, endtime event. So John did not taste death until he saw Jesus come to him, in royal imagery that parallels the Matthean prediction. (By the same token, Jesus came to Paul [Acts 9, 22, 26], to instigate his conversion.)

Likewise, in his dictated letters to the seven churches (Rev 2-3), Jesus threatens to "come" to some of them in judgment. But in context, that hardly seems to be the end of the world. It simply marks the demise of that particular fellowship.

We need to distinguish at least two different ways in which Jesus can come to people. There's a local, individualized appearance, and then there's a global return. Both are personal. But the former is repeatable whereas the latter is climactic. Between Jesus coming within church history (i.e. objective visions) and Jesus coming at the end of church history (i.e. the return of Christ).

Some Protestants misunderstand sola scriptura. They treat the Bible as an encyclopedia. Unless they can find something in Scripture, it never happened. This often leads to very creative proof texting. But the Bible does not intend or pretend to record everything that exists.

Jesus may well have appeared to other disciples in the same way he appeared to John. It's just that John wrote about it.

## The "Deuteronomic history"

I'll comment on a post by Arminian theologian Randal Rauser:

<http://randalrauser.com/2015/02/did-god-really-command-genocide-a-review-part-3/>

The problem is that they never address the glaring question: why think God ever uttered these commands as they are recorded?

### **Why think this happened...?**

In order to appreciate the knotty nature of this historical question, consider how evangelical apologists typically press the importance of history, particularly as it regards the resurrection of Jesus. Evangelical apologists are keen to argue that New Testament documents (e.g. the creedal formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5) bring us to within years of the purported events themselves. (As an introduction to this literature one might begin with Paul Copan's treatment of the resurrection in **LOVING WISDOM: CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION** (Chalice Press, 2007), 116 ff.)

The contrast with the Deuteronomic history could hardly be greater for here the gap between event and report shifts from years (as in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5) or decades (as in the Synoptic gospels) to centuries. Philip Jenkins explains:

“Even by the most optimistic estimates, **J** [According to the Documentary Hypothesis “J” is

the Yahwist source, one of four sources that comprise the Torah] would not have been written down until 900 or 850. Deuteronomy itself did not take its final form until five hundred years after the massacre of King Sihon and his subjects. *That book's authors were as far removed from the conquest as we today are from the time of Martin Luther or Christopher Columbus. Any approach to Deuteronomy or Joshua has to read it in the context of around 700 BCE, or even later, not of 1200.*" (**LAYING DOWN THE SWORD: WHY WE CAN'T IGNORE THE BIBLE'S VIOLENT VERSES** (HarperOne, 2001), 53-54, emphasis added.)

Think about that: the proximity of the events narrated in the Deuteronomic history to the final form of the texts is equivalent to the distance from Christopher Columbus to today! Given that the period covered by the narrative occurred centuries earlier than the final form of the Deuteronomic history, one would think Copan and Flannagan would be centrally concerned with the historical question: *Do we have a historical ground to think these events occurred?* Instead, Copan and Flannagan appear to accept the basic historical veracity of the Deuteronomic history in much the same way they would accept the reliability of the Gospels and Acts.

Three basic problems:

**i)** The argument is circular. Jenkins (whose views Rauser rubber-stamps) simply denies the historical setting of the Pentateuch (or Hexateuch). He takes the Documentary Hypothesis for granted. He then cites his disbelief in the

ostensible setting of the Pentateuch as justification for disbelieving the historicity or historical accuracy of the Pentateuch.

But why should we have more confidence in the Documentary Hypothesis than the self-witness of the Pentateuch? The Documentary Hypothesis is a conjectural reconstruction by modern scholars who weren't alive to witness what really happened, either according to the original setting or the setting they reassign to the composition of the Pentateuch.

**ii)** Even if, for the sake of argument, we say the Pentateuch was written centuries after the fact, notice how divine inspiration doesn't register in Jenkins' explanation. He treats the narratives of Scripture as merely human documents. His outlook is secular.

**iii)** Finally, even if, for the sake of argument, we treat the Pentateuch as an uninspired source, his skepticism is ironic coming from a church historian. He cites Luther as an example. Well, what about that? Does he think that due to the passage of time, we lack reliable information about the life and work of Luther?



## Lost knowledge

I'm going to comment on two related phenomena.

**i)** Many OT numbers seem peculiar to modern readers. There are scholarly explanations for these numbers. Some are plausible. In a few cases, these may be transcriptional errors, but that doesn't explain everything.

Yet I'd like to make a general point: even though these numbers seem peculiar to modern readers, presumably they didn't seem peculiar to the narrator or his intended audience.

Authors normally write to be understood. The numbers made sense to the intended audience.

If, therefore, they seem "wrong" to a modern reader, that's not because they are wrong, but because we must be missing something which the first readers implicitly understood.

**ii)** Likewise, modern scholars find it challenging to harmonize the genealogies of Christ in Matthew and Luke. However, whatever else we may say about that, presumably the genealogies made sense to Matthew, Luke, and their intended audience.

To my knowledge, there was never a Matthean faction in the church, over against a Lukan faction. There were never rival Matthean and Lukan churches. The ancient church, from earliest times, always acknowledged both Gospels. Both Gospels were accepted as authentic accounts.

Given all the schisms in the ancient church, if there had been disagreement, we'd expect that to leave traces in the historical record.

So even though a modern reader finds the relationship between their respective genealogies puzzling, that doesn't mean one or both are wrong. Rather, that means we are missing something that was clear to Matthew, Luke, and the intended audience. A bit of inside knowledge that was lost over time.

Surely comparisons were made very soon. Quite likely within the lifetimes of Matthew and Luke. The NT church was a pretty close-knit community. They shared the same books.

It's like having elderly relatives. Sometimes, after they die, you think of questions you wish you had asked them when they were still alive. It's too late. The knowledge they had, which fills in the lacuna, is gone unless that's passed on. As a result, we're sometimes left with puzzles about family history which would be easily resolved if a member of that generation was available to ask.

## Why freewill theism logically denies the verbal inspiration of Scripture

Arminian theologian Roger Olson gives us yet another reason to reject freewill theism:

*I believe Calvinism is riddled with such distinctions without differences. But such pop up all over the place in theology; it's not a problem confined to Calvinism. One that never ceases to befuddle me is that made by many conservative evangelicals —between “dictation” and “plenary verbal inspiration” of the Bible. Many conservative evangelicals (such as Millard Erickson) go to great lengths to attempt to demonstrate that “plenary verbal inspiration” is not the same as dictation inspiration. At the end of their explanations I'm left scratching my head because this appears to be a distinction without a difference no matter what they say. They say, for example, that in the process we call “divine inspiration of Scripture” God directed the human*

*authors to the very words he wanted them to use without over riding their personalities or using them mechanically. Millard Erickson, for example, in Christian Theology, appeals to a form of compatibilism to explain how plenary verbal inspiration is different from dictation. God, he says, prepared Paul (for example) to be the kind of person who would freely choose to write the very words he wanted Paul to use in writing his inspired epistles. To me, the typical conservative evangelical explanation of the “difference” between verbal plenary inspiration and dictation inspiration disappears once inspected closely. It’s a distinction without a difference.*

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Read more:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/a-problem-in-theology-distinctions-without-differences/#ixzz3NuQtZmYL>

## Taking out the trash

I'm going to make a few comments on this:

<http://www.newsweek.com/2015/01/02/thats-not-what-bible-says-294018.html>

I've already left a number of comments on Mike Kruger's initial takedown (part 1). In addition, Eichenwald rehashes many stock "contradictions" which I've often dealt with elsewhere. So I'll just confine myself to a few:

*To illustrate how even seemingly trivial contradictions can have profound consequences, let's recount the story of Christmas. Jesus was born in a house in Bethlehem. His father, Joseph, had been planning to divorce Mary until he dreamed that she'd conceived a child through the Holy Spirit. No wise men showed up for the birth, and no brilliant star shone overhead. Joseph and his family then fled to Egypt, where they remained for years. Later, they returned to Israel, hoping to live in Judea, but that proved problematic, so they settled in a small town called Nazareth. Not the*

*version you are familiar with? No angel appearing to Mary? Not born in a manger? No one saying there was no room at the inn? No gold, frankincense or myrrh? Fleeing to Egypt? First living in Nazareth when Jesus was a child, not before he was born? You may not recognize this version, but it is a story of Jesus's birth found in the Gospels. Two Gospels—Matthew and Luke—tell the story of when Jesus was born, but in quite different ways. Contradictions abound. In creating the familiar Christmas tale, Christians took a little bit of one story, mixed it with a little bit of the other and ignored all of the contradictions in the two.*

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It's true that popular Christmas traditions combine Matthew and Luke. However, Eichenwald commits a very elementary blunder. The nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke only contradict each other on the assumption that they are reporting events which happened at the very same time and place. It's trivially easy to create a bogus contradiction by acting as though two accounts have the identical timeframe.

Indeed, a difference of just one day can dissolve a chronological contradiction. What can't happen in one day can happen in two days, or spread over weeks or months.

If, moreover, you read Matthew carefully, it's clear that the Magi arrived on the scene about six months to a year after the birth of Christ. Just by spacing things out over the course of a few weeks or months, the contradictions disappear.

We may still scratch our heads about how to coordinate these two accounts in a relative chronology, but that's because we lack the intervening details.

***Paul in 1 Corinthians is even clearer; he states, "The time is short." He then instructs other Christians, given that the end is coming, to live as if they had no wives, and, if they buy things, to treat them as if they were not their own.***

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Here Eichenwald is alluding to Paul's cryptic statement in 1 Cor 7:29:

- i)** Paul doesn't say in reference to what the time is short.
- ii)** This comes on the heels of his reference to "the present crisis"—which is probably topical. Some scholars think that alludes to famine conditions in the Roman Empire at the time.

**iii)** Paul uses the word *kairos* rather than *chronos*. *Chronos* denotes quantitative time, linear time, an interval of time. By contrast, *kairos* denotes qualitative time, epochal time, eschatological time.

Because of where Christians stand in redemptive history, they should assume a Christian perspective on life. They live after the cross, after the Resurrection, but before the world to come. An in-between time. As Paul says in his follow-up letter: **"We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal"** (2 Cor 4:18).

**iv)** Notice that in v31, Paul doesn't say the world itself is passing away, but the world in its "present form" is passing away. Once again, that's a matter of viewing the significance of life from a Christian perspective. Our relative position in redemptive history.

We need to distinguish between appearance and reality. Life is short. The world carries on without us. What's ultimately significant is what is taking place behind-the-scenes. Where we are headed. Where the world is headed.

*In fact, the Bible has three creation models, and some experts maintain there are four. In addition to the two in Genesis, there is one referenced in the Books of Isaiah, Psalms and Job. In this version, the world is created in the*



*aftermath of a great battle between God and what theologians say is a dragon in the waters called Rahab. And Rahab is not the only mythical creature that either coexisted with God or was created by him. God plays with a sea monster named Leviathan.*

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That's deeply confused:

**i)** In Isaiah and the Psalms, it's using new creation imagery as a metaphor for the Exodus. Using chaos monsters as a political metaphor for Egypt. These are not alternative creation accounts. Rather, these have reference to the history of the Exodus.

Likewise, Job 41 is not an alternative creation account. Leviathan is a creature. God made him. That's the point. Leviathan is not a preexistent, rival power who coexisted with God before God made the present world.

**ii)** We also need to differentiate the speakers in Job. When God speaks, that's ipso facto normative in a way that statements by the human characters are not.

*Unicorns appear in the King James Bible (although that wasn't the correct translation of the mythical creature's Hebrew name).*

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Notice what he asserts in the first clause he retracts in the parenthetical.

There are fiery serpents and flying serpents and cockatrices—a two-legged dragon with a rooster’s head (that word was later changed to “viper” in some English-language Bibles).

**i)** To begin with, he offers no evidence to justify his identification.

**ii)** More to the point, this is poetry. Figurative imagery. A political allegory.

***And in Exodus, magicians who work for the Pharaoh of Egypt are able to change staffs into snakes and water into blood.***

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Yes, witchcraft is real.

## Defending Daniel

Although this post has special reference to Daniel, much of what I say is applicable to Scripture in general.

**i)** Warranted belief in Scripture doesn't hinge on corroboration from outside. Most Christians are in no position to independently verify Scripture. If the God of Scripture exists, he wouldn't make faith dependent on access to information which few Christians enjoy.

In apologetics, we cite various lines of evidence to rebut attacks or provide additional reasons for belief. But that doesn't mean faith in Scripture should depend on independent confirmation.

**ii)** Although unbelievers routinely attack the historicity of Scripture, that's really a red herring. Even if we had independent corroboration for every merely historical report in Scripture, that wouldn't make a dent in the unbeliever's disbelief. That's because unbelievers don't really care about the merely historical events recorded in Scripture. Their real objection is to the specifically supernatural or miraculous events. Even if we had complete corroboration for every "natural," nonmiraculous incident in Scripture, unbelievers would continue to reject Scripture out of hand.

**iii)** The argument from silence is only significant if there's a reasonable expectation something would be mentioned if it occurred.

**iv)** I find historical objections to Scripture inherently unimpressive. As I've said before, hits are far more impressive than misses.

If two ancient sources disagree, it's easy to account for their disagreement if one or both are wrong. By contrast, if two ancient sources independently agree, then it's hard to account for their agreement unless both are (at least approximately) correct.

If the reported event really happened, they agree because that's the source of their information. And that's the standard of comparison.

Roughly speaking, there's only way to be right, because there's only one event. By contrast, sheer imagination is the only limit on the number of false reports. Since error isn't aligned with a standard of comparison (i.e. the actual event), there's no external check on variations in error. Proliferation of erroneous accounts is uncontrollable in a way that true accounts are not.

Two accounts can easily disagree if both are out of touch with reality. The permutations of error are infinite. It's sheer coincidence if two fictional accounts happen to agree. Likewise, two accounts can easily disagree if one is factual while the other is fictitious.

**v)** What makes the hits even more impressive is the scattershot nature of the surviving evidence. Given how little evidence survives, given how little interest ancient historians took in Israel or 1C Christianity, given the inevitable bias of ancient sources, it's nothing short of remarkable that we even have much independent corroboration of Scripture.

So this is something Christians always need to keep in mind when reading historical criticisms of Scripture. Hits are very impressive, but misses are very unimpressive. These are radically asymmetrical.

**vi)** I think some scholars view a historical reconstruction like a jigsaw puzzle. In a good reconstruction, all the available pieces should fit together.

But that's a misleading metaphor. Events fit together like pieces of a puzzle. Things only happen one way. One thing follows another. One thing happens at the same time as another—in a different locale. So there's only way that events fit together.

But in the case of ancient history, we don't have direct access to the events. What we have are sources. Ancient sources are unlikely to have the tight-fit of a jigsaw puzzle. Due to bias and ignorance, our ancient extrabiblical sources are, at best, raw data.

If, say, a Christian scholar identifies Darius the Mede with Cyrus, his historical reconstruction needn't dovetail with all of the available evidence. For the extant evidence is likely to have jagged edges rather than smooth edges. The extant evidence is going to be piecemeal at best and often inaccurate to some degree. A rough fit is usually the best we can expect.

**vii)** If Daniel was fictional, the more evidence that archeology turns up, the more the historical problems for Daniel should multiply. But the opposite is the case. The more evidence that archeology turns up, the more that eliminates or ameliorates past objections to the historicity of Daniel.

That's not the emerging pattern we'd expect if Daniel was fictional. That's antithetical to the pattern we'd expect if Daniel was fictional.

Liberals used to say Belshazzar was fictional, until archeology discovered extrabiblical evidence.

Liberals used to raise linguistic objections to the 6C date of Daniel. But comparative linguistics based on archeological discoveries of extrabiblical Hebrew and Aramaic texts made that argument backfire.

Liberals used to say Daniel 1:1 got the date wrong, but archeology has turned up evidence of different calendrical systems which can harmonize Daniel and Jeremiah.

Liberals often say Darius the Mede is fictional. But archeology has supplied evidence that makes Cyrus a plausible candidate.

Liberals used to say the designation of Belshazzar as a "king" is inaccurate. Yet archeology has turned up evidence to corroborate that title, viz. distinguishing between a "king" and a "great king."

Likewise, there's fragmentary evidence that Nebuchadnezzar suffered a bout of mental illness, which is consistent with boanthropy.

**viii)** Apropos (vii), why would Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Jehoiakim be historical figures, but Darius the Mede be fictional? It's consistent to say all three are fictional. But since even liberals admit that's untenable, that puts pressure on their position. You could argue that if the Belshazzar pericope is fictional, and Belshazzar is fictional, then Darius the Mede is fictional. It's all of a piece. But when evidence turns up that Belshazzar is historical, then the claim that Darius the Mede is just a literary construct becomes very ad hoc.

**ix)** When unbelievers read conservative defenses of Daniel, this smacks of special pleading. Yet liberals and conservatives alike engage in historical reconstructions. Both sides extrapolate from trace evidence. Both sides interpolate missing evidence.

For instance, Collins, in his commentary, doesn't think Darius the Mede ever existed. However, he's enough of a scholar to realize that it's inadequate to say Daniel was wrong and leave it at that. For he needs to explain what motivated the author to write Dan 6. He needs to provide an alternative explanation to account for Dan 6.

So he comes up with an ingenious reconstruction. Yet his explanation is at least as complicated and speculative (if not more so) than scholars who identify Darius the Mede with Cyrus.

## The fate of false prophets

In his generally excellent commentary on Daniel, Dale Ralph Davis makes an odd comment. He's responding to the allegation that Daniel is a pseudonymous book written in the mid-2C BC, but set in the 6C BC. He says:

*Why should they give solemn credence to "prophecies" they knew had been produced by a bunch of visionaries who were their own contemporaries? What divine authority could these pack? The Message of Daniel (IVP 2013), 20.*

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**i)** On the face of it, this comment is peculiar. Perhaps I don't know what he means. Or perhaps he didn't succeed in saying what he means.

Surely, many OT prophecies were produced by visionaries who were contemporaneous with their audience. And these had divine authority. They were sent by God to speak his words in his name.

**ii)** I'd add that in the course of church history, you have men and women who claim to be prophets, and their oracles are sometimes taken seriously, at least within their sect or cult or band of followers. But there's a catch. If they make false predictions, then they discredit themselves. Although some of their adherents follow them no matter what they say or do, although some of their adherents explain away the discrepancies, this produces a crisis of



faith. Some, or many, former followers become disillusioned with the would-be prophet or prophetess. They drop out of the movement. Some of them write in opposition to their former sect or cult.

An analogous case is when a popular Bible teacher makes an end-of-the-world prediction based on his confident interpretation of Bible prophecies. He doesn't claim to be a prophet in his own right. But he does claim special insight into the meaning of Scripture. He was able to crack the code.

That happens every so often in modern times. And when his prediction fails, he loses credibility.

If Daniel was actually a contemporary of Jews during the Antiochian crisis, and he mispredicted the death of Antiochus, then we'd expect his oracles to suffer the same ignominious fate. At the very least, they'd be very controversial in Judaism. Hard to see how they could possibly attain canonical status.

So that's one reason, among others, why the liberal date for Daniel is implausible.

## Typography and exegesis

Conservative commentators think there's an implicit break between Dan 11:35-36 whereas liberal commentators think it's continuous. In other words, the question is whether this is referring to the same person throughout (i.e. Antiochus Epiphanes), or whether there's a shift from Antiochus to the Antichrist.

Liberal commentators think it's special pleading for conservatives to posit a break at that point. By way of response:

**i)** The charge of special pleading cuts both ways. Liberal commentators (e.g. Collins, Goldingay) admit that vv36ff. are not an accurate record of Antiochus. They themselves have to explain away the historical evidence to rationalize their identification.

**ii)** Some commentators (Davis, MacRae, Steinmann) have noted striking parallels between 11:21-35 & 11:36-45 (or 11:36-12:3). They contend that if both refer to the same person, the duplication is hard to explain. If, by contrast, that's an a fortiori relation, where Antiochus prefigures a future counterpart, then the parallel is more explicable.

**iii)** There's an abrupt shift in 11:2-3, from the Persian kings to Alexander. It skips over several later Persian kings. So an unannounced shift between v35 and v36 is not unprecedented.

**iv)** Finally, I'd like to make a point of my own. To my knowledge, ancient Hebrew MSS didn't have chapter divisions or paragraph divisions. It was a continuous block text. Ancient scribes didn't have our modern formatting

conventions. One of the things OT commentators (as well as NT commentators) must do is to decide where one unit ends and another unit begins. Sometimes that's obvious, but sometimes that's subtle or ambiguous. Commentators disagree with each other on when a Bible writer begins a new topic.

Given the absence of modern typographical conventions in ancient Hebrew MSS to demarcate transitions from one unit to another, there's nothing inherently ad hoc about commentators positing a shift from v35 to v36. If the writer intended a transition at that juncture, that's something the reader would have to infer for himself. That's not something the ancient writer could signal by starting a new chapter or paragraph. Even if there's an implicit break, the text itself will be continuous.

So it's not as if conservative commentators are doing anything unusual in this respect. Every commentator, when exegeting a book of the Bible, must decide where the internal divisions occur. That's part of the interpretive process.

## Hoping Scripture is wrong

A common objection to inerrancy is that inerrantists have a totalitarian commitment to the plenary inspiration of Scripture. They are deeply invested in the issue. They can't afford for Scripture to make mistakes. So they resort to desperate expedients to defend the inerrancy of Scripture.

There's some truth to that allegation. Mind you, there's nothing wrong with fighting for a worthy cause. The meaning of life is pretty fundamental. And absent divine revelation, the meaning of life is groundless.

In addition, there's a difference between commitment to inerrancy and the need to demonstrate inerrancy. There's no presumption that we can or should be able to explain everything in Scripture. It's bound to have some obscurities. Our ability to harmonize the Gospels is not a precondition of inerrancy. Since we didn't see what they saw, we may be in no position to piece together the whole picture. But that's not surprising.

However, that's not the point of my post. Let's turn the objection around. Why do many people deny the Bible? Well, some people deny the Bible because they think there's evidence that disproves the Bible. But that's not all.

Many people, both inside and outside the church, think the Bible is wrong because they *want* the Bible to be wrong. They *need* the Bible to be wrong. They have a vested interest in the falsity of Scripture.

You have atheists who don't want God to exist. God's existence offends their sense of autonomy and self-importance. God is a superior being. That knocks them

down a peg. If God exists, they are answerable to someone else.

There are "progressive Christians" who think St. Paul is sexist and homophobic. They want Paul to be wrong. They can't both be right.

There are "progressive Christians" who need Jesus to be wrong about hell.

There are "progressive Christians" who think the divine command to sacrifice Isaac was immoral. They need that to be fictitious.

They don't reject it because they have evidence to the contrary. It's not as if they have a tape recording of Yahweh telling Abraham *not* to sacrifice his son.

There are "progressive Christians" who don't want Yahweh to exist. They hate Yahweh. They hate what he says and does. They hate what he represents. They are counting on Scripture to be wrong. God *can't* be like that. Scripture *must* be wrong.

There are scientists who want Bible miracles to be fictitious, "for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. Anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured"

There are theologians who hope that God doesn't know the future. For if our actions are 100% predictable, then in what sense are we free to do otherwise?

Make no mistake: this attitude informs much of what passes for Bible scholarship of the SBL variety. The Bible *has* to be

wrong. There's too much at stake if Scripture is true. They have too much to lose if Scripture is true.

## **Bible "contradictions" and missing evidence**

I'm going to quote from this article:

[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/history/2013/11/john\\_f\\_kennedy\\_conspiracy\\_theories\\_debunked\\_why\\_the\\_magic\\_bullet\\_and\\_grassy.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2013/11/john_f_kennedy_conspiracy_theories_debunked_why_the_magic_bullet_and_grassy.html)

*The Warren Report concluded that Oswald had fired all three shots from a window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, where he worked. \* But the case was far from closed. A man named Abraham Zapruder, one of thousands of people standing along the motorcade route that day in Dallas, captured the shootings on his 8mm home-movie camera. At 26 seconds and 486 frames, it would come to be the most thoroughly examined snuff film in history—and a prime piece of evidence for the Warren Commission and the subsequent “conspiracy buffs.”*

*At first, it was assumed that Kennedy and Connally had been hit by separate bullets. But the Zapruder film threw a wrench in that notion. The Warren Commission’s analysts concluded that JFK was shot sometime between Frames 210 and 225 (a street billboard blocked Zapruder’s view at the crucial*

moment), while Connally was hit no later than Frame 240. In other words, the two men were hit no more than 30 frames apart. However, FBI tests revealed that Oswald's rifle could be fired no faster than once every 2.25 seconds—which, on Zapruder's camera, translated, to 40 or 41 frames. In short, there wasn't enough time for Oswald to fire one bullet at Kennedy, then another at Connally.

The inference was inescapable. Either there were at least two gunmen—or Kennedy and Connally were hit by the same bullet. The Warren Report argued the latter. The “single-bullet theory,” as it was called, set off a controversy even among the commissioners. Three of them didn't buy it.

That section of the Warren Report drew the most biting attacks. Critics drew diagrams tracing the absurd path that a bullet would have had to travel—a midair turn to the right, followed by a squiggly one to the left—in order to rip through Kennedy's neck, then into Connally's ribs and wrist.

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Before proceeding, let's pause to consider this. It appears to be a mathematical impossibility that a single gunman was



responsible for shooting both men. The rifle can only fire so fast. And there's only so much time between frames. Plus the trajectory of a bullet from a 6th floor perch. It wasn't mathematically possible for one shooter to get off three rounds in that interval.

So the evidence seems to contradict the lone gunman theory. And not just any kind of evidence, but evidence of a very stringent kind. Mathematical rigor.

Continuing:

*Then, in November 2003, on the murder's 40th anniversary, I watched an ABC News documentary called **The Kennedy Assassination: Beyond Conspiracy**. In one segment, the producers showed the actual car in which the president and the others had been riding that day. One feature of the car, which I'd never heard or read about before, made my jaw literally drop. The back seat, where JFK rode, was three inches higher than the front seat, where Connally rode. Once that adjustment was made, the line from Oswald's rifle to Kennedy's upper back to Connally's ribcage and wrist appeared*

*absolutely straight. There was no need for a magic bullet.*

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Notice how that one additional piece of evidence might suddenly resolve what appeared to be an incontrovertible contradiction. Turns out that one bullet could do the work of two.

Now, I'm not vouching for this explanation. I'm not a JFK conspiracy buff. For all I know, there may be criticisms of this explanation.

I just use this to illustrate a point. Consider in principle how a single piece of missing evidence can resolve what seems to be an irrefutable contradiction. And think about that when unbelievers confidently allege a contradiction in Scripture.

## Was Ezekiel a false prophet?

The question arises due to conflicts between the Mosaic cultus and Ezk 40-48. Insofar as Mosaic revelation supplies the benchmark to distinguish true from false prophecy (Deut 13:1-5; 18:15-18), discrepancies between the Pentateuch and Ezekiel potentially invalidate Ezekiel's prophetic status.

**i)** Since liberals don't assume that the Pentateuch antedates Ezekiel, the Pentateuch isn't a benchmark for them in this regard.

**ii)** There is, of course, a question concerning the degree to which the Mosaic Covenant is a benchmark. If the Mosaic Covenant is provisional, then at some juncture it would be supplanted by something different.

**iii)** However, that's a bit circular. What if a false prophet said his oracle marks the turning-point at which the Mosaic Covenant is defunct?

One distinction concerns the scope of Deut 13:1-5 & 18:15-18. Ezekiel doesn't have a different doctrine of God than Moses. He's not enticing Israelites to abandon Yahweh and embrace a pagan god or gods. Rather, the differences concern the priestly line, vestments, a new moon offering, and sanctuary furnishings.

**iv)** It's not as if Ezekiel is attacking the status quo. For the Mosaic cultus was already inoperative during the Babylonian Exile. There was no extant temple or tabernacle. So Ezekiel is not a revolutionary who is challenging business as usual.

To the contrary, given the fact that the Mosaic cultus was in abeyance during the exile, the question naturally arose as to whether, at the end of the exile, the situation would revert to the status quo ante. Would past practice resume, or did the Exile mark a definitive break with the past? Was the status quo ante to some degree irretrievable? After God restored them to the land of Israel, were they to pick up where they left off, or begin something new?

**v)** In addition, it's not as if Ezekiel contravenes the Mosaic cultus. Ezk 40-48 is descriptive, not proscriptive. It is simply a record of his vision. A verbal record of what he saw and heard. It doesn't directly evaluate the Mosaic cultus.

**vi)** Of course, this still raises a thorny question concerning the significance of his vision. What is that about? Is it about the future? Is it about something earthly? Is it about something heavenly?

**vii)** Although most Jews didn't receive the kinds of visions that OT prophets did, there's a sense in which, by recording their visions, OT prophets enabled their audience to individually reexperience the vision, as if it happened to them. They were viewing the same scene through the eyes of the prophet. His picturesque narrative recreates the pilgrimage.

Imagine seeing what Ezekiel saw, as it unfolded. The layout has a climactic design. You mount seven steps to an outer gate. Then you mount eight steps to the inner court. Then you mount ten steps to the temple porch. Then you mount several steps to the altar. In addition, the hallway narrows from fourteen cubits upon entering the porch, to ten cubits upon entering the great hall, to six cubits upon entering the

inner sanctum. Cf. D. Block, **BEYOND THE RIVER CHEBAR** (Cascade Books, 2013), chap. 9.

So you keep rising to reach your destination. And the hallway keeps narrowing. A change in both vertical and horizontal space. That heightens the suspense.

The Solomonic temple was long gone, yet there was still a temple—"wherever" this was. Evidently, there had always been a temple. A temple far more spectacular than Solomon's. Moreover, the Solomonic temple was destructible, but this temple is indestructible insofar as it appears to occupy an unearthly space or timeless realm in Ezekiel's vision. A "place" untouched by the ravages of terrestrial time and space. An otherworldly exemplar. "Not made by human hands."

The exiles were living in Babylon, far from home. In a heathen land. The Solomonic temple was a thing of the past. And yet here's a temple! "Somewhere," this temple exists (or maybe subsists). In the Spirit, Ezekiel is taken to this temple. A surreal temple. Unimaginably greater than Solomon's. The Solomonic temple was forever lost, yet what they lost was a pale imitation of this greater reality. And they could retrace Ezekiel's pilgrimage. In effect, they could see it for themselves by visualizing his description.

A generation that was born in exile, who never knew the Solomonic temple, had imaginative access to this greater temple, through the mediation of Ezekiel's revelation.

Some commentators assume this must be a blueprint, given the level of detail. They think it would be pointless otherwise. But that fails to enter into the recorded experience.

Suppose if you had an extended dream. Suppose you had an accurate recollection of the dream. If you wrote out what you saw, it would be a lengthy, detailed description.

**viii)** Ezekiel is a transitional book. It has one foot in the old covenant and one foot in the new covenant. Indeed, it has one foot in the world to come. Sometimes the Shekinah emerges from the world to come, to enter Ezekiel's world. Sometimes Ezekiel is drawn (at least imaginatively) into the world to come. Ezekiel stands at a crossroads between two covenants, two epochs, and two worlds.

## The Book of Truth

40 “At the time of the end, the king of the south shall attack him, but the king of the north shall rush upon him like a whirlwind, with chariots and horsemen, and with many ships. And he shall come into countries and shall overflow and pass through. 41 He shall come into the glorious land. And tens of thousands shall fall, but these shall be delivered out of his hand: Edom and Moab and the main part of the Ammonites. 42 He shall stretch out his hand against the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape. 43 He shall become ruler of the treasures of gold and of silver, and all the precious things of Egypt, and the Libyans and the Cushites shall follow in his train. 44 But news from the east and the north shall alarm him, and he shall go out with great fury to destroy and devote many to destruction. 45 And he shall pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the glorious holy mountain. Yet he shall come to his end, with none to help him ([Dan 11:40-45](#)).

**i)** Liberals think Daniel was written in the mid-2C BC. They think most of Dan 11 is prophecy after the fact. The anonymous author was writing history under the guise of prophecy.

They think there's a shift at v40. They view that as a genuine, but mistaken prediction. The author was writing history up to that point, but then made the precarious move of extrapolating the future from the recent past—and got it wrong.

He supposedly got it wrong, because Antiochus didn't die in Palestine (pace vv40-45), but Persia.

**ii)** I've critiqued that interpretation from various angles. Now I'd like to broach the issue from another angle.

**iii)** Keep in mind that Daniel doesn't name the ill-fated individual. He doesn't say this was Antiochus. That identification is supplied by commentators rather than the author.

That doesn't mean there's anything necessarily wrong with commentators attempting to identify unnamed referents. But we need to guard against a circular argument whereby we first impute to Daniel something he didn't say, then accuse him of contradicting known facts.

**iv)** Not to mention that even if Daniel was alluding to Antiochus throughout, it comes down to a question of which historical source you trust.

**v)** Commentators who defend the Maccabean date don't believe that God, if there is a God, reveals the future. They view the world as a closed system.



However, even if you take that position, it's important, for the sake of argument, to consider what would follow if, in fact, the opposing position is true.

Let's take a comparison. Suppose God showed Thomas Aquinas an image of Lee and Grant at Appomattox. No caption. Just the image—like Civil War photos we've seen.

That's future in relation to Aquinas. But could he tell if that's past or future? Sure, people in his own time and place didn't dress that way, but his personal experience is pretty provincial.

In addition, could he tell, by looking at the image, who he was looking at? No. They'd be unrecognizable to him.

Suppose God told him: "That's Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox."

Would that mean anything to Aquinas? Not at all. God might as well tell Aquinas that's Frodo and Legolas at Rivendell—for all the difference it would make.

Suppose God told him: "That's Gen. Lee surrendering to Gen. Grant."

Would that mean anything to Aquinas? Not in the slightest. Aquinas has no frame of reference. God would have to give him a crash course in American history for that explanation to be meaningful.

When we interpret ancient prophecies, it's important not to equate our knowledge of the past (or what we think we know about the past) with the prophet's knowledge of the future—then fault him for allegedly thinking things which, in fact, he couldn't possibly have had in mind at the time.

**vi)** The book of Daniel is full of revelatory dreams and visions. Dan 10-12 is, itself, an extended vision. That raises several interpretive questions.

Revelation can take place by showing, telling, or both. In Daniel we have examples of each—sometimes back-to-back.

**vii)** The images are frequently symbolic. Allegorical dreams and visions. Indeed, that's why they require inspired interpretation. Daniel interprets a dream, or Gabriel interprets a vision for Daniel. What they represent is not self-explanatory.

**viii)** One interpretive question is how Daniel recorded his visions. Most commentators (e.g. Archer, Baldwin, Collins, Keil, Steinmann, Young) take 7:1 to mean that when Daniel committed his visions to writing, he summarized what he saw. (Goldingay is a notable exception.)

Assuming that's correct, and this represents Daniel's *modus operandi*, then we'd expect Dan 10-12 to be a summary as well. On the face of it, Dan 10-12 is revelation by telling rather than showing. But if Daniel was in the habit of summarizing his visions, then the original vision may have included illustrative imagery.

Indeed, given the length of this vision, it wouldn't be surprising if Daniel abbreviated the vision by omitting picturesque descriptions of what he saw, for that would make the record far longer. This may just be a *precis*.

We don't know that for a fact. But we need to make allowance for that possibility.

**ix)** Dan 10 opens with an angelophany. In 10:21, the angel refers to "the book of truth." What are we to make of that? At one level, the "book of truth" is a metaphor for predestination. God's master plan for world history. Everything happens according to script.

But as readers, what are we intended to visualize in that scene? Does the angel read aloud from the Book of Truth? Is Daniel listening the whole time while the angel recites that section? Does the angel quote from memory—or paraphrase?

**x)** On a related note, what does "the book" refer to in [Dan 12:4](#)? In context, this evidently takes place within the vision. Of course, that will have a counterpart after Daniel comes out of his trance, when Daniel transcribes the discourse.

Does Daniel assume the role of a scribe in the vision? Is the angel giving dictation, while Daniel writes it down? Or does the angel hand Daniel the scroll after reciting the contents?

**xi)** Does Daniel simply listen the whole time, or does he see images which accompany the angelic discourse? The passage doesn't say he sees anything. But at this stage, that might be something the reader should take for granted—given ample precedent in all the dreams and visions which come before this culminating vision. If Daniel is merely summarizing a very long vision, he may strip it down to a prosaic record of what was said.

**xii)** Suppose 11:40-45 is a verbal description of an image which Daniel saw in his vision? If so, is that representational or allegorical? If, say, Daniel sees the adversary perish in the desert, between the Mediterranean sea and the temple mount, is that a prediction regarding where, in fact, the

adversary will meet his fate? Of is that one of those dreamy images that stands for something analogous to it depicts?

## Slave trade

There is no biblical command to buy or sell slaves. Let's consider the question of whether it's intrinsically wrong to buy slaves.

Suppose there's a slave market. If you could, you'd abolish the slave market. But that's not within your power. At least, not in the short-term.

So how do you respond to the status quo? Since slaves are going to be sold anyway, to someone or another, is it intrinsically wrong for you to buy slaves?

Now, someone might object to the principle that if it's going to happen anyway, there's nothing wrong with *me* doing it too. And I agree that, as a general principle, that's morally unreliable.

Notice, though, the question at issue is not: since other people are selling slaves, I might as well sell them. Rather, the question at issue is: since other people will buy slaves no matter what I do or don't do in that respect, are there circumstances under which it would be permissible, or even commendable, for me to buy them?

Our intuitive reaction typically depends on what examples spring to mind. From what I've read, there are millions of street kids around the world. It wouldn't surprise me if some street kids are sold into child prostitution, or even child sacrifice. For instance:

***In Brazil we lived and worked in the Spiritist capital of the world [Sao Luis, Maranhao] where the sacrifice of children and the black market dealing of their body parts is still a common practice.***

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<http://20schemes.com/2013/should-we-let-them-live-thinking-about-halloween-in-the-schemes/>

It's possible that's an urban legend. However, it may not be coincidental that, from what I've read, Brazil has huge numbers of street kids. So it might well be easy to procure a street kid for child sacrifice. Tragically, there's ready supply of unwanted, untended kids.

If you were a wealthy Christian, would it be wrong for you to buy as many as you could afford—to rescue them from child prostitution, sweatshop labor, or child sacrifice? Presumably, that would be the right thing to do. So the answer depends, in part, on the motivation.

However, a further objection might be what you buy them for. Are you buying their freedom? Or do they become *your* slaves instead of someone else's slaves? In my example, the wealthy Christian wouldn't buy them to enslave them.

There is, however, another twist. In the past, masters were sometimes forbidden by law from freeing their slaves. In that situation, a master can't emancipate his slaves even if he wants to.

I suppose one alternative would be to treat them like freemen, like hired hands, even if they were still technically enslaved. In a fallen world, we have to be ingenious.

## Runaway slaves

**15 “You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. 16 He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him (Deut 23:15-16).**

**i)** This is an interesting passage in debates over Biblical "slavery." Some commentators think it's confined to foreign runaway slaves. Ancient Israel had no extradition treaty with neighboring states to return runaway slaves.

**ii)** That's one possible interpretation. However, the text itself doesn't specify that qualification. So if the restriction exists, it must be implicit. The commentaries I've read which restrict it to foreign runaway slaves don't explain why they think it's about foreign runaway slaves rather than runaway slaves in general.

Perhaps, though, this is their assumption: If it was about runaway slaves generally, then that would undermine other OT laws regulating "slavery." It would render them unenforceable. In that respect, it would conflict with other OT laws regulating "slavery." Therefore, it must be about foreign runaway slaves.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), the OT attitude towards slavery is, at best, grudgingly ambivalent. It is permitted under some circumstances, but that's viewed in the jaundiced light of Joseph's enslavement as well as the enslavement of Israel



in Egypt. In addition, you have the reenslavement of Israel, as a punitive measure, in the Assyrian deportation and the Babylonian Exile. So slavery always has those invidious connotations.

**iv)** It may well be that the Mosaic law has no concern with protecting slavery. *Given* slavery, it will regulate slavery to mitigate the evils of slavery. But it has no problem with simultaneously subverting the practice. Making slavery impractical.

The Mosaic law never commands slavery. At best, it's merely tolerated.

**v)** One possible objection to that interpretation is that not all forms of "slavery" are evil. Indentured service isn't evil. So we wouldn't expect the Mosaic law to sabotage "slavery" across the board, including morally unobjectionable forms like indentured service.

**vi)** Apropos (v), if Deut 23:15-16 allowed an indentured servant to simply walk off the job, with no fear of recrimination, does that harm a morally acceptable practice? On the one hand, the master loses the benefit of his debt servant. However, he already benefited from that arrangement. And if the debt servant leaves before his contact expires, the employer no longer has to provide for his upkeep. No longer has to provide free room and board. So it's not as if a runaway slave is defrauding him. The debt-slave gets something in exchange for his labor. If his labor terminates, for whatever reason, he loses the compensation. It seems to be a wash for both sides of the transaction.

So the more radical interpretation may well be correct. This may apply to runaway slaves in general.



## Editorial discrepancies

Jason Engwer recently referred to this article—which includes the following statement:

*Accordingly, the postulation of a pre-existing, forty-member genealogy structured around Abraham, David, Josiah, and Joseph does more than merely solve a math problem.*

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<http://hypotypeis.org/weblog/2014/10/cbq-article-on-matt-117-published.html>

I haven't read Carlson's article. But I'd like to make a general observation. As is widely documented, the Bible contains some apparent discrepancies. Discrepancies about names and numbers, times and places. That's not a novel observation on my part. And there are various proposals to harmonize these apparently discrepancies.

Now I'd like to make a neglected point: some Bible writers undoubtedly use written sources. And in so doing, they make selective use of their sources. Once again, that's not a novel observation on my part. Historians typically use written sources. And when a historian quotes from a source, he doesn't normally quote the whole text. He only quotes what's relevant.

This, however, invites what I'll call editorial discrepancies. Editorial discrepancies aren't the same as factual

discrepancies.

Say a written source mentions a certain number of people. Say it totals their number.

When a historian excerpts that source, he may only quote what it says about the people of interest to him. Yet when he copies the original source, he may include the total.

That creates a discrepancy, because he mentions fewer people than the total. The discrepancy is generated by the fact that he's omitted some information. The total is correct, but if you add it up yourself, based on what he shows you, it doesn't add up. Yet that's not a mistake. He didn't make a mistake. Rather, the discrepancy is due to missing information. If he copied the total, but he didn't copy every name, then the total number doesn't match what's on display. Yet what he wrote is factually accurate. It's just that the reader lacks access to the original source, which contains the missing information. If you could compare the original source with the redacted document, it would fall right into place.

Take another example. When we write about someone, we may give their full name at the outset. Their first and last name. Having, however, initially identified them, we don't continue to give their full name. Thereafter, we refer to them either by their first or last name.

If, however, you were to copy part of what a biographer or historian wrote about someone, that might be confusing, because the part you copy may only use the first or last name. That can be even more confusing if there are two people with the same first or last name. To the reader, it may seem like you confused two different people. But that's simply an editorial discrepancy, not a factual discrepancy.

For instance, in Bible times, people could be referred to by first or last name. Sometimes both. And I think the surname was generally more important in Bible times. Who was your father? What was your clan?

It also wouldn't surprise me if, in Bible times, more people went by the same name. In the US, because we're so multiethnic, there's probably a greater variety of names than in a more linguistically homogenous culture.

If a Bible writer selectively quotes from a written source, it's easy to see how the source might mention two people who share the same name. The original source might initially distinguish them by giving their full names, but that's something it only does once. The first time they are introduced. After that, they are distinguished by context.

If, however, a Bible writer is only quoting the relevant part of his source, then the excerpt may not include their full names. But that could be confusing to the reader.

Let's take a concrete example. There's a famous Muslim philosopher who's commonly referred to simply as Al-Ghazâlî. However, his full name is Abû Hâmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazâlî. Quite a mouthful!

A writer won't give the full name every time he mentions to him. At most, he will only give the full name when he introduces him to the reader. Thereafter, he will use the simplified designation.

In fact, editorial discrepancies are commonplace in the computer age, where we often copy/paste from electronic texts. I suspect the Bible contains quite a few editorial discrepancies. These are not errors. They are simply an

artifact of incorporating written source material into a historical account.

Since, however, the reader doesn't have access to the original source, it may not be possible to harmonize an editorial discrepancy. We can't see what the author saw. We can't see what he left out. All we have is the end-product of his editorial process. So we're often in no position to reconstruct the original. Yet that doesn't mean he made a mistake. To the contrary, editorial discrepancies are to be expected. And that's entirely consistent with inerrancy.

## Arminians and Calvinists on inerrancy

As I've noted on more than one occasion, Arminians—especially in academia—have a center of gravity that's typically to the left of Calvinists. It's interesting to see Ben Witherington admit this, as well as Blomberg's explanation:

### **6) Inerrancy is an issue that seems to be more of an issue among Reformed Evangelicals than Arminian ones. Why do you think that is?**

The classic exponent of comparatively recent American inerrantism was B. B. Warfield, a Princeton theologian and Presbyterian and Reformed scholar of about a century ago. Mark Noll, a prolific American evangelical church historian, has pointed out that the more Calvinistic wing of Christianity valued higher education and theological education earlier and more widely in the settling of America than the more Wesleyan-Arminian wing. And these debates tend to go on among scholars much more so than among the average Christian, unless those Christians have been provoked by scholars they trust into making it a big issue. That doesn't mean inerrancy isn't a very important topic, but it is at least, I think, a partial answer to the question of why it is more of an issue among Reformed than among Arminian evangelicals.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2014/10/22/blombergs-can-we-still-believe-the-bible-part-one/>

## Wake me up after the world ends

I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place (Mt 24:34; par. Mk 13:30; Lk 21:32).

**i)** Neil Nelson has argued that it's an idiomatic, endtime descriptor:

[http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/38/38-3/JETS\\_38-3\\_Nelson\\_369-386.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/38/38-3/JETS_38-3_Nelson_369-386.pdf)

**ii)** Robert Stein has argued that "these things" and "all these things" in Mk 13:29-30 refer back to their programmatic use in 13:4, which limits 13:30 to the fall of Jerusalem, foretold in 13:2, rather than the Parousia.

**iii)** However, the point of this post is not so much to determine what it means but to determine what it can't mean. Liberal scholars view it as a classic failed prophecy. Jesus predicted the end of the world within the lifetime of his contemporaries, but that obviously didn't happen. Inerrantists try to salvage the prophecy with ingenious reinterpretations, but that's special pleading. If you didn't have a prior commitment to inerrancy, you wouldn't resort to these face-saving interpretations. The liberal interpretation is clearly the most straightforward. So goes the argument.

**iv)** I'd like to explore the unspoken assumptions of the liberal interpretation. One issue concerns the meaning of a "generation." Arguably, this typically denotes a group of people living at a particular time in history. It's possible that it has a more specialized connotation in Synoptic usage (a la Nelson). But let's consider the generic sense for the sake



of argument. That would mean Jesus is referring to his contemporaries.

v) Now, there's more than one context or audience for the Olivet Discourse. On the one hand, there's the historical setting. Jesus was addressing the disciples.

But, of course, the Olivet Discourse was recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. So there's the audience for the Synoptic Gospels. The context of the Synoptic Gospels.

But that requires us to distinguish between "this generation" and the Christian generation reading the Synoptics. By the time the Synoptics were written, Jesus had spoken about "this generation" at least a generation before the younger generation of Christians reading (or hearing) the Synoptics. By the time the Synoptics were written, "this generation" already represents the older generation, whereas the reader represents the next generation.

On conventional conservative dating, Mark was written in the 50s while Matthew and Luke were written in the 60s. So, chronologically speaking, "this generation" is already *that* generation. The previous generation—in relation to the younger generation. By that I mean, many of Jesus contemporaries were no longer alive by the time the Synoptics were written. They had already passed away.

Of course, the fact that some members of the older generation have come and gone doesn't mean the "generation" as a whole has come and gone. Some of his contemporaries would still be alive. But that itself raises an interesting question. Does "this generation" mean the last surviving member of that generation? Does it come down to one lone survivor? Would "all these things take place"

before *he* (or she) died? Does it mean "all these things take place" before *some* of them or *most* of them pass away? Is it quantitative? If so, what's the fractional terminus ad quem? What's the minimal percentage that must still be alive?

Perhaps, though, asking that question shows that we are asking the wrong question.

**vi)** How did the Synoptic authors understand the prediction? On the face of it, the liberal interpretation generates a dilemma. If Jesus predicted that "this generation" would witness the end of the world, and if it's recorded in Gospels written a generation later, then we're getting down to the wire. If "this generation" is already the former generation, then does that mean the end of the world is just a few years away—from the chronological vantage-point of Matthew, Mark, and Luke? From "now" (their time) until the end of the world—using the older generation as the cut-off. Is that how they understood it?

But they sure don't act as if the world is coming to an end any time soon. If they thought the world was going to end a few years from "now" (their time), why did they even bother to write their Gospels? After all, this prediction had been handed down apart from their Gospels. So why is there a pressing need to write it down *now*?

Indeed, isn't the point of committing all this Jesus-tradition to writing for the benefit of *posterity*? If their own generation is on the way out, if their own generation is likely the final generation, then for whom are they writing their Gospels? If, up until this point, Jesus tradition had been preserved and passed down apart from their Gospels, why write it up at the very time when the prediction is about to overtake them?

Doesn't the very existence of the Gospels imply long-range planning? A degree of permanence?

Isn't an obvious reason for writing the Gospels that the living memory of Jesus is dying out? That you need to put this in writing for later generations? The Apostles and others who witnessed the public ministry of Christ are dying or going to die. If you wait too long, it's too long to recover their recollections. Oral history is a very perishable commodity.

Weren't the Gospel writers, from the very fact that they were Gospel writers, expecting the world to be around for the foreseeable future? To be around for at least several generations to come—necessitating a permanent record of the life and teaching of Christ? Isn't this for the benefit of future generations? Christians who will come on the scene long after they have died?

**vii)** And not only that, but aren't the Gospels loaded with material that's pretty irrelevant, pretty **passé** to readers, if—in fact—the world is about to end? If they thought their readers represented the last or next to last generation of the human race, isn't a lot of the material in the Gospels misleading or distracting? Would you build a history museum if you knew an earthquake was going to destroy the museum (indeed, the entire city) five or ten years later? And if, anything, the liberal dating of the Synoptics (80-100) intensifies the conundrum. Surely, by then, the clock struck midnight. Did they miss the end of the world?

So even if you didn't have a precommitment to the inerrancy of Scripture, it's not special pleading to think the liberal interpretation of Mt 24:34 must be seriously askew.



## Commanding evil

One objection which some "progressive Christians" raise to OT "genocide" is that if genocide is wrong, then commanding genocide is wrong. Therefore, the OT attributes commands to God which God did not in fact command.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that OT "genocide" is wrong. If what is commanded is wrong, is it wrong to command it? That might seem like a logical inference, but is it?

Let's consider a couple of counterexamples:

**i)** My first example is adapted from a friend's illustration. Many of us have seen movies or TV dramas in which a spy or undercover cop must take certain actions, including some ordinarily immoral actions, to maintain his cover. He might have to issue "abhorrent" commands to a subordinate. Suppose he orders a subordinate to torch the establishment of a business that refuses to pay protection money. If he doesn't issue that command, someone else will, so his refusal to issue the "abhorrent" command will not prevent any evil that would otherwise occur. On the other hand, by maintaining his cover, he is able to greatly mitigate the scale of evil.

Although it's wrong for the subordinate to carry out the command, it's not wrong for him to give the command.

**ii)** I sometimes use a different example. Instead of commanding wrong, it's a case of instigating wrong. But I think they're morally comparable.

For instance, suppose a Latin American country is trying to protect the populace from two drug cartels. But it's a losing battle. The gov't lacks the resources to defeat the cartels. The cartels bribe judges, soldiers, policemen, &c. Those that can't be bought off are assassinated.

The only way for the gov't to defeat the cartels is to provoke a civil war between the two cartels. They will so degrade each other that it will be a mopping up operation after the dust settles.

In order to pull that off, the gov't must kill the son of a drug lord, but make it look like a hit by the rival cartel. The son is deeply involved in the family business, so he's a legitimate target.

It would be wrong for members of the rival cartels to murder each other. But it's not wrong of the gov't to instigate their mutual hostilities. The gov't has a duty to protect innocent citizens, and that's the only feasible strategy.

Some critics might object that God doesn't face the same limitations as my two scenarios. True. But the question is whether, as a matter of principle, it is necessarily evil to command evil.

You also have radical chic Anabaptist types who refuse to get dirt under their fingernails by even contemplating tough judgment calls in ethics. They subcontract that out to others. Leave it to others to make the hard choices. They reap the benefits without having to make the tough call themselves.

Keep in mind that I don't concede that God commanded evil. I'm just responding to critics on their own grounds.

Even if we grant their operating premise, does their conclusion follow?

## The sugar-plum tree by the lollipop sea

Michael Kruger's review of Peter Enns new book was posted both at his own blog and cross posted at TGC. I'm going to remark on some of the comments left at the latter site. Some commenters rehash the same issues I dealt with in response to Lydia McGrew, so I'm ignoring those comments.

Caleb G

Context is important. But some actions are immoral no matter the context.

True.

A man forcing a woman to have sex with him is rape even if it occurs in the context of marriage.

Since marriage implies a general consent to conjugal activities, that's not the best example. I'm not saying there's no such thing as spousal rape, but that's not a clear comparison.

Is there any context where killing infants and children is morally justified? I say, "No." In every other situation, you (I hope) would agree.

No, I don't agree.

Can you say that God directly wipes out a civilization with a natural disaster?

Well, by definition, if God does it through a natural medium, then that's indirect.



Did God send the current Ebola outbreak on the West Africans? That seems quite presumptuous.

That deliberately obfuscates two distinct issues: are some natural disasters divine judgments? Yes. Apart from divine revelation, are we in a position to say a natural disaster is divine judgment? No.

If you were to agree that God did directly send a natural disaster, then it would seem to be fighting against God to clean up afterwards. Why would we want to find against God, if God sent that tsunami?

Once again, that would be a case of mediate rather than immediate divine action. More to the point, Caleb seems to be riffing off of the false dilemma in Camus's **THE PLAGUE**.

The alleged dilemma is that if a natural disaster (like contagion) represents divine judgment, then it would be impious to aid the victims. However, that's a false dilemma:

**i)** Apart from revelation, we don't know that any particular natural evil is divine judgment.

**ii)** Even collective judgment doesn't assume every victim is guilty.

**iii)** If we are able to counteract the natural disaster, then it was never God's intention to kill the people we save. Unless you think God is incompetent. We can't thwart God even if we tried.

**iv)** Natural evils can also function as a God-given opportunity for God's people to minister to victims. Model God's grace and mercy. Be at our best when times are at their worst.

Only giving me these 2 options is a false dichotomy. Scripture could be accurate, but it could be accurately reporting what the ancient Israelites believed God was telling them to do.

That's the secular explanation. God doesn't speak to man. Rather, man speaks about God. That simply denies the fundamental status of Judeo-Christian faith as a revealed religion. It amounts to pious atheism.

Or as Adam has mentioned elsewhere in this thread, I could follow Origin and other early Church Fathers and allegorical [sic] these passages. They believed the Scripture is accurate, but it must be interpreted properly.

Allegorizing passages you find offensive is a transparently makeshift solution.

Evangelical questions [sic] often condemn abortion as inherently immoral.

Prolifers often allow some exceptions.

If that is indeed the case, then one should also condemn the killing of infants and toddlers as inherently immoral.

Unless there is divine authorization.

But this is just what these passages have YHWH commanding the Israelites to do. If the the killing of infants is always wrong, then what the Israelites did (or are portrayed as doing) is also wrong.

Taking a false premise to a logical conclusion.

Someone who would argue that there are situations when the killing of infants is justified, in my mind, has lost all ethical credibility.

As if his approval is the standard of comparison.

All ancient civilizations were barbaric and corrupt compared to societies today.

I don't think modern societies are less barbaric than ancient societies. Especially modern societies that secularize.

My question for Kruger is this, "Is genocide ever morally justified?" If his response is a qualified yes, (i.e. Yes, if God commanded it) as appears from this review, then he has lost all moral credibility to speak.

Lost all credibility to whom? To people like Caleb? Who made Caleb the arbiter of right and wrong?

I encourage all readers to check out Randel Rauser's essays on this issue. Rauser is himself a Christian apologist, so you cannot accuse him of trying to undermine Christianity.

Rauser's a flaming liberal.

Adam Omelianchuk

"I suppose Enns could say he doesn't need to justify why "genocide" is wrong—it's just obvious

to everyone (which is also Dawkins's argument). But why should Enns get a philosophical "pass" on such a fundamental issue like the foundation for ethics, especially if his main argument is an ethical one?"

I wouldn't think he gets a "pass" on the "foundation for ethics"--but one doesn't need that to have a justified belief that genocide is wrong. That much is a moral datum, and if your moral theory can't explain why its wrong, then so much the worse for the moral theory.

Ah, yes, truth by definition. Just call your own position a "moral datum."

Isn't Omelianchuk a lapsed Calvinist? Striking how often, when people leave Calvinism behind, that's not all they leave behind.

What does he even mean by "bludgeoning babies"? Does the OT contain a divine command to bludgeon babies?

Perhaps he's alluding to Ps 137:9. If so, even liberal commentators like Goldingay regard that imagery as figurative.

Sure, it gets "more complex," alright, especially when you have to claim that bludgeoning babies, who are made in the image of God (as Scripture claims), is not necessarily or even intrinsically wrong, and that your best evidence for that claim are a few Ancient Near Eastern conquest narratives (for which there is no archaeological backing).

**i)** So, like Enns, he denies the historicity of Biblical narratives.

**ii)** Why think we need archeological corroboration for every event in Scripture? Why think that's a reasonable expectation?

**iii)** What's the archeological backing for the Incarnation or Resurrection?

It gets even more complex when you have to claim that loving one's enemies, a command Christ clearly endorsed, is supposed to be compatible with that sort of thing.

**i)** Loving one's enemies is not the only command that Christ clearly endorsed. And keep in mind that Christ is the eschatological judge of God's enemies.

**ii)** Death is not inherently unloving. Moreover, if God intended to save Canaanites babies, that would be the retroactive effect of Christ's life and death. But if the Israelites were unable to defend themselves, Jesus would never come on the scene.

Of course, it is doubtful that any such account could undermine our justification for believing genocide (in which baby-bludgeoning occurs) is always wrong and for placing a heavy burden of proof on those who would say otherwise.

Once again, notice the tactic. He stipulates that the burden of proof is on his opponents. Pure sophistry.

Here's the problem: If you are right, then the belief that bludgeoning babies is not intrinsically wrong is a

matter of Christian commitment...

What about babies who die of natural causes (e.g. malaria)?  
God is the ultimate cause of their demise.

...and that to follow Christ is to view such an act as morally neutral in itself; it is wrong (or right) only when God says something about it. Do you really believe that?

I don't really believe it because it's a malicious caricature.

Funny how he spurns divine command theory, yet he himself presumes to dictate what is good and evil.

In any case, I cannot believe that genocide is not intrinsically wrong and if that is what is required of me to gain the whole Bible, then I will have to forfeit my soul by forcing myself to believe something I surely don't. That is just dishonest, and I doubt God would be honored by that.

God is dishonored by his false dichotomy.

Believe me I would love to reconcile this problem, but I will follow Origen and go allegorical before I ever entertain the belief that genocide is not intrinsically wrong.

He's just being willful. And while he's at it, why not allegorize the miracles of Christ? Why not allegorize the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Parousia.

I'm struck by the compartmentalized faith of people like Omelianchuk. They want to reduce the Bible to the sugar-plum tree by the lollipop sea. A sweet, inoffensive book.

Yet the moment they put the book down and step outside, the real world doesn't look anything like the sugar-plum tree by the lollipop sea.

## Cosmic imagery

*It is a serious misunderstanding of the relevant ways of speaking and writing to suppose that when the Bible speaks of the sun and the moon being darkened and the stars falling from heaven, and of similar “cosmic” events, it intends the language to be taken literally.*

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[http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Apocalypse\\_Now.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Apocalypse_Now.htm)

*More specifically, different manners of speaking were available to those who wished to write or talk of the coming day when the covenant God would act to rescue his people...Metaphors from creation would likewise be appropriate. The sun would be turned to darkness, the moon to blood.*

*It is vital for our entire perception of the worldview of first-century Jews, including particularly the early Christians, that we see what follows from all this. When they used what we might call cosmic imagery to describe the coming new age, such language cannot be reading in a crassly literalistic way*



*without doing it great violence. The restoration which would be brought about was, of course, painted glowing and highly metaphorical colours.*  
***The New Testament and the People of God (1992), 283-84.***

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**i)** I appreciate the fact that Wright is debunking pop dispensationalism hermeneutics. Mind you, the fact that he's correcting one error doesn't make his own position correct. Indeed, he could be committing the opposite mistake by overreacting.

**ii)** It may also be that he's trying to make Scripture less vulnerable to scoffers. Perhaps he thinks some eschatological language involves a three story cosmography. Taken literally, that would be false.

**iii)** For some odd reason, he seems to equate a "literalistic" interpretation of this imagery with cosmic disintegration. But there's no reason to suppose the phenomena he quotes, even if taken literally, denotes cosmic disintegration.

**iv)** We also need to distinguish between *figurative* imagery and *mythopoetic* imagery. He acts as though the imagery he quotes *can't* be literally true. But even if, for the sake of argument, we think the imagery he quotes is figurative, that doesn't make it mythopoetic. In fact, it's fairly prosaic.

**v)** Apropos (iii-iv), he doesn't seem to grasp what the imagery describes. In my opinion, a darkened sun denotes a solar eclipse, a darkened or blood-colored moon denotes a lunar eclipse, and falling stars denote a meteor shower.

There's nothing inherently figurative about that imagery. These are natural phenomena. I myself have witnessed a solar eclipse. Unfortunately, it was overcast. Even so, for a few minutes morning became night.

I've witnessed a lunar eclipse. The moon was literally darkened. And it was reddish. A red hue. And I've probably seen shooting stars.

**vi)** As I've remarked before, I think one problem with some Bible scholars is that they are so out of touch with nature that they just assume certain descriptions must be figurative or mythopoetic. It's not something they themselves have observed or experienced.

Keep in mind, too, that if you live in or near a big city, light pollution obscures stargazing. But people in Bible times had a better view of the night sky than we do.

Just recently, as I was returning from a late afternoon walk, I saw a sunset sundog (parhelion). That's a rare optical illusion in which refracted sunlight generates a cloudy virtual mirror-image. A double sun.

Now, if I was a Bible writer or Intertestamental writer, Wright would chalk that up to "figurative" omen. Yet it really happens.

**vii)** I don't think there's a presumption that cosmic Biblical imagery is either literal or figurative. That depends on the context and the genre. And sometimes context or genre is inconclusive. In those cases, you have to be open-minded.

**viii)** In addition, there's nothing mythopoetic about Christ returning in the clouds. I think that's like Ezk 1. Christ will return in the Shekinah.



## The Nuremberg Defense

**i)** One objection to the OT holy war command I sometimes run across is the assertion that "just following orders" is no excuse. This is sometimes dubbed the Nuremberg Defense. What about that?

**ii)** It's true that *just* following orders is no excuse. However, in that case the adjective does all the work. Surely though there are situations where there's more at stake than *just* following orders. There are situations in which it's *costly* to disobey orders. You pay a steep price for insubordination.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), what about a situation in which a subordinate is acting under duress? "That's a direct command. Do it or *else!*"

In other words, is there an implied threat behind the order? If you disobey the order, what are the consequences for *you*? Suppose we have a dialogue like this:

**Commander:** Shoot the POW.

**Subordinate:** I refuse, sir.

**Commander:** Either you shoot him or I shoot you!

If he complies, that's more than *just* following orders. His action was coerced. He's literally acting at the point of a gun. In that situation, surely he does have *some* excuse for following orders, whether or not we think his action was morally justifiable. At the very least, it's a *mitigating* factor.

In addition, it's trivially easy to make the dilemma more egregious: "Unless you shoot the POW, I will shoot your wife

(or mother, or child).

Again, we might still debate whether it's morally permissible to shoot the POW in order to save his wife (or mother, or child). But he's clearly in a bind. That's a very tough call. Even if you think he made the wrong call, would you punish him? If I were a juror, I wouldn't feel it was my place to punish a defendant who had to face that dilemma.

Or would you say the commander is to blame? If so, that's a different argument. That transfers blame from agent who carried out the order to the agent who gave the order.

**iv)** Of course, I don't think Yahweh is morally equivalent to a commander who issues an abhorrent command which his subordinate is in no realistic position to defy. I'm just responding to a facile, thoughtless objection for the sake of argument.

## Foresight and insight

This is related to some other recent posts of mine. Should NT commentators emulate apostolic exegesis? Did OT prophets understand what they were predicting? Did OT prophets really foresee the future? Do NT writers rip OT passages out of context? This also has some bearing on the current debate over christotelism.

### I. HINDSIGHT

Although we tend to think of OT prophets as forward-looking, a basic function of OT prophets was to be backward-looking. They reminded OT Jews of their duties under the Mosaic covenant. They remind OT Jews of what God had done for his people in the past, especially the Exodus, but also guiding and guarding the patriarchs, providing for the Israelites in the wilderness, and protecting Israel from her enemies.

By itself, hindsight doesn't require supernatural knowledge. It is, however, possible that just as Moses saw the tabernacle in a vision, which was the model for the earthly tabernacle, so the early chapters of Genesis were based on direct visionary revelation.

### II. FORESIGHT AND INSIGHT

i) We most associate prophets with inspired foresight, in part because that's clearly supernatural. In that regard it's important to distinguish between foresight and insight. These can be combined or be separated. Revelatory dreams are a good example.

**ii)** Take Joseph's two related dreams (Gen 37:5-11). These are predictive dreams. However, Joseph didn't know how they'd be fulfilled. He had to discover how they'd be fulfilled by experience. The dream was prospective, but his understanding was retrospective. The correct interpretation was based on the context of fulfillment.

In what sense did Joseph understand the dream? He could describe what he saw. The dream used recognizable images. And he caught the drift of its allegorical import. His father and brothers would be subordinate to him. But he was in the dark regarding what, precisely, was the literal counterpart to the allegory. What would be the concrete circumstances?

**iii)** Take the dreams of the baker and cupbearer (Gen 40). In this case, Joseph was not the dreamer, but the interpreter. In this situation he was given insight rather than foresight.

Their dreams are predictive. However, a dreamer wouldn't necessarily know that a dream was predictive ahead of time. Absent inspired interpretation, for all he knows it might just be an ordinary dream. It's only if and when the dream comes true that its predictive nature becomes evident.

The baker and cupbearer seemed to think their dreams were predictive. That might be because they were naturally nervous about their fate. They'd fallen out of favor with Pharaoh. Would they be restored or executed? Were these dreams an omen?

In fact, they were right to sense that their dreams were predictive. However, there's nothing in the dreams themselves that contains unmistakably predictive clues.

And, of course, the allegorical nature of the dreams compounded the ambiguity. That's why they required interpretation.

If, by contrast, a revelatory dream or vision employs literal, representational imagery, then that simplifies the interpretation. And that makes it clearer at the outset if the revelation is predictive.

**iv)** Then you have Pharaoh's two related dreams (Gen 41). Once again, these are predictive, allegorical dreams. Considered in isolation, the dreams aren't clearly predictive. Of course, with the passage of time, their predictive nature would become evident.

So there are two ways of knowing whether a dream is predictive. You can find out after the fact. Wait and see. But to know that in advance requires inspired interpretation.

**v)** Then you have the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2; 4). One pressing issue in dream interpretation is whether the interpreter has any actual insight. Or does he just pretend to be insightful? How can you tell if his interpretation is correct?

Nebuchadnezzar is shrewd in that respect. He has a simple test. Instead of telling the interpreter what he dreamt, he requires the interpreter to tell him what he dreamt. Obviously, that's not something an interpreter can fake. He can't do that unless he has supernatural knowledge. That, in turn, corroborates his interpretation. If he has the supernatural ability to recount what the dreamer dreamt, then he presumably has the supernatural ability to explain what it signifies. Nebuchadnezzar's tactic is a way of smoking out the charlatans.



**vi)** In principle, God can give a prophet foresight without insight, insight without foresight, or give him both. God can give a prophet advance knowledge. The prophet knows what he saw, and what he saw is a future event. In that sense, the prophet knows the future.

Yet a prophet may or may not understand what he saw. That depends, in part, on whether God gave him the interpretation of what he saw. In some biblical visions there's an interpreting angel. The seer asks the angel questions, and the angel explains the imagery.

He's able to grasp what he sees in the sense that he can describe it. The imagery is familiar. But he may not know what it represents—assuming it uses symbolic imagery. If it uses prosaic imagery, then what it points to may be self-explanatory.

In principle, the relationship between OT prophecy and NT interpretation might be the relation between foresight and insight. A distinction between advance knowledge and interpretation.

I'm not claiming that's the norm. I just use that as a limiting case. Even within the OT, you have that distinction. Therefore, if you had that distinction between the OT and the NT, that wouldn't be a new distinction. Rather, that would be a preexisting principle. Something already in play in OT times.

## Legal technicalities

**16 “If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. 17 If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins (Exod 22:16-17).**

**23 “If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, 24 then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.**

**25 “But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. 26 But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and**

**murdering his neighbor, 27 because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.**

**28 “If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, 29 then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days (Deut 22:23-29).**

**i)** I'm going to comment on a controversial OT law (Deut 22:28-29). Atheists routinely take this to mean a rape victim is required to marry her rapist. Atheists don't bother to exegete the offending text. Rather, you have atheists quoting other atheists quoting other atheists. This is a polemical tradition, handed down without question.

**ii)** As I've often noted, atheists have no basis to attack OT ethics inasmuch as atheism can't justify objective moral norms. And many secular philosophers admit it.

**iii)** We need to consider the legal rules of evidence. The Mosaic law must address the challenge of potential crimes for which there's no direct evidence. Take the comparison with murder in Deut 22:26b. Often, there are only two witnesses to a murder: the murderer and the murder victim. The murderer won't incriminate himself while the victim can't incriminate his killer.

So the Mosaic law sometimes resorts to circumstantial evidence. The burden of proof. The Mosaic law will sometimes assign a *technical* presumption of guilt or innocence depending on the circumstances. That's different from actual guilt or innocence.

Take the case of a sexual encounter in the countryside, where there are no third-party witnesses. It could be consensual or coercive, seduction or rape. There's no direct evidence. In that setting, the law simply gives the woman the benefit of the doubt. Both parties could be guilty, but that can't be determined as a matter of fact.

**iv)** Penalties have a deterrent value. If a single man can engage in sexual activity with no strings attached, then he has no incentive to refrain from so doing. If, however, premarital sex obligates him to pay a fine or provide for the woman, then that's a disincentive. So that protects the woman.

However, deterrents may carry a tradeoffs. When the deterrent works, that's better for the innocent party. It prevents the crime. The innocent party is never victimized in the first place. But when the deterrent fails, it may worsen the situation for the innocent party (i.e. the accused). Laws are often a compromise.

Take the case, alluded to in v16, where the law infers criminal intent (cf. Deut 19:4-13). That has deterrent value. That's better for the potential victim. But if in fact the belligerent neighbor is innocent, that's far worse for him.

**v)** Deut 22:28-29 is ambiguous in several respects. It isn't clear that this is a case of rape. It uses a different word (tapas), and a weaker word ("handle," "take hold of") than

the word (hazaq) in v25. Although this might be a synonym, if both cases refer to rape, it's odd that the second case uses a different word and a weaker word. Scholars differ on the connotations of the word.

**vi)** Keep in mind that Deut 22:28-29 is a hypothetical case. For *hypothetical* purposes, the man is presumptively guilty. But that's abstract.

In a real-life situation, the man may be innocent. The law doesn't specify how the couple were "discovered." Does the woman cry out? Does someone happen to walk in on them? If they were "caught in the act," a witness doesn't know how that was initiated. Is it consensual or coercive?

So we're dealing with an *allegation*. Even assuming this law refers to rape, this is an *accused* rapist. But that doesn't mean the defendant is guilty.

**vii)** Moreover, the law may be addressing a question of seduction rather than rape. If so, who seduced whom? How should the law deal with he said/she said allegations?

In either case, the onus is *technically* on the accused. That's potentially unfair to the defendant, if in fact he's innocent. But because the law must deal with uncertain situations, it sometimes resorts to technicalities. Balancing one potential injustice against another potential injustice.

**viii)** There's also the question of whether Exod 22:16-17 deals with the same situation, or a similar situation. Scholars disagree. Even if Exod 22:16-17 only deals with a similar case, that may still have interpretive value in how we construe the details of Deut 22:28-29.

**ix)** The details may be fuzzy in part because case law is illustrative. It gives a judge general guidelines for adjudicating certain kinds of situations. But the law doesn't address every conceivable situation. So case law often leaves loose ends. OT Judges must exercise discretion.

**x)** Assuming that Exod 22:16-17 parallels Deut 22:28-29, the woman is not obliged to marry the accused. But the man is required to pay the equivalent of a fine. Financial compensation. In ancient Israel, deflowering a virgin outside of marriage greatly reduced her eligibility. So whether or not it was consensual, it is still a crime. And the penalty also has deterrent value, reducing the incidence in the first place.

## What's so bad about dictation?

Theological liberals try to lampoon plenary verbal inspiration as the "dictation" theory of inspiration. That's despite the fact that classic exponents of verbal plenary inspiration like Warfield champion the "organic" theory of inspiration. To caricature plenary verbal inspiration as the dictation theory is either an ignorant misrepresentation or malicious misrepresentation.

That said, what's so bad about a dictation theory of inspiration? Consider the following:

*1:11 "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."*

*19 Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.*

*2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:*

*8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:*

*12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:*

*18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write:*

*3:1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

*7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

*14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write:*

*21:5 “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

Looks like a dead-ringer for a dictation theory of inspiration to me. Christ casts John in the role of scribe or stenographer. Christ dictates seven letters to John. In addition, the specter of John taking dictation extends more broadly in 1:19 and 21:5 to the entire experience.

So, there's nothing intrinsically unfitting about a dictation theory of inspiration. On the face of it, here's a prime example.

Now, some scholars might dismiss this as a literary convention. Possibly. But if Christ speaks to John in a vision, why wouldn't he tell John to transcribe what he says? Unless you think the vision itself is a literary convention, why assume the dictation is a literary convention? For speakers are a fixture of the vision. And the only reason to



classify the vision itself as a literary convention is if you reject visionary revelation outright.

I'd add that even if you deny divine revelation, it's a fact that some people have visions. You might try to explain that away naturalistically, but since visions are a common religious phenomenon, there's no reason to automatically classify a visionary account as a literary convention. Although that's a convention in some instance (e.g. 1 Enoch), that doesn't squeeze out records of real visions.

My point is not that dictation is the only, primary, or even usual mode of Biblical inspiration. But when theological liberals burn this in effigy, it's worth noting that a dictation theory of inspiration is not outlandish. And, in fact, it's not just a "theory," anymore than verbal plenary inspiration is just a "theory." Scripture bears witness to both modes of inspiration.

## God-breathed

According to Arminian theologian Roger Olson:

*Nowhere does the Bible say, nor does Christian tradition require, that God literally "breathed out the very words" of the Bible. That's the dictation theory (sometimes called "verbal plenary inspiration). "Theopneustos" can and should be interpreted as "breathed into by God."*

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<http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/what-is-marcionism-my-response-to-a-ludicrous-accusation-.jpg>

It's impressive to see how much error Olson can squeeze into two short sentences:

**1)** Verbal plenary inspiration doesn't presume that God "literally" breathed out the very words of Scripture. Verbal plenary inspiration doesn't require divine lung-power or a divine respiratory system. Divine "breath" is a metaphor for inspiration.

I assume Paul uses this metaphor in 2 Tim 3:16 for one or two reasons:

**i)** Both in Greek (pneuma) and Hebrew (ruach), the words are synonyms for "breath" and "spirit." To say Scripture is "breathed by God" trades on one connotation to attribute Scripture to the agency of God's Spirit.

**ii)** In addition, it trades on the other connotation to associate Scripture with the spoken word: Scripture as divine speech.

**2)** What makes Olson suppose that verbal plenary inspiration is equivalent to dictation? What does he even mean by that? Does he imagine that plenary verbal inspiration has God actually dictating a speech to the authors of Scripture, like a king dictating a letter to a royal scribe? Does he really think plenary verbal inspiration is that anthropomorphic?

Or is he using "dictation" as a metaphor? Does he think verbal plenary inspiration is equivalent to dictation? If so, how so? Does he mean the process is equivalent? But if "dictation" is metaphorical, then the actual process is clearly different. Or does he mean it's functionally equivalent? The effect is as if God dictated the message? If so, what's wrong with that?

Keep in mind that this is how Scripture distinguishes true prophets from false prophets. True prophets speak the very words of God. They deliver God's message.

**3)** Perhaps Olson's underlying objection is that plenary verbal inspiration violates libertarian freewill. If God controls the process from start to finish, that infringes on the libertarian agency of the speaker or writer by preventing him from making mistakes. Of course, it's because humans are normally fallible that inspiration is a necessary safeguard against error.

In that case, it's a question of theological priorities. What gives: libertarian freedom or verbal plenary inspiration?

**4)** Olson offers no lexical evidence that theopneustos means God "breathing into" rather than "breathing out" or simply "breathed." Standard lexicons (BDAG) and commentaries on the Greek text (I. H. Marshall) define the compound word as "God-breathed."

As far as the metaphor goes, since the context concerns the effect of divine agency, where Scripture is the effect of divine "breathing," then exhalation would be more consistent with the metaphor. Or, more precisely, verbalized breath. A divine utterance.

## Living death or merciful death?

At the risk of exhuming a horse carcass to flog it some more, I'd like to make a further observation. Some critics of the OT say it was unnecessary to execute the Canaanite kids along with the adults. Adoption was an alternative. They assure us that that would be more merciful than mass execution.

I have to wonder how much thought they've given to that. Imagine you're a Canaanite child of 7, 8, 9. You watch an Israelite soldier put your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings to the sword. He then adopts you.

Is it really more merciful for a 9-year-old (give or take) to witness his whole family cut down while he alone is spared, to be raised by the executioner? Not just being the sole survivor, but being raised by the very person or people who did that to the rest of your family?

From time to time the news reports an accident which killed the parents, leaving their children orphaned. I can't help thinking that in many cases it would be more merciful for families to die together, rather than being torn apart like that.

I'm not saying that's the ipso facto justification for the OT commands. I'm just responding to critics on their own grounds, when they say the OT commanders are "merciless," and when they offer a more merciful alternative. I don't think they've made a serious effort to project themselves into the mind of a child. Sometimes death is more merciful than life.

Fact is, it's not hard to destroy a person by killing the one person (or persons) they can't live without. They linger on. But at that point it's a living death.

## Aha moments

Peter Enns has been hosting a series of deconversion testimonials ("aha" moments) about losing faith in the inerrancy of Scripture. Presumably, these anecdotes are more than personal interest stories. Rather, it's an argument from authority. If the Bible scholars in question give these reasons for rejecting the inerrancy of Scripture, then that's why you should too! So let's scrutinize their "aha" moments:

### MICHAEL PAHL

I was taught that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, that Deuteronomy's account of his death and mysterious burial was an instance of prophetic foresight.

How is the fact that Deut 34 is a posthumous obituary incompatible with the inerrancy of Scripture? It doesn't say it was authored by Moses, even though wasn't.

Indeed, vv6,10 clearly imply a posthumous addition. Something written after his demise ("to this day," "not since").

Among other things, the posthumous obituary clearly functions to validate the succession from Moses to Joshua (v9). Moreover, it's a transitional pericope, which rounds out the Pentateuch while it leads into the next installment (the Book of Joshua).

I was taught that Jesus' words in the Gospels were word-for-word what Jesus said.

How does that disprove the inerrancy of Scripture? Is inerrancy incompatible with Gospel writers paraphrasing Jesus?

I was taught that Paul's gospel was all about how individual sinners get saved, so that after death we can escape hell and enter heaven.

What, exactly, is wrong with that? I suppose he's alluding to N. T. Wright. What if Wright is mistaken instead?

I was taught a bunch of things "the Bible says" that I no longer believe the Bible says.

Notice his failure to distinguish between what Scripture teaches and what he was taught Scripture teaches. Why is he unable to draw that elementary distinction?

### MICHAEL RUFFIN

Me: "That Moses didn't write everything in those books." Dad: "Really?" Me: "Yes, really." Dad: "Huh. Well, I always wondered how Moses managed to write about his own death."

Here we go again. How is this postscript at odds with the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch *in general*?

### DANIEL KIRK

One example: does Jesus go into the temple to cast out the moneychangers as the climactic moment of his "triumphal entry" (Matthew)? Or does he wait until the next day (Mark)?



For that matter, does Jesus curse it before going to the temple for the clearing incident (Mark)? Or after (Matthew)? Details, details, right?

Why is Kirk assuming that inerrancy entails strict chronological reportage?

Another: Does the fig tree wither immediately upon being cursed (Matthew)? Or does the withering happen overnight (Mark)?

**i)** This assumes that Matthew means instantaneous. That it had to happen all at once. But parachrema simply means a very short interval (cf. Louw & Nida, 67.113).

The point is that it didn't wither naturally. Rather, it withered and died at a miraculously accelerated pace.

**ii)** For that matter, It's not as if Mark says the fig tree didn't shrivel up in a few minutes. Even if it had, the disciples didn't have occasion to witness the result until their return-trip.

But then there are potentially more troubling questions: did Jesus have his last meal with the disciples on Passover (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)? Or was Jesus killed on the day when the Passover Lamb was slaughtered, such that the religious leaders were scrupulous to keep themselves pure for the feast that would take place that night (John)?

I've discussed that issue here:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/johns-passion-week-chronology.html>

One of the most compelling things about landing at Fuller Seminary six years ago was finding myself in a Bible Division practically devoid of inerrantists, and yet brimming with Evangelical colleagues who affirm that the Bible is the word of God, who seek it for divine guidance, and who seek God as a direct and active participant in the lives of God's people.

Really? Elsewhere, Kirk takes the position that we can disregard what Scripture teaches about homosexuality and the historicity of Adam.

### JOHN BYRON

The problem, however, as I pointed out to my teacher, is that **Jesus got it wrong**. The story in 1 Samuel 21 relates how David fled from Saul *alone*. When he stops at the tabernacle and asks Ahimelek for help the priest enquires why David is alone. David seems to lie when saying that his men will meet him later (v. 2).

To begin with, that fails to distinguish between Jesus accurately describing what 1 Sam 21 says, and whether 1 Sam 21 is, itself, an accurate description of events. Even if, in his (Byron's) opinion, 1 Sam 21 is misleading, that doesn't mean Jesus was wrong when he accurately summarizes the account. Why is Byron unable to draw that rudimentary distinction?

Moreover, **Mark has the wrong priest**. In 2:26 Jesus states that the priest was Abiathar, but 1 Samuel 21 clearly states that it was Ahimelek.

i) If he thinks Jesus was obviously wrong, why didn't Mark quietly correct the mistake rather than drawing attention to

the mistake by reproducing the (alleged) misidentification? Presumably, Byron believes the Gospel writers were not above redacting the words of Jesus. Why not save face in this instance?

**ii)** Surely this was a well-known story in 1C Judaism. So confusing the actors would be surprising.

**iii)** Treating the two names as interchangeable evidently goes all the back to the source. As one scholar notes, commenting on 2 Sam 8:17, "Also in 1 Chr 24:3,6,31. It seems likely that the order of the names has been transposed because elsewhere Abiathar is consistently said to be the colleague of Zadok," J. Vannoy, 1-2 Samuel (Tyndale 2009), 314.

In that event, Jesus is simply following conventional precedent. If the author of Samuel himself uses these two names interchangeably, it's hardly a mistake for Jesus to emulate the practice of the very source he's alluding to.

**iv)** Moreover, it's not hard to see how this would occur. The close association is only natural given the combined fact that you have both a direct genealogical succession as well as a direct priestly succession. As a result, the author of Samuel, as well as the Chronicler, already feel free to substitute one for the other: treating the two men (father/son, fellow priests) as if they were one.

Byron himself says "In 2 Samuel 8:17 the father/son relationship is reversed and Abiathar is said to be the father of Ahimelech. The same thing happens in 1 Ch 24:6."

He chalks that up to confusion, just as he chalks up Mark's statement (or Christ's statement) to confusion. Why is "confusion" the first and only explanation he reaches for? If,

by his own admission, the intersubstitutability of the names reflects a pattern, why does he assume that's due to confusion rather than intentional? Why not infer that Mark, Samuel, and Chronicles deliberately do that as a way of linking the two figures? What if that's a literary strategy?

He needs to add some new tools to his explanatory toolkit. His repertoire is too limited. "Confusion" is not the only explanation, much less the best explanation.

Perhaps Byron never understood inerrancy in the first place. Inerrancy doesn't preclude literary conventions—or intentional theological associations, as a way of connecting two things.

### CHRIS TILLING

So, yes, I've come from a theologically conservative background. Ken Ham this, dinosaurs-lived-with-humans-as-seen-in-Job that.

That's not the background I come out of. And I think Job is referring to chaos monsters, not dinosaurs.

Even at University, because of that fear, I didn't make the most of my studies. Rather than downing Barth, Sanders, etc., I stuck to my safe and sure Ken Hams, Benny Hinns, Reinhard Bonnkes, and Josh McDowell's.

Why is he making Benny Hinn et al. the standard of comparison for the inerrancy of Scripture?

Instead, he argued, an inductive approach, one which refused the deductively logical wringer of inerrancy,

allowed the Bible itself to shape our doctrine of Scripture.

That's such a musty old chestnut. Does he even have any firsthand knowledge of how writers like Warfield proceed? Warfield's method is *inductive*, not deductive. He begins with the self-witness of Scripture.

One particular "aha" moment came when listening to a Walter Brueggemann lecture on "The character of God in the OT." Brueggemann pointed out that the Bible could say some astonishingly strange things about God, for example:

the contrast between what Deuteronomy 23:1-3 and Isaiah 56:3-5 have to say about who God says can be admitted to the assembly,

Why does Tilling imagine that contradicts inerrancy? The Mosaic cultus was temporary by design. Isa 56 is looking forward to a new era, after the Mosaic cultus served its purpose.

Jeremiah 20:7 and God "overpowering" Jeremiah, 1 Kings 22:20-22, where God's actions seem devious,

How is that inconsistent with the inerrancy of Scripture? Does it conflict with Tilling's preconception of what God is like? If so, then Tilling is operating with a "deductive" theological methodology. He begins with his preconceived idea of what God ought to be like. If Scripture challenges his preconception, then he rejects the Scriptural depiction.

Exod 4:24, where God "tried" to kill Moses.

i) To begin with, it's not clear that Moses is the target. The Hebrew text doesn't specify the referent. Some scholars think it refers to the firstborn son of Moses.

ii) More to the point, the reason that God only "tries" to kill Moses is to give Zipporah time to intervene. It's like oracles of doom, which are implicitly conditional. A threat which gives the audience an opportunity to repent and thereby avert disaster.

### ANTHONY LE DONNE

So I looked for the gist of God's words through Ezra. The underlying message—it occurred to me—was that interracial marriage is sinful and disastrous to the purity of bloodlines. This teaching seemed remarkably similar to my grandmother's disapproval of my parents' relationship because my father was dark-skinned. I'm not claiming that my 16-year-old exegesis was all that sophisticated. But any way you slice it, Ezra 9-10 is deeply troubling—especially so to folks with an owner's manual view of the Bible.

Ezra isn't about racial purity. Why is Le Donne unable to distinguish between interracial marriage and interfaith marriage?

Sure, he was only 16 at the time, but the problem is that he hasn't thought better of his misinterpretation in the intervening years. For him to repeat it at this stage is downright dumb.

### CHRISTOPHER KEITH

Second, I was astonished at how (some) defenders of inerrancy and the like **treated those who held alternative views**. When they went through their lists of heroes and villains in class, almost all their villains were other Christians, and usually other conservative Christians. Their language for them was sometimes vitriolic, always patronizing, and almost always de-humanizing.

It seems that, in their Bibles, Jesus said that we should love our enemies unless they disagree with us theologically or hermeneutically, in which case it's alright to mistreat them.

Notice Keith's hyperbolic characterization of his theological opponents.

### CARLOS BOVELL

An inerrantist historical Jesus scholar, for example, is not able to say that the early church put words into Jesus' mouth in various portions of the Gospels or that a number of events recounted in the Gospels never really took place, being made up by a later generation of well-meaning disciples. Evangelical philosophy will already have decided these matters ahead of time.

Notice the conflict between Keith and Bovell. Keith faults inerrantists for (allegedly) disregarding the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. By contrast, Bovell faults inerrantists for reaffirming the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Well, you can't have it both ways. If Bovell is right, then Keith is wrong to naively cite statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels.

Even if, for the sake of argument, we accept Keith's tendentious interpretation and application, did *Jesus* say we should love our enemies? Or are those words which the early church put into his mouth—a la Bovell?

### CHRISTOPHER SKINNER

This meant that despite my misgivings, there had to be a way to reconcile the conflicting genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. From Abraham to Jesus, Matthew lists only 41 names while Luke lists 57. At the time I thought Matthew's omission of names must be some kind of rhetorical device. However, more problematic for me was the realization that of the 41 names Matthew and Luke should have had in common, they agree on only 17.

Why should they have 41 names in common? Are they not allowed to have different selection criteria?

### CHRISTOPHER KEITH

I suppose I could trot out the traditional fare concerning the realities of Scripture that produced "aha moments": the day of Jesus' crucifixion in the Synoptic Gospels and John;

Been there, done that (see above)

David's census in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21;

See below.

Paul's Hagar allegory in Galatians 4;



How is that a problem for inerrancy? Is Keith's unstated objection that Paul's "Hagar allegory" violates the original intent of Genesis? But even if that's the case, of Paul's treatment is intentionally allegorical, then how does that conflict with inerrancy?

Keep in mind, too, that some scholars regard Paul's treatment as typological rather than allegorical. Moreover, it's an argument from analogy. So the question is whether his comparison is logically invalid.

the sexual violence and erotic language in Judges 19, Ezekiel 23, and Song of Solomon. Let's include in that mix the stories of Tamar and Onan, which somehow never made it into youth group talks.

Notice how he lumps these together without any explanation or discrimination:

**i)** Does he think erotic language per se conflicts with inerrancy? If so, how so? Is sex evil?

**ii)** Does he think it's wrong for Scripture to depict sexual violence? Does he think historians condone everything they record? Is he unable to distinguish between the narrator's viewpoint and what the narrator relates?

**iii)** Does he think it's wrong to use graphic language to depict graphic sin? Does he think the Bible should be like the Hallmark channel?

When one text says God made David take a census and another says Satan did, well, we call that a contradiction in any other realm of communication.

We do? Truman is often faulted for bombing Hiroshima. Yet Truman didn't drop bomb. Paul Tibbets did. Truman didn't pilot the Enola Gay.

It is contradictory for critics to attribute that event to Truman when Tibbets was the real culprit? Since Truman gave the order, is it wrong to finger him as the agent ultimately responsible for that event? Assuming that was a blameworthy decision, is it not logical to blame Truman? Even if you think Tibbets was culpable to some degree, is it not logical to assign primary blame to Truman? Had he not given the order, it would never have happened.

My point is not to debate the merits of bombing Hiroshima. My point is that, far from calling that a contradiction in any other realm of communication, we routinely distinguish between direct and indirect agency. Examples could be multiplied ad infinitum.

For me—like so many others have done—all I needed to do was read the first two chapters of the Bible, the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1 presents the world as created in six days. If we take the sequence literally, things are created in this order: light, sky, earth, plants, stars and sun and moon, aquatic animals, birds, land animals, and, finally humans in large number. In other words, **humans—and many of them—are created last**. But when we come to Genesis 2, **the one human (Adam) is created first**, even before plants had grown (Gen 2:5). After the human is made, God sows a garden and plants begin to sprout. After this, God begins the process of identifying a suitable companion for the human.

**i)** To begin with, the sequence of Gen 1 only contradicts the sequence of Gen 2 on the assumption that both accounts describe the same event. If, by contrast, they describe different events, we wouldn't expect them to synchronize.

**ii)** Apropos (i), Gen 1 & 2 aren't separate accounts or coincident accounts. Rather, they overlap. Gen 2 doesn't describe the creation of plants and animals in general—unlike Gen 1. Rather, Gen 2 describes the creation of the garden, the creation of plants and animals in and for the garden, in preparation for Adam and Eve, as their original home. And it details the creation of Adam and Eve.

**iii)** And even if, for the sake of argument, the sequence of Gen 1 differs from the sequence of Gen 2, that wouldn't impugn the inerrancy of Scripture unless you assume Bible writers must narrate events in their historical order, or that this was the narrator's intention.

Frankly, the contributors which Enns recruited for his series lack basic thinking skills.

## CHRISTOPHER HAYS

2 Peter 2:15 mentions false teachers who have gone astray like Balaam, the prophet from Numbers 22:5 who was hired by King Balak to curse the Israelites. Some manuscripts of 2 Peter 2:15 called him "Balaam son of Beor" (which is what Numbers 22:5 calls him); other manuscripts of 2 Peter 2:15 call him "Balaam of Bosor," which, as we'll see in a moment, makes no sense at all.

"Beor" is a person's name; it was the name of Balaam's dad (his patronymic). Bosor is the name of a city (a.k.a. Bosorra). The problem is: the older, better

manuscripts called him "Balaam of Bosor," but Balaam wasn't from anywhere near Bosor, which is in the land of Gilead. According to Numbers 22:5, Balaam was from "Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw."

That fails to draw an obvious distinction between where someone was born, where he grew up, and where he resides. That can represent three or more different locations.

The name Beor actually occurs in a genealogy (a king-list) that is copied three times in the Old Testament (Gen 36.33; 1 Cor 1.44; Job 42:17c [LXX only]). That genealogy mentions a king whose name was "Bela son of Beor," who in turn was succeeded by a guy from the city of Bosorra (Bosor). And in one version of the genealogy (the LXX of Job 42), the king "Bela son of Beor" is actually called "Balak son of Beor".

Now the King Balak son of Beor in this genealogy is a different King Balak (of Moab) than the one that hired Balaam son of Beor in Numbers. But you can see how people might get confused: same patronymic, similar sounding first names. You're probably confused already! And so were some ancient Jews.

In fact, when you read the genealogy in ancient Aramaic translations of the Old Testament (the "targums"), which were already popular at the time of Jesus, you can see that they sometimes actually changed the name of King Bela/Balak son of Beor to Balaam son of Beor.

Since there was already a history of confusion over the Balaams and Balaks and Beors in the Numbers story and the genealogy, **it seemed really understandable that the author of 2 Peter would be caught up in the flow and reproduce the same mistake.**

**i)** Assuming for the sake of argument that that's why Peter calls him Balaam of Bosor, why would that be a mistake? If, by Peter's time, that designation was a literary tradition, how is Peter in error for repeating that convention? Is it erroneous to call New Orleans the Big Easy or New York the Big Apple? For that matter, Is it erroneous to say New York rather than New Amsterdam, which was the original designation?

Christopher Hays has an artificial notion of naming. If enough people call a place by a certain name, that becomes the correct name, even if that's not the original name. Charleston has a suburb that used to be called St. Andrew's Parish. But people began calling it West Ashley. So that became the new name.

**ii)** In addition, Christopher Hays disregards alternative explanations. Most commentators (e.g. Richard Bauckham, Peter Davids, Michael Green, Douglas Moo, Tom Schreiner) think this is a play on words. They think Peter is punning the Hebrew *basar* to make Balaam a "son of flesh," trading on the pejorative connotations of carnality. As Schreiner notes, Peter has a penchant for ironic punning.

**iii)** One exception is Gene Green, who questions that interpretation, wondering why *Bosor* would be used instead of *Basar*, the transliteration of the Hebrew word for "flesh."

But do we know how Greek and Hebrew were pronounced in the 1C? In fact, Davids says of *basar* that "the first 'a' can be read as a short 'o' in some circumstances" (242n51).

Consider how Yankees pronounce New Orleans compared to the locals. Or consider how South Carolinians pronounce Beaufort. Pronunciation is highly variable in time and place.

Likewise, many American cities have Indian names. But the Indian names are Anglicized. A "corruption" of the original word, phrase, or pronunciation. Yet that's the correct designation.

**iv)** Even so, Green doesn't think Peter is mistaken. After discussing Num 22:5 & 23:7, he concludes that this "could, in fact, come from someone who knew the region and the whole Balaam story quite well (289).

So these are the intellectual luminaries whom Enns showcases to disprove inerrancy.

## Arminian schizophrenia

Since Olson's post continues to accrue comments (170 at last count), I'll say a bit more:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/08/god-and-children-would-jesus-god-command-their-slaughter/>

***Or do you not feel any pressure to reconcile or deal with contradictions? Do you simply accept that God both did and did not command David to carry out a census? Please read Dewey Beegle's Scripture, Tradition and Infallibility and then tell me how you hold on to scriptural inerrancy (other than closing your eyes to the contradictions or engaging in tortured harmonizations).***

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An obvious problem with Olson's argument is that he's appealing to Scripture to attack Scripture. If the Bible is errant and contradictory, what makes him think the Gospels are a reliable source of information about Jesus' teaching? Given his view of Scripture, why think Jesus really said the things the Gospels attribute to him? Why not think the Gospels write a script which they put on Jesus' lips? You can't impugn the veracity of Scripture one moment, then proof-text your claim the next moment.

*Frankly, and with all due respect, I think you are still evading the issue. Jesus, God in humanity, the God-man, the perfect revelation of God's character, gathered children about him and said "of such is the Kingdom of God." Surely you don't think he meant "these children only--the ones right here sitting by me." Surely he meant children, period. That he, God, would also command the merciless slaughter of innocent children...*

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There are several obvious problems with his extrapolation:

Jesus miraculously fed some children when he multiplied the fish and bread. But Jesus doesn't miraculously feed all, or even most, hungry children. Many children are malnourished. Many children die of starvation.

Jesus healed the daughter of Jairus. But there were many sick or dying children in Palestine whom Jesus didn't heal. Not to mention the Roman Empire at large. Or North America. Or South America. Or China, India, Japan, Scotland, &c. And that's just in the 1C. What about the ancient Near East? What about the Middle Ages?

*I know of no more important principle for Christian theology than that Jesus is the perfect if not*



*complete revelation of God's character. After all, Jesus was God in human flesh. Or, put more technically, following the hypostatic union doctrine of Chalcedon, he was the Son of God, the eternal second person of the Trinity, equal with the Father, with an added human nature. But orthodoxy does not say and should not permit anyone to say that the addition of humanity to the Son of God made him any different morally than he always was or than the Father is.*

*The "person" of Jesus Christ was not morally altered by the incarnation. That, I take it, is a basic orthodox doctrine. He was the Son of God. That is his "who" even if his "what" included humanity.*

*Surely, in trinitarian orthodoxy, the Son of God, the Word, the Logos, is morally the same as the Father; that is, there is no difference between them (and the Holy Spirit) as to their character. They share all the same moral attributes and always have and always will. To say otherwise would be to wreak havoc with the Trinity.*

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**i)** Problem with his appealing to the deity of Christ is that it backfires. Logically, this means whatever the OT attributes

to Yahweh, Christians should attribute to Jesus. But that includes the very commands to execute the Canaanites.

**ii)** In addition, thousands of children die every year from divinely preventable causes. Sometimes these involve moral evils, like war or murder. Sometimes natural evils, like illness, accidents, famine, tornadoes, &c.

*Be patient...I'm going somewhere with all this.*

*Jesus said "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." He gathered them about himself and, as they say in Texas, "loved on them." I do not believe these were "elect children," some select group of children Jesus loved while he hated others.*

---

Actually, this *is* a select group of children. Notice that Jesus didn't seek out children to bless. Rather, parents brought their children to Jesus.

*But there's a problem. Can anyone imagine Jesus turning around and saying "Slaughter these little children"? I can't.*

---

**i)** Actually, when God threatened to punish apostate Israel by the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans, that included

many underage victims.

**ii)** What matters in the long run is what happens to you in the long run. Not this life, but the afterlife. Sooner or later, all of us die. Some die young. Death by natural causes can be more painful than a violent death.

## **Saving God from himself**

*I think there is an important apologetic aspect to this whole issue of whether God ordered the slaughter of the Canaanite infants...We cannot invite men to the source of all goodness and then play a bait and switch. We cannot turn around and say, "Oh, by the way, I told you that God is the source of love, mercy, pity, and the laughter of children. But actually, I also believe firmly that God commanded men to be pitiless upon little children and to cut off their laughter forever by putting them to the edge of the sword. And they carried it through, too. And in the end, I'm okay with that."*

*Which is why I cannot sit down and simply accept God's ordering the slaughter of the Canaanite children by the Israelites.*

---

[http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2014/08/on\\_paul\\_copans\\_attempted\\_solut.html#comment-294835](http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2014/08/on_paul_copans_attempted_solut.html#comment-294835)

One problem with Lydia's position is the notion that she can erect a high wall between God and natural or moral evil. But even if she succeeded in that implausible exercise, it would relocate rather than resolve the problem of evil. It's like a black market arms dealer for a drug cartel who says he's

not responsible for the cartel assassinating a prosecutor because, once the buyer takes receipt of the weapons, what's done with them is out of his hands. But, of course, we wouldn't accept that excuse.

## The Cat in the Hat

I'm going to comment on some of Lydia McGrew's latest statements on this thread:

<http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2014/08/no-magic-bullet-copans-insufficient.html>

*I think if you have a real, absolute moral prohibition on killing infants, you should be very, very uncomfortable with these passages and especially with saying that it really happened just like that. You should have a serious conundrum. You should not be \*just fine\* with the, "God ordered it, so I guess then it's okay" response.*

---

That's reversible. If you take Biblical revelation seriously, then you should question having "a real absolute moral prohibition" on killing infants.

*There are plenty of reasons for not just taking it that it must be okay, the most important of which is that that would appear blasphemously to be saying that God ordered the murder of children. It's*

*odd that those who are concerned for the honor of God aren't concerned that perhaps attributing this to Him isn't so honoring to Him.*

---

Notice her tendentious tactics. Christians who defend Biblical revelation aren't saying that God ordered the *murder* of children. She smuggles in her own characterization, then imputes that to her opponents.

*As I said elsewhere, Scripture is full of statements that God is light, that God is love, that in God is no darkness at all, that God is good, that all goodness comes from God. If we are to consider that God ordered hacking infants to death, surely you can see that any attempt to say that our ideas of goodness are just radically faulty enough that we can't see why that is okay severely calls into question our ability to have any concept of divine benevolence! It raises the very real question of whether the passages could say that God ordered just anything and people would believe it in the name of*

*inerrancy. It also raises the very real question of what we are worshiping and whether we can be worshiping truly, truly adoring God's goodness, while attributing these things to Him. And if one were simply to accept such a thing, it raises the question of whether one who insists on doing that could literally \_reverse\_ the meanings of "good" and "evil" and still worship the god thus defined.*

---

But that goes to the problem of evil generally. After all, infants have been "hacked to death" at various times regardless of whether or not God orders it. Since she considers that intrinsically evil, how is God benevolent towards infants if he twiddles his thumbs while that happens?

*As for its not being applicable to today, that seems to confuse the situation of the Israelites vis a vis the Canaanites with our situation vis a vis the Israelites. \_They\_ didn't get this order from a written canon of Scripture, because no such thing existed. \_They\_ couldn't have*



*believed sola scriptura. Anyone who putatively received such an order today would presumably believe himself to be in \_their\_ position. He's not interpreting what God said to the Israelites but interpreting what he thinks God is telling him to do today. If you believe God could order the slaughter of infants over three thousand years ago, it seems rather too convenient, and argumentatively unsupported, to use the concept of sola scriptura to argue that God \_couldn't\_ do such thing today.*

---

She's disregarding the specific reasons given in the text for the holy war commands.

*The putative slaughter of the Canaanites, with its apparent contradiction of the 6th commandment and even other OT statements, \_does\_ undeniably put strain on Judaism sans Christ, even as it puts strain on Christianity (which is a continuation of Judaism).*

---

She keeps salting the mine. It's only in apparent contradiction to the 6th commandment if it's murder. That's the very question in dispute.

*First of all, I am not "setting" the Scripture against the Scripture. I am pointing out what seems to me a direct conflict, which would be there even if I never pointed it out. This isn't something I'm just making up. You yourself should be able to see the appearance of conflict, and simply resolving it by saying, "I believe in inerrancy" isn't much of a resolution.*

---

Notice that she's *stipulating* a "direct conflict."

*I would not apply the "consequentialist rationalization" label to God, because I've already said at the outset that the entire category of murder does not apply to God at all. It's just a category mistake to try to apply it to Him. So therefore the notion of a consequentialist*

*rationalization of a wrong action cannot apply to God either.*

---

*If the entire category of murder does not apply to God at all, how does that mesh with her claim about "the very real question of what we are worshipping"?*

*I'm surprised that you don't see the relevance of the hypothetical to the topic at hand. There are evidently some things that you would not believe to be true, even if found in part of the canon of what is designated as Scripture that has come down to us.*

*A counterfactual scenario can show a method to be mistaken. If your method is, as it seems to be, to take it as beyond question that anything that comes down to us in what is designated as the canon of Scripture must be true, even if that means attributing what appears to be an atrocity to God, and redefining our concept of "atrocity" accordingly, then that method is subject to a reductio ad absurdum. That reductio can be understood in terms of a counterfactual as to what that method would require us to do in the*

*hypothetical case I have given. You cannot just say that the hypothetical is irrelevant because it isn't actual, because to do so is to show a failure to comprehend the nature of a reductio for a method of coming to a conclusion.*

*In trying to run a different reductio using a hypothetical, I'm simply finding something that you would balk at.*

*Your method of believing whatever is in what is designated as the canon of Scripture does have these absurd consequences as shown in my hypothetical. For some reason you just do not see that I have presented thereby a reductio of your method.*

*I'm pointing out, however, that someone could say exactly the same things you are saying, in exactly the same way, about *\*absolutely any content\**. Since you don't apparently really want to say that you would accept *\*absolutely any content\** as being true just because it is in the canon of Scripture, you should realize that what you are saying to me is also not argumentatively moving.*

*In that context, to try to move me \*merely\* by saying, "You can't call that into question. It's in the Bible" is a fairly weak argument and really does invite the sorts of reductios I have been bringing forward.*

*Why is this so hard? Why couldn't someone say the \_exact\_ same thing about "why the Bible shouldn't be the norm" if the Bible contained a record of God's telling the Israelites to rape the Canaanite children? The answer is, someone could.*

*This point has force whether you see it or not. If you have any line at which you would reject what is in the canon of Scripture, then you are prepared to do the exact same thing that I am doing.*

---

**i)** Notice the bait-and-switch. When she asks, "What *if* the Bible said...?" she's no longer talking about the *Bible*, but something different. The fact that an inerrantist doesn't have the same deference for what's *not* the Bible as he has for what *is* the Bible proves nothing. That's *not* what has come down to us from the Jews, or Jesus, or the Apostles.

**ii)** To say "what is designated as Scripture" is sleight-of-hand. Suppose an avid fan of Dr. Seuss founded the Church of Seuss. Members regard Dr. Seuss as a prophet sent by God to restore the true faith. In the Church of Seuss, his

writings are designated as canonical Scripture. As a result, Green eggs and ham are the communion elements.

Suppose Lydia then says, "Well, if you balk at what **GREEN EGGS AND HAM** teaches, then you ought to balk at what Deuteronomy 20 teaches." Really? How does that counterfactual scenario show that faith in Deuteronomy is misplaced?

Yes, there are some things I wouldn't believe to be true, even if found in what the Church of Seuss designates as Scripture. I draw a line. And that's a reason to deny the Bible?

**iii)** Lydia acts as if the designation of canonical Scripture is arbitrary. The title on the dust cover. What's inside could be anything.

But, of course, the books comprising the canon aren't simply designated as Scripture by fiat, a la **THE DA VINCI CODE**. At least, not for Protestants.

**iv)** In fact, this isn't just hypothetical. There are rival canons of the OT. The church of Rome, the Orthodox church, and the Ethiopian church have different OT canons than the Protestant canon. Protestants reaffirm the Hebrew OT canon because that has the best historical chain-of-custody. The OT apocrypha and pseudepigrapha arose during the Intertestamental period, and there's no good reason to think the Jews, or Jesus, or the Apostles, ever viewed those Intertestamental writings as Scripture. Content, per se, is not the criterion, but the chain-of-custody.

*If the idea is that the reason we don't need to talk about those hypotheticals is that the real-life situation \*isn't really all that bad\* and hence needn't be compared to such a hypothetical, then that, of course, is where we disagree.*

---

So if her opponents don't think the real-life situation is intrinsically evil, then by her own admission, the hypothetical comparison has no traction.

What *is* her argument, anyway? Is this an argument from analogy? If you reject child rape, you ought to reject child homicide, because the two are morally equivalent? But if that's the claim, where's the supporting argument? To say they're morally equivalent begs the question.

*In what sane moral universe, I ask you, do we say, "Raping little kids, that can't be justified. I draw the line there. But cutting off their heads with swords--yeah, I can probably find a workaround to justify that"?*

*But we're talking here about swiping the heads off of babies, which, on the contrary, \*is\* one of the things which has been condemned both by natural law and by tradition all along. Therefore all manner*

*of special pleading is necessary to try to justify it in the case of the Canaanites.*

*For some reason, chopping off children's heads just doesn't do it for you, but raping children does.*

---

**i)** Are we talking here about beheading babies? That's what *she's* talking about, but does the OT command the Israelites to behead Canaanite babies? Where does the Pentateuch prescribe that method of executing the Canaanites? Why is she suddenly imputing that imagery to the text? Is it because she finds that polemically useful, even if it's untrue?

**ii)** Since, moreover, she's conceded that God has the right to end a child's life, then her comparison between raping children and killing children isn't analogous even on her own grounds.



## From silver bullets to bullet ricochet

I'm going to comment on some additional statements by Lydia McGrew, from two sources:

[http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2014/08/on\\_paul\\_copans\\_attempted\\_solut.html](http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2014/08/on_paul_copans_attempted_solut.html)

<http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2014/08/no-magic-bullet-copans-insufficient.html>

*The point is that all the attempts to make that position \*seem less bad\*, such as by using phrases such as "original sin" or "capital punishment" or what-not, fail. And I think people use them because they find it hard to say, "Yes, these were innocent babies, and God ordered them slaughtered. You know, just exactly the sort of thing we're fighting against every day in the culture of death. Well, God actually ordered that done. But I'm okay with that."*

*I suppose it's good in the way that people feel uncomfortable saying that. But I have a niggling feeling of duty to take away the fig leaves and evasions.*

---

The fact that we find it "hard" to attribute some statements or actions to God doesn't mean God didn't say it or do it.

*By the way, I want to note an interesting dynamic: In a conversation where I hear Christians at first staunchly defending the idea that God really did order putting a bunch of children to the sword, I find psychologically that any reversion to a view like Copan's ("Maybe it really is hyperbole; maybe it doesn't mean what it appears to mean") comes as a relief. There is something so shocking and horrifying to me about people's twisting their minds into justifying the slaughter of children (all the more so when the commitment to inerrancy is such that they will admit no reductio) that one would almost rather that they accept a view like Copan's. I believe that Copan's view is \_intellectually\_ untenable and born of wishful thinking, and that was why I felt that I had to write refuting it. But in the grand scheme one feels in one's gut that that's better than holding a view that is morally untenable and, frankly, morally corrupting.*

---

**i)** Commitment to inerrancy means commitment to divine revelation. That Christianity is a revealed religion. That's not a secondary or expendable principle. Rather, that's foundational to the Christian faith.

**ii)** What is morally untenable is for Lydia to reject revealed moral norms. Absent that standard of comparison, how does she avoid moral skepticism? She may appeal to "natural law" to undergird her moral intuitions, but having repudiated Biblical norms, why think her moral intuitions transcribe natural law rather than species variable natural instincts or cultural conditioning?

**iii)** There are two basic problems with her resort to hypotheticals and reductios. To begin with, it's a diversionary tactic. And it's irrelevant to the issue at hand. Suppose she asks, "What if Scripture says God said or did such-and-such? Would you believe it? Would you obey it?"

Suppose I said no? Has she succeeded in extracting a damaging concession from me? Not at all. For she's not talking about the real Bible, but a hypothetical Bible. How does the fact that I might reject statements in a hypothetical Bible justify rejecting statements in the real Bible? The real Bible doesn't make those statements. How are imaginary commands germane to the case at hand?

Sure, we can postulate a hypothetical Bible with hypothetical commands, hypothetical narratives, &c. Suppose I don't believe it. Is that a reason not to believe the real Bible? How is "what if" a compelling reason to reject "what is"? There's no evidentiary parity between the two.

*Given* Biblical revelation, we can posit there are some things God wouldn't say or do. But absent that revelatory standard of comparison, we lack a basis for the contrast. Her hypotheticals implicitly withdraw the benchmark.

**iv)** Lydia takes refuge in natural law as her fallback position. But that's very naive. At best, natural law is pretty coarse-grained. It won't warrant the specificity and absolutism that she requires.

If, moreover, you're skeptical about Biblical revelation, you ought to be equally skeptical about natural law. For instance, Lydia might say we find filial cannibalism morally repellent because that's grounded in natural law. But some animals practice filial cannibalism. How will she respond to an atheist who says the cannibalism taboo is simply a natural human instinct, while other animals have a natural instinct to practice cannibalism?

*I find all of that highly problematic, as I found the response by Steve on my personal blog in which he started going down the double effect rabbit trail.*

---

So if I mention the double effect principle as a counterexample, that's a "rabbit trail." But if Lydia floats hypotheticals and reductios, that's *not* a rabbit trail? Notice the egregious double standard on her part.

Lydia acts as though discussing exceptions and counterexamples can only be motivated by a malicious agenda to "make room" for atrocities. But although that's

sometimes the case, ethicists necessarily consider exceptions, counterexamples, borderline cases. She herself tries to bolster her position with analogies (e.g. suicide, euthanasia).

*Steve's point was similar: If this or that qualification is required, then the intrinsic evil of deliberately putting a child to the edge of the sword is called into question. I simply don't agree at all, and I think it is troubling to find that a technique in use is to call into question the \_general\_ intrinsic wrongness of unambiguously, deliberately killing a child in order to make space, as it were, for the slaughter of the Canaanites, in order to preserve inerrancy. Surely it should be obvious that such an approach has potential ramifications that go beyond just allowing the slaughter of the Canaanites.*

---

Notice that she's not presenting a counterargument. She's just expressing her disapproval.

What I did was not a "rabbit trail." I'm responding to her on her own grounds. Does she grant the double effect

principle? If so, is that consistent with her overall position— or does she herself allow for exceptions?

***My argument is that we have to have a category of murder, and we do have a category of murder, which really is always wrong under every circumstance.***

---

By definition, "murder" is always wrong under every circumstance. But that's a decoy. The question at issue isn't the wrongness of *murder*, but *homicide*. Not all homicides are murders. There's such a thing as justified homicide. Lydia herself acknowledges that category.

***Now, we already know that that category does not apply to God when God acts directly. The whole point of a category such as "murder" is that it applies to finite creatures in their interactions with one another. We wouldn't even have the category at all if we were just talking about God.***

---

That's an important concession on her part.

*I'm willing to allow that there could be \_adjustment\_ in the category of murder, so that it is murder under normal circumstances for an individual to kill someone for (say) his private p\*rn\*gr\*phy use, but under some extremely strange but imaginable circumstances, God might appoint another human being to execute him for that sin. But that the human killing of infants is intrinsically wrong is something that I've spent twenty-five years arguing as part of the pro-life movement.*

---

Of course, she's begging the question. She keeps resorting to stipulative claims, as if expressing her vehement opinion should suffice to settle the matter.

*I've been through all the blocks and moves, all the "what ifs," all the attempts on the part of the pro-aborts to say that there is such-and-such an exception, all the scoffing at absolute moral prohibitions, all the attempts to*

*undermine this one. This is old hat for me.*

---

And where's the actual argument?

*And intrinsically wrong means just what it sounds like. It means that you can \*never\* deliberately aim a sword, swing it, and deliberately kill that baby right there with it.*

---

That's her claim. Where's the supporting argument?

*(The very fact that God doesn't need to swing swords, that God is capable of exercising His will to take someone to Himself via direct, unmediated, sovereign power over His creation, is one clue that there is a huge difference between the two.)*

---

How is that *metaphysical* difference equivalent to a *moral* difference? How does that begin to demonstrate that it would be illicit for God to delegate such a task to a human agent? How is the medium all-important?



*The same thing is true, by the way, of both suicide and euthanasia. In the pro-life movement we have spent all this time arguing that it is wrong to kill yourself, yet the argument given here would (as far as I can see) also license God's ordering you to perform a suicide bombing against the equivalent of the Canaanites. After all, it's just God "indirectly taking life," right?*

---

Here she's propping up one disputable claim by appeal to another disputable claim. Is suicide always wrong under every conceivable circumstance? What about a suicide mission? What about a soldier throwing himself on top of a live grenade to shield his comrades? What about a member of the French Resistance who kills himself before the Nazis apprehend him so that he won't give up the names of his comrades under torture? What about stranded office-workers on 9/11 jumping to their death to avoid incineration?

*Or consider a suffering baby. We have argued that the infanticide for disabled and suffering children in Europe is an abomination. But the argument here would mean that God could order it as*

*being \*no different from\* God's quietly ending the child's suffering via His own action. Of course, the whole point of arguing against euthanasia is that there is a huge difference between the two. There's nothing wrong even with praying that God would take a suffering loved one to Himself. There's something hugely, always, directly wrong in giving the lethal injection to end the suffering. That's why God wouldn't order you to do it.*

---

This assumes that mercy-killing is always wrong. What about a wounded soldier? What if his comrades *have* to leave him behind? There isn't time to medevac him. The enemy is minutes away. If they know the enemy will torture him to death, is it wrong for them to euthanize him?

*That's why we show movies like The Silent Scream. That's why we understand and rejoice when an abortionist like Nathanson or clinic owner like Abbey Johnson finally cannot do this anymore. We take that to be listening to the voice of conscience. I*

*would go so far as to say that suppressing that voice of conscience is the road to damnation. Now, what some are saying in the case of the Canaanite slaughter is that it was an \_obligation\_ for the Israelite soldiers to suppress that horror and revulsion, that God wanted them to do so. To my mind, this is near-blasphemous, as it is saying that God was tempting man to suppress the very instinctive, conscientious revulsion which God Himself placed within man as a clue to the nature of reality. But James says that God does not tempt any man.*

---

**i)** Why assume Israelite soldiers were suppressing revulsion? Where's her evidence that they felt the same way she feels?

**ii)** Her appeal to James is only as good as her interpretation. It is, moreover, self-defeating to pit Scripture against Scripture. Having repudiated inerrancy, why is James more authoritative than Deuteronomy? How does one fallible book trump another fallible book?

**iii)** Sometimes doing your duty can be painful. What if parents have a psychotic teenager. He threatens his mother with a butcher knife. The father shoots his son to protect his

wife. That's an excruciating choice for the father and husband.

*Then, of course, there are plenty of Bible verses against murder, as well as the biblical statement that God hates "hands that shed innocent blood." If they don't mean an absolute prohibition on killing babies, I'm not sure what they do mean.*

---

What it means, in context, is to not knowingly execute a defendant for a crime he didn't commit. "Innocent" of violating the Mosaic law. If you falsely charge and convict him of a capital offense, then carry out the death sentence, that's "shedding innocent blood."

*By the way, the babies and young children didn't just have to be driven out to die in the wilderness. They could have been kept and raised as adoptees.*

---

That's highly unrealistic. That might work for babies and toddlers who were too young to remember who did what to whom. But for children old enough to remember that the Israelites killed their parents, I imagine that when they got to a certain age, some of them would return the favor by killing their adoptive parents to avenge the death of their biological parents. Revenge is a powerful motive.

Lydia has replaced Copan's magic bullets with bullets that ricochet. That's no improvement.

## Ectopic pregnancies

I take a pretty hard line on abortion. I reject the "rape/incest/life of the mother exceptions." However, I am inclined to make allowance for tubal ectopic pregnancies. Even among staunch proliferers, that's pretty standard exception. The basic rationale is that if you can't save both mother and child, and both are at high risk of death absent intervention, it's permissible to save one at the expense of the other, rather than letting both die.

It's usually justified by the double effect principle. If you don't know what that is, here's a detailed exposition and analysis:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-effect/>

By contrast, Lydia McGrew is critical of this exception:

[http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double\\_trouble\\_or\\_double\\_effect.html#comment-159796](http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double_trouble_or_double_effect.html#comment-159796)

[http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double\\_trouble\\_or\\_double\\_effect.html#comment-159871](http://www.whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2011/03/double_trouble_or_double_effect.html#comment-159871)

I mention this because it seems to figure in her criticism of Biblical commands to execute the Canaanites. It's my impression that Lydia begins with an a priori position on abortion, then minimizes or trivializes the dangers of ectopic pregnancies. And it isn't clear to me that she has an accurate grasp of the medical issues. For a possible corrective:

<http://rockingwithhawking.blogspot.com/2014/08/ectopic-pregnancy.html>



## Shedding innocent blood

As a rule, Lydia McGrew is equally adept at bioethics and apologetics. She recently did a post critiquing Paul Copan's handling of OT commands to execute the Canaanites. I think she did a fine job of exposing the exegetical inadequacies of his position. The problem is her own position.

She did a post at **EXTRA THOUGHTS**, which she cross-referenced at **WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD**. I'll be quoting her from both sources:

**i)** In responding to one commenter, she makes a passing reference to the OT prohibition against "shedding innocent blood." It's hard to tell from her post if that's a major factor in her overall argument. But assuming that's the case, she's ripping those passages out of context. Verses which prohibit the "shedding of innocent blood" (e.g. Exod 23:7; Deut 19:10; 21:8-9; 27:25) concern crime and punishment, not warfare.

That doesn't mean anything goes in war. War doesn't suspend morality. Rather, that's why the Bible contains the laws of warfare (e.g. Deut 20). War had different objectives than crime and punishment. So different considerations apply.

**ii)** By the same token, death isn't necessarily punitive. For instance, there were pious Jews who died the fall of Jerusalem, both in 70 AD and the Babylonian exile centuries before. God wasn't punishing *them*. But due to the fact that humans are social creatures, divine punishment has an



*incidentally* collective aspect. Some innocents are swept up in the current.

*One piece of good news, as far as it goes, is that there is nothing about the slaughter of the Canaanite children that is theologically necessary to the truth of Christianity. Unlike, say, the historical existence of Adam, the killing of Canaanite children is not woven into the warp and woof of Christian theology, doctrine, or ethics. Very much to the contrary.*

---

That's seriously confused. It's true that commands to execute the Canaanites are not as intrinsically important as the historical Adam. However, the principle of divine revelation *is* as intrinsically important as the historical Adam. To deny that God said what Scripture attributes to him denies the revelatory status of Scripture.

*Yes, I'm certainly willing to consider that this portion of Scripture might be incorrect, that God didn't really order that. In fact, I'm hoping God will tell me that when I get to heaven!! My only reason for not definitely saying it is that I have no independent textual reason for doing so. (I'd*

*love to be handed one, though, that would stand up to independent examination.)*

*Why assume that we know what passages belong in Scripture better than we know what is absolutely and intrinsically evil when it comes to harming babies?*

*Nonsense. Over and over again in the OT we find that false prophets crop up or that God takes his hand off of a particular leader or deliverer. Why not think this had happened to Moses when he started telling them to slaughter children? Or why shouldn't Saul think it of Samuel in I Samuel 15? That he had gone off the rails? An endorsement of a person as a prophet was never automatically an endorsement for life and for every possible thing the person could say.*

---

**i)** It is theologically catastrophic to say the OT misrepresents the true character of God. Fundamental to the OT is contrasting the one true God with false gods. The OT presents itself as a corrective to pervasive misconceptions of the deity in the ANE. If, however, Yahweh is just a variation on Baal, Molech, Dagon, Ishtar et al., then it's arbitrary to elevate the OT above other ANE literature.

ii) The NT isn't separable from the OT. The truth of the OT is foundational to the truth of the NT. The NT itself makes that point repeatedly.

*Jeff, I have been intrigued to see how the hard-line response (George's comment is yet another example) seems to be fairly popular. So far I've had quite a number of people, both on blogs and on Facebook, taking a hard-line response of the kind that would make Copan's whole literary approach unnecessary.*

---

True.

*The consequentialism really is shocking. Hey, if killing baby boys so they don't grow up to be a later army against you is fine and dandy (assuming that the "you" is some specially important and favored people group), then that opens up all kinds of convenient doors, doesn't it?*

---

That's a caricature. The point is not that consequences *always* justify a particular course of action. The point, rather, is that every ethical decision isn't reducible to what's

intrinsically right or wrong. Although some things are intrinsically right or wrong, there are other cases in which the circumstances do make a difference to the licit or illicit nature of the action.

*George, I find it a continual astonishment how easily some people just \_leap\_ over that step where they say, "If God can take a baby's life, then why can't he delegate that to me?"*

*The answer is so obvious: Because \_my\_ taking a baby's life is a paradigm case of what we call "murder."*

---

Notice that Lydia's response is fatally ambitious. What, exactly, is she objecting to? There are two different possible positions, which she fails to distinguish here:

**i)** it is permissible for God to take a baby's life, but impermissible for God to delegate that task to a human party

**ii)** It is impermissible even for God to take a baby's life

If her position is (i), she needs to explain why it's permissible for God to directly end a baby's life, but impermissible for God to indirectly end a baby's life, via a second party. For instance, what about the death of the firstborn by an angel?

If her position is (ii), natural evil seems to present counterexamples in which God indirectly ends the lives of some babies, viz. Noah's flood, firebombing Sodom and Gomorah.

Likewise, even if she doesn't think the "angel of death" is really a second party, that would mean she *does* think it's permissible for *God* to end a baby's life (unless she denies the historicity of the Tenth Plague). But in that case, why would it be impermissible for God to authorize a second party to carry out the death sentence?

Furthermore, to say that my\_ taking a baby's life is a paradigm case of what we call "murder" assumes the very thing she needs to prove. Is ending a baby's life always equivalent to murder? That's not something she's entitled to stipulate, then deploy against Biblical revelation.

***But as I said to Mike T., if you are really willing to consider that our moral intuitions about the wrongness of raping babies might just turn out to be wrong, then all natural law reasoning is o-u-t, out the window. We really have to hold that we know so little about right and wrong that there's no point in arguing against anything, from abortion to unjust war to sexual ethics to...anything, on the basis of the natural light. More or less, the natural light doesn't exist in any remotely reliable form if we could just "turn out to be wrong" about raping babies.***

*This is obvious from the fact that, if a person stands up in court and says, "God told me to kill that baby," even we Christians don't (or, heaven help us, shouldn't) for a moment consider the possibility that the statement is true. We don't think that we should investigate the nature and track-record of the defendant's voices-in-the-head to find out if maybe that really was just the delegated means by which God released the baby in question from the toils of this world and took him to heaven in his innocence! We assume that the defendant is crazy. Why? Well, obviously: Because for human beings deliberately to kill babies is wrong. Therefore we assume that God wouldn't tell a human being to kill a baby.*

---

There are multiple problems with that argument:

**i)** I wouldn't assume the killer is crazy. Maybe he (or she) is. But, unfortunately, people don't have to be crazy to murder kids. Just evil.

A killer might say that because the insanity defense is his best shot at getting a lighter sentence, and not because he heard a voice telling him to do that.

**ii)** The holy war commands have a specific context: the cultic holiness of Israel. That isn't something which carries over into the new covenant era.

**iii)** Suppose I'm a juror and the defendant says "God told me to drown my baby." So what? Since God didn't tell me that he told her to do that, I have no evidence that he told her to do that. There's no presumption that God told her that. So why would that carry any weight in my deliberations?

**iv)** Finally, her position logically extends to Gen 22, a paradigmatic redemptive event. Speaking of which:

*Re. Isaac: I knew somebody would bring up Isaac. I frankly admit that in some ways the story of Abraham and Isaac brings up the same issues I have brought up here. I have thought about it myself in those terms repeatedly. There is, however, one thing that gives us more wiggle room with Abraham and Isaac than we have in the case of the Canaanite slaughters: Abraham had a promise from God that "in Isaac shall thy seed be called" and that "thy descendants shall be as the sand of the sea" and "in thee all the nations of the world shall be blessed." Every indication*

*in Scripture is that the promise was given with at least as much evidence that it came from God as the later order to sacrifice Isaac. They are both just things that the Lord "said" to Abraham, whatever that experience was like for Abraham. Therefore, Abraham had at least as much evidence that Isaac, who had never yet fathered a child, would somehow live on and have children and many further descendants. The Apostle Paul glosses this as Abraham's believing that God could raise Isaac from the dead. Notice, too, that Paul credits Abraham with faith \*in God's promise\* of many descendants from Isaac. If this is correct, then Abraham never believed that he would be killing Isaac in the same sense that one kills a person in any natural situation--where the person just stays dead. Call this the "zombie Isaac" theory if you like. We also have Abraham's own cryptic words to Isaac, "God will provide for himself a sacrifice," where Abraham seems to be holding out the possibility*



*that God would, as God did in the end,  
remit the order.*

---

Here she's appealing to God's promise. But that frame of reference is only reliable if we can identify divine revelation in the first place. Lydia has called that into question.

*Part of the question here is whether we have any notion of what it means to say that God is good. If literally anything can be in Scripture attributed to God and we have to bite the bullet on it, then apparently we have no idea what good and evil are, and we might as well not bother with the natural light at all.*

*Let me ask the hard-liners this: Suppose that some book of the Old Testament recorded that God sent a prophet to tell a king to have a woman seized and her unborn child aborted. You can make up your own frame story as to why this was supposedly necessary. Would you just say, "Oh, well, I guess abortion can sometimes be ordered by God. I guess we can't draw the line there"?*

*Mike, a problem with that is that it seems to allow no limits or pushback from the actual content of the*

*putative order, even at this point, thousands of years later, where we are deciding whether or not this statement in the Bible that God ordered this is actually accurate. If that conjecture about the voice of God just takes care of the problem, couldn't you apply it to anything? Suppose that this experience, whatever it was, which is supposed to tell you "from every fiber of your being" that God the Father is speaking, seemed to contain the content, "Go and rape Canaanite children"? What about adultery? Sexual orgies? Torturing the kids? Etc., etc. There has to be some kind of reductio where we say that the true God \_wouldn't\_ order such a thing and that therefore we have a problem if a text tells us that He did. My line just apparently falls elsewhere from where it falls for some other people. Because I assume that you do have a line, some act so obviously vile and contrary to the character of God as revealed both in Scripture and in the natural law, that you would not bring that forward as an answer.*

---

**i)** Is Lydia posing a *hypothetical* question? If I were not a Christian, but I'm considering religious conversion, then there'd be the question of how to sift rival revelatory claimants, viz. the Bible, the Koran, the Book of Mormon,

the Arcana Cœlestia. In that context, we can raise hypothetical questions about what a candidate for the true God would be prepared to say and do.

I'd add that people often convert to Christianity, not by engaging in comparative analysis, or applying generic criteria, but by fostering a religious experience. They expose themselves to gracious influences. Fellowship with the community of faith. Cultivating the means of grace.

But if I'm already a Christian, then that presumes that I've already resolved such questions in my own mind. To be a Christian believer is, among other things, to affirm the revelatory status of the Bible. That becomes the benchmark.

**ii)** If, however, we reject revealed moral norms as our standard of comparison, then I think moral skepticism is the logical alternative. Yes, we may *feel* that certain actions are intrinsically evil, but that's the effect of our social conditioning, natural instincts (which varies from species to species), evolutionary programming (or whatever).

***The thing is, we pro-lifers have been making these natural law arguments for years about, say, the intrinsic evil of abortion. Now suddenly all of that is supposed to be out the window?***

---

I wouldn't say that abortion is *intrinsically* evil, if by that she means abortion is wrong in *every conceivable situation*. For instance, I think it's generally permissible to terminate a

tubal ectopic pregnancy. In that situation, both mother and child will die unless one dies.

*The whole thing about everybody being a sinner from conception, etc., proves too much, as I said in the original post over at my personal blog. If \_that\_ sense of "guilt" is enough to remove the "innocence" label from newborn infants (or even unborn infants), then why in the world do \_we\_ still have to use that "innocence" label when it comes to defining murder for the purposes of human society? Every abortionist in the world \_could\_ give (if he so chose) a theological defense that he did not kill an innocent human being because "there is none righteous," and all murder laws would fall to the ground. If the innocence of the newborn infant \*in the relevant sense\* for purposes of the concept of murder can survive the concept of original sin, then the problem of the Canaanite slaughters remains. You cannot just trot out the doctrine of original sin*

*when you need it to indict every infant in the world and make us feel better about mass slaughter and then pack it back up tidily again and let us all get back to calling babies "innocents" for other purposes. Logically, it doesn't work that way.*

---

I myself haven't used that appeal at this stage of the argument. That said, her inference is fallacious. *Crimes* aren't synonymous with *sins*. Original sin is not a *crime*. The fact that no one is innocent in reference to sin doesn't mean no one is innocent in reference to a particular crime. So guilt in *that* sense wouldn't obviate laws against murder. Compare these two statements from her post:

*Any attempt to answer the problem by saying that original sin means that no one is really innocent proves far too much, for it removes the rationale for regarding the killing of infants generally as murder.*

*Steve, I don't have time to answer every point, but actually, \*all\* human death is indirectly the result of man's free will. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that man would not die if Adam had not sinned.*

---

How can she invoke original sin to justify death by natural evil, but reject original sin to justify death by divine command?

Here's yet another odd combination of statements:

*For a human being to do this meets the definition of murder which it is necessary for us to use to explain to, e.g., pro-aborts why murder is wrong. (For example, "the direct and deliberate taking of the life of an innocent human being.") Implicitly, this definition means \_our\_ direct and deliberate taking, etc., not God's. But to do it "by God's command" is still for me to do it, not for God to do it directly. I still must act as an agent to aim the gun or swing the sword, doing it deliberately in such a way as to cut off the life of that particular infant. To all appearances, this is murder \*by me\*.*

---

The wording of this statement seems to be modeled on the double effect principle. She apparently makes approving use of the double effect principle. I don't know what else to

make of her distinctions ("direct" and "deliberate") unless she's alluding to the double effect principle.

*I don't want the entire thread to go into a discussion of double effect. I'm generally quite a hard-liner on that one. But we can all agree that in the case of slaying the Canaanite children no double effect was involved. They were trying to slay those individuals. We're talking about aiming your sword *\*so that\** it will cut off the head of *\*that\** child. As far as I am concerned, that is obviously intrinsically evil for innocents, with no exception.*

---

I can't tell from this statement which side she comes down on respecting the double effect principle. But if she endorses the double effect principle, then she can't say taking the life of innocents is intrinsically evil *simpliciter*. Rather, that will have to be qualified by double effect distinctions.

*Actually I disagree that the verses you probably have in mind in the New Testament actually teach pacifism, but that's a whole different subject.*

---

It's hard to see how she could simultaneously reject pacifism and the double effect principle inasmuch as rejecting pacifism commits her to situations in which the death of innocents is a necessary, albeit incidental, result of securing the strategic objective.



## Olson's imaginary Jesus

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/08/god-and-children-would-jesus-god-command-their-slaughter/>

**Roger Olson**

*I can't think of a better litmus test than Jesus.*

*Jesus must be our hermeneutical litmus test whenever we encounter and interpret biblical (or extrabiblical) texts that claim something about God. He was and is God (Yahweh).*

---

i) That sounds pious, but as a matter of fact, Jesus is not the litmus test for the veracity of the OT. Rather, the OT is the litmus test for Jesus. And the NT makes that point repeatedly. That's why Jesus, the Apostles, and/or NT writers repeatedly appeal to the OT to validate his messianic mission.

Throughout history there have been many messianic claimants. A messianic claimant is not the litmus test for the OT.

And this isn't a question of *hermeneutics*, but *historicity*. What really happened.

**ii)** Traditionally, Jews regard Christianity as a Jewish heresy, just as Christians regard Islam or Mormonism as a Christian heresy. If a pious Jew were reading Olson, and he thought Olson's position was representative, he'd be justified in viewing Christianity as a Jewish heresy. The NT can only falsify the OT on pain of falsifying itself. (Mind you, I think the NT helps to verify the OT, and vice versa.)

Just as it's proper to evaluate the claims of Muhammad or Joseph Smith by the Bible, it's proper to evaluate the claims of Jesus by the OT. And we have NT precedent for that procedure. (Mind you, there are additional reasons to reject Muhammad and Joseph Smith.)

## ***Roger Olson***

***First you answer my question. Can you sit back, close your eyes, and imagine Jesus commanding his disciples to slaughter the children instead of saying "bring them to me for of such is the kingdom of God." If you say that you can, then you and I have totally different ideas of who Jesus was and if you think I have trouble explaining some passages I will simply say you can't explain that one. You seem to assume Scripture is flat; I don't.***

***But there's a problem. Can anyone imagine Jesus turning around and saying "Slaughter these little children"? I can't.***

*But if I can't imagine Jesus doing that, to any group of children, what am I to do with 1Samuel 15? Was Yahweh someone other than Jesus—different in character from him?*

---

**i)** Notice that Olson's litmus test isn't really Jesus, but his "imagined" Jesus. What he imagines Jesus would or wouldn't say or do. Of course, an imagined Jesus is just an imaginary Jesus. A figment of Olson's imagination. So Olson's litmus test is actually...Olson!

**ii)** Yes, Jesus is Yahweh. Therefore, whatever the OT attributes to Yahweh we should attribute to Jesus.

**iii)** In addition, the NT teaches us that Jesus is currently ruling the universe. From the time of the Ascension until the Day of Judgment, Jesus is in charge (1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20-22). When children die in a natural disaster, Jesus was pushing the buttons. Older Arminians like Charles Wesley didn't hesitate to take that position.

## Dying young

I'm posting my side of a little impromptu debate between Lydia McGrew and me:

### **steve said...**

Thanks for your intellectual honesty. Sometimes we have to eliminate bad answers before we can explore better answers.

I'm glad I'm not in a position where I have to carry out those commands.

That said, I don't think death by divine command is worse than death by divine providence. I don't see that death by God's command presents a special theodicean problem in contrast to death by ordinary providence. Either both are morally problematic or neither is.

I think the efforts by Copan, Hess, and Matt Flannagan are shortsighted in that regard.

Same thing with more liberal theologians. If there's a problem, it's not with God's word but God's world. Even if one denies the inspiration of Scripture, that just relocates the problem to real-world atrocities, for which God remains ultimately responsible.

Conversely, if we have an adequate theodicy for real-world atrocities, why is that inapplicable to Biblical holy war?

steve said...

Why do you think the death of an infant by divine command presents a special problem, but his death by natural evil does not? Your distinction is not self-explanatory.

Yes, my Calvinism may make a difference, but every theistic tradition (e.g. Thomism, Arminianism, Molinism, open theism) must grapple with parallel issues.

On just about every alternative, God is the ultimate cause of natural evil.

Sorry, but I'm still unclear on why you think death resulting from a divine command is problematic in a way that death resulting from a divine action is not. Take two scenarios:

**i)** Ed dies because God ordered Ted to kill Ed

**ii)** Ed dies because God made a mantrap to kill Ed

Does (i) present a special theodicean problem, but (ii) does not?

(I'm using the mantrap as a metaphor for death by some natural evil.)

Yes, you're focussed on the specific issue of babies, but you're combining two issues: who dies and how they die. My question is why the mode of death is especially problematic in one case, but not the other.

**steve said...**

**i)** I'm afraid I don't see from your explanation why the mode of death is morally germane. Your key contention is that killing a baby is wrong. So it's still the who rather than the how.

**ii)** Also, do you really mean that killing a baby is intrinsically wrong, or generally wrong—absent extraordinary mitigating circumstances? What about terminating ectopic

pregnancies? What about the double effect principle, viz. if the enemy uses human shields?

"In the second case, a fortiori, God has a right to permit a death by way of the natural laws which He has put in place and which He preserves."

Isn't "permission" a bit weak or euphemistic in that context? Does God merely permit the outcome of natural forces he himself put in place?

To take a comparison: Suppose a car is parked uphill with a wheel chock behind the right rear tire to prevent it from rolling down the hill. Suppose I kick the wheel chock aside, as a result of which the car rolls downhill. I didn't push the car downhill. I merely removed an impediment. Gravity did the rest.

Yet even that action on my part is more than permitting the car to roll downhill. I caused it to roll downhill.

If, moreover, I foresaw that by kicking the wheel chock aside, the car would run over a 2-year-old playing in the cul-de-sac at the bottom of the hill, I did more than permit his death. I engineered his death.

So I fail to see a morally salient difference between death by divine command and death by divine providence. Adding buffers between cause and effect doesn't avoid divine agency or divine intent.

One could imagine Rube Goldberg machines in which the effect is far removed from the cause. Yet the outcome would still be traceable to God.

(At the moment I'm discussing natural evils, not moral evils.)

**steve said...**

Several issues:

**i)** Seems to me you're taking a harder line than you did in the body of the post. There you framed the issue in terms of a prima facie conflict between two sets of divine commands. Now, however, you're saying it's intrinsically wrong to kill babies/children.

**ii)** If, on the one hand, Scripture unmistakably contains commands in God's name to kill babies/children—while, on the other hand, killing babies/children is intrinsically wrong, then either the God of biblical theism doesn't exist, or else he permitted Bible writers to misrepresent his true character. If the latter, this would mean that even though Scripture presents itself as a corrective to false views of deity in ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman religion, in fact the Bible cannot be used as a standard of comparison.

**iii)** It isn't quite clear to me whether or not you think God has the right to take the life of a baby/child. When you say that's intrinsically wrong, do you mean in reference to human agents, or do you include God in that prohibition? You've said God has a general right to take life, as well as acting in the best interests of the baby/child, but unless I missed something, there's a remaining ambiguity regarding your position on God's prerogative in taking the life of a baby/child.

**iv)** If you think God has the right to take the life of a baby/child, then I don't see why it would be intrinsically wrong for God to command someone to take the life of a baby/child. That would not be a case of the human agent

"playing God" by making life-and-death decisions which only God is entitled to make. Rather, the human would be divinely tasked to carry out a divine decision. Are you saying it would be illicit for God to delegate the implementation of his decision to a second party? Or is the decision itself illicit, even for God?

**v)** I'm studiously striving to avoid turning this thread into a debate over the freewill defense, but since you keep introducing that consideration, I have to say something about it. I mention natural evils because that would be a case of babies/children dying as an end-result of a chain of events initiated by God. God taking life through intermediate agencies, which is analogous to human agents who carry out divine commands.

Yes, there are cases in which natural evils are partly brought about by the choices/actions of free agents, but surely there are many exceptions. Take miscarriage. Although the pregnancy was partly brought about by human free agency, the miscarriage was not.

Whether a natural disaster kills humans (including babies/children) may be contingent on "where a family chooses to live in a certain year," but God could avert their death by giving them advance warning of an imminent natural disaster. That wouldn't destabilize the natural order or infringe on their freedom. Far from violating their freedom of choice, advance warning would expand their freedom of choice by giving them another, better option. More opportunities to choose from. So I don't see how invoking the freewill defense, even if we grant its key assumptions, will salvage your position.

**vi)** No, the double effect principle doesn't not apply in this particular case. The question, though, is whether, in



principle, it is always wrong to take the life of a baby (or innocent life). If not, then that's not intrinsically wrong.

**steve said...**

Thanks. A few final points. I'll leave the last word to you:

**i)** I don't think the Fall accounts for natural evils, per se. Just human death by natural evil. Actually, natural "evils" are often natural goods. They preserve the balance of nature. I have no reason to think that's a result of the Fall. They only become "evil" in relation to us if humans happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

**ii)** You seem to be suggesting my response is inconsistent. Keep in mind that I was responding to you on your own terms, as you chose to frame the issue.

**iii)** To speak of advance warning as "interference" with "free human day-to-day decisions" strikes me as special pleading. Enabling people to make informed decisions about their future is hardly equivalent to interfering with their libertarian decision-making process. To the contrary, that enhances their freedom of opportunity. So I think there's a tension in your appeal which you are reluctant to acknowledge.

Notice I didn't use suggest God suspending the laws of nature. Freewill theists sometimes argue that we need a stable environment with predictable consequences to make free decisions. But even granting that assumption, advance warning is a different principle.

**iv)** Finally, many kids/babies die every year from natural causes. Death by natural causes can be more painful and prolonged than death by a sword or spear. Although you can

say free choices figure in some of the deaths, I don't think it's plausible to universalize that claim.

## **And the walls came tumbling down**

***In my judgment, the only way to counter this for the inerrantists is to prove that the historical and archaeological evidence supports that account as it is in Joshua 6.***

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<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/08/06/the-inadequacy-of-the-inerrancy-model-pete-enns/>

***On the problem passages, I have one big comment: inerrantists tip toe and tap dance around the fall of Jericho's walls and end up denying the overwhelming conclusions of the archaeologists. Pete Enns is right here to challenge dust-in-the-eyes proposals of resolution to these sorts of problems.***

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<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/08/13/well-versed-inerrancy/>

Several issues:

**i)** There's the question of personal and professional ethics. McKnight used to teach at TEDS. That's a seminary committed to inerrancy. Yet he's attacking inerrancy. Has he changed his mind? Or did he dissemble about his true views when he was there?

**ii)** Biblical archeology is a wonderful discipline. But it has inherent limitations. Unless we know what Jericho looked like in the 2nd millennium BC, from one century to the next, we don't know what it looked like before or after the Conquest. Not to mention over 3000 years of subsequent erosion, reuse of preexisting materials, &c. So what's the basis of comparison?

**iii)** Do proof and disproof have the same burden of proof? Does archeological proof that something happened, something existed, have the same evidentiary onus as archeological disproof that something never happened, never existed?

**iv)** Josh 6 is, in itself, historical and archeological evidence for the event in question. Written records are a major source of archeological evidence.

**v)** Why are inerrantists required to supply corroborative evidence? The area where I grew up has changed drastically in just 50 years. Many of my old haunts are now unrecognizable. From memory, I can mentally reconstruct what used to be there. But only someone who lived through that period is in a position to do so. And when that generation dies, those memories are lost. That knowledge is gone.

**vi)** Incidentally, McKnight is a prominent Arminian. Once again, I'm struck by the fact that Arminians, especially in academia, are more liberal than their Calvinist counterparts.



## David and Goliath

I'm going to comment on some related statements by Arminian theologian Randal Rauser:

<http://randalrauser.com/2014/08/the-beheading-of-goliath-and-the-beheading-of-syrian-soldiers/>

<http://randalrauser.com/2013/11/is-it-time-to-reestablish-state-based-beheading/#comment-1109747985>

***First, every person is informed in their reading of the Bible by moral (and rational) intuitions. Tolstoy believed that witnessing the act of killing another person punitively allowed him to see it was wrong. I agree with him on that. I suspect we would also agree that this moral perception is a God-given truth-producing faculty. You might consider it one of the deliverances of what is classically called "general revelation".***

---

**i)** There's an elementary difference between *claiming* that your moral intuitions transcribe general revelation, and *proving* it. All we're getting from Rauser is his tendentious assertion. It's very convenient to baptize his radical chic social conditioning as "general revelation."

**ii)** Clearly, Bible writers and their target audience didn't share Rauser's sensibilities. The same holds true for ancient and medieval people generally, as well broad swaths of the modern world. If Rauser's "moral intuitions" map onto general revelation, why aren't his views more widespread in human history? If anything, his perspective represents a tiny, modern, ethnocentric viewpoint. Something you find among certain Western elites.

*Second, as long time readers of my blog would know, I take a Christocentric approach to reading the Bible. I believe that Jesus unveils the illegitimacy of redemptive violence. And that becomes a key principle to read the rest of the Bible.*

---

What about NT depictions of Jesus as a divine warrior (e.g. 2 Thes 1:6-9; Rev 19:11-21)?

*Finally, we need to deal with the facile assumption that the Bible is a revelation something like the Qur'an. It isn't. While I do believe that every word of the Bible is minimally human words that were divinely appropriated, that doesn't mean that the human voice is equivalent to the divine voice.*

---

I agree with him that the Koran isn't revelatory in the same sense as the Bible. That's because Muhammad was a false prophet. The Koran isn't divine revelation at all.

The Bible typically identifies prophetic words with God's words. That's what distinguishes a true prophet from a false prophet. A true prophet transmits God's message.

*Last week the world gaped in horror at a photo posted to Instagram by Jihadist Khaled Sharrouf. The photo depicts Sharrouf's seven year old son proudly holding up the decapitated head of a Syrian soldier. The moral judgment was unequivocal. "Appalling!" "Disgusting!" "Evil!"*

---

**i)** Problem with Rauser's attempted moral equivalence is that he has the hero and the villain backwards. The proper analogy would make Goliath parallel Sharrouf, whereas Rauser implicitly makes David parallel Sarrouf, or his son.

**ii)** On a related note, killing, per se, isn't wrong. A particular method of killing, per se, isn't wrong. Who is killing whom for what reason is morally relevant.

*This moral revulsion provides an opportune time to turn to one of the*



*most familiar stories in the Bible, one that has provided fodder for countless Sunday school lessons. As you might have guessed, I speak of David's defeat of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.*

---

**i)** Rauser's always on the look-out for a wedge issue to undermine Christian faith in Biblical revelation. Problem is, Rauser's position isn't consistently Christian or consistently secular. Attacking the Bible would make more sense if he were an atheist (although atheism is morally self-refuting). It makes no sense for Rauser to put Christians on the defensive for believing the Bible. Christianity is a revealed religion. Logically, Rauser's view of Scripture should lead him, not to liberalize his theology, but to drop all pretense of Christianity.

**ii)** Let's assume for the sake of argument that David's action was morally wrong. So what? In narrative theology, the reader can't infer that the narrator approves of whatever he narrates. Even if David's action was morally wrong, that doesn't mean 1 Sam 17 is morally defective. The Bible records many events it doesn't condone. Historians do that. Historians report events without endorsing the events they report.

*While we don't know David's age, he is described as a "youth" (KJV) or "little more than a boy" (NIV) (v. 42). Both of these are translations of the Hebrew*

**“na`ar” . (Cf. “na’ar,” Expository  
Dictionary of Bible Words, ed. Stephen  
Renn (Hendrickson, 2005), p. 176.)**

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According to the narrative, David already had a track record of killing bears and lions (vv34-37). He had to be strong enough to use primitive weapons to kill major predators. Minimally, that suggests a young adult (at least in his upper teens).

And this refers to *past* events. He'd been guarding his father's sheep for several years prior to the encounter with Goliath.

***One can surmise that he was not a diminutive child given that Saul, an individual of formidable size, attempts to dress David in his own tunic (v. 38), not to mention David’s impressive claim to have defeated both lion and bear (v. 36). Regardless, even if David was a formidable young man, he was still likely in his pre-teen or early teen years.***

---

"Regardless"? How is it "still likely" that he was in his pre-teen or early teen years if he could kill lions and bears at close quarters? And he was tall enough that wearing Saul's

armor (Saul being the tallest Israelite around) wasn't patently ridiculous.

*So how old was David, exactly? We don't know, but we can make a ballpark guess. David was the youngest of eight sons, the eldest three of whom had followed their father into battle (vv. 12-14), a fact that suggests the youngest five were not yet of battle age.*

---

**i)** Why would Jesse risk sending *all* his adult sons into battle? Isn't three more than enough? What would Jesse have to fall back on if all his sons were killed in battle?

**ii)** Presumably, Jesse needs some of his sons around to help run the family business. Keep in mind explicit military exemptions (Deut 20:5-8). There's a distinction between *compulsory* military service and the minimum age of *eligibility*.

**iii)** V12 says Jesse was an old man. So old that he delegated the responsibilities of pater familias to his eldest son. Cf. D. Tsumura, **THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL** (Eerdmans 2007), 447. Since ancient Jews usually married young, Jesse probably began fathering kids when he was in his mid-teens. If he was an old man by the time of the account, all his sons could well be grown men.

*So it is likely that David was about 5-6 years older than the son of Khaled Sharrouf. With this in mind, let's revisit the horror of witnessing Sharrouf's son carrying the Syrian soldier's head. Would our moral assessment have changed if the boy had been 12 or 13? Or would we still consider that an act of indefensible barbarism?*

---

Yes, it does make a difference whether a father is exploiting his prepubescent boy, instead of a young adult acting on his own volition.

*And the issue is not merely about the involvement of children.*

---

David wasn't a "child."

*In our day and age we generally consider the desecration of corpses (whether of civilians or soldiers) to be morally indefensible.*

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In context, I disagree. Rauser is confusing ethics with etiquette. In context, Goliath was shaming the Israelite army. He challenged the enemy to single combat. Champion warfare.

This is about winning through dishonoring your adversary, as the representative of his armed forces. Dispatching and dishonoring Goliath spares a lot of lives on both sides. Desecrating his body (assuming that was the motive) is a small price to pay to avoid massive bloodshed on both sides. Rauser's moral intuitions are seriously skewed.

***And that includes the beheading of corpses whilst treating the head as a trophy.***

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That assumes Goliath was already dead when David beheaded him. But the Hebrew is ambiguous. It may just as well be the case that Goliath was stunned, and decapitation was the quickest, simplest way of killing him. With an opponent like Goliath, you wouldn't expect David to take any chances. And this was, after all, a fight to the death.

Moreover, Goliath was heavily armored, whereas his throat was exposed, in his prostrate position. Beheading him may have been the easiest way to finish him off, rather than trying to impale a vital organ.

***This leaves us with some important questions. Does this divergence between our sensibilities and those of the ancient***

*Israelites reflect merely culturally relative differences? If so, then it follows that we might be mistaken to extend a moral censure to the practice in contemporary Syria. But if we insist that the desecration of corpses in this manner is objectively morally wrong how should we think of the practice in ancient Israel?*

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If we were living in the ANE, we'd have to adapt to ANE warfare. That doesn't mean we'd do whatever heathen warriors were prepared to do. But demoralizing the Philistine army to make them retreat is preferable to sacrificing your own troops in an unnecessary battle. It says something about Rauser's "moral intuitions" that he thinks decorum is more important than avoiding gratuitous bloodshed.

## Pygmalion

I'm going to comment on some related statements by Arminian theologian Randal Rauser:

*The same is true for the Bible itself. The text has many images of violence on which Christians rarely pause to reflect. We've learned to read many of these passages selectively. (See, for example, my article "On reading the Bible's texts of terror".) Others we don't read at all. When I read Ezekiel 16 to students they are aghast as they see God depicted as a horrifying, abusive husband who plans the vicious murder of his own (adulterous) wife.*

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<http://randalrauser.com/2014/04/lets-talk-about-violence-discussions-on-the-bible/>

*Christians and other religious people do need to confront and reflect upon depictions of God as an abusive consort within their traditions. For example, I*

*regularly challenge Christians to consider Ezekiel 16, a passage that depicts Yahweh in terms that would immediately be considered abusive were they applied to any other agent. To fail to reflect on this text while decrying this kind of behavior in all other circumstances is a recipe for cognitive dissonance. Consequently, we do need to reflect on these types of images and in what sense they are to be appropriated and/or critiqued within communities of faith.*

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<http://randalrauser.com/2014/08/god-as-an-abusive-boyfriend/>

*Lanier completely ignores all the morally problematic depictions of God in the Bible. To take but one example, in Ezekiel 16 God is described as adopting Jerusalem like an abandoned child and then, when she reaches sexual maturity, as taking her as a romantic consort (Ez. 16:6-8). That's awkward enough. But after Jerusalem then becomes promiscuous God becomes enraged and marshals a mob that can "stone" Jerusalem and*



*“hack [her] to pieces with their swords” (v. 40). Only after Jerusalem is finally lying dead and dismembered in the dust does God’s wrath subside (v. 42)*

*This is an extremely disturbing description of God as acting like the worst kind of abusive husband. And any apologist who is going to appeal to the “biblical teaching on God” had better be prepared to address such deeply disturbing images.*

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<http://randalrauser.com/2014/06/christianity-on-trial-a-review/>

**i)** I don't know if Rauser is simply incompetent, or if he willfully misrepresents the material to further his theological agenda. He probably misrepresents the material because his theological compromise requires him to misrepresent the material. He used to be a conservative Christian. He's moved far to the left of the theological spectrum. He's trying to cling to some semblance of Christianity while repudiating Biblical revelation.

**ii)** Ezk 16 is ugly. Ezk 16 was meant to be ugly. This isn't a difference between a backward, sexist prophet and how sensitive modern readers view the same situation.

In this chapter (as well as chap. 23), the prophet goes out of his way to be offensive. He's using graphic, ugly imagery for shock value. He's trying to get under the skin of

hardened sinners. The description is deliberately cringe-worthy.

**iii)** This is an allegory. A very anthropomorphic allegory.

Some scholars deny that classification because they think an allegory demands one-to-one correspondence between each detail and what it represents, but that's a wooden understanding of allegory. Even in Dante, many of the details are window-dressing. So this is basically an allegory, although the underlying historical referents break through from time to time—since the allegorical depiction is just a means to an end and not a literary masterpiece for its own sake.

**iv)** An allegory operates at two levels: the fictional narrative and what it symbolizes. It's crucial to interpret each level consistently. *God* doesn't adopt the woman. Rather, a *man* adopts the woman (baby girl). You may say the man stands for God, but if you're going to take it to the next level, then you need, at the same time, to say the woman stands for the Israelites. God is to the man as the woman is to (personified) Jerusalem. It's the man (in the allegory) who relates to the woman. *God* doesn't relate to the woman. That confuses what's inside the story with what's outside the story. Confounds the fictional characters with the external referents.

**v)** The allegory is not about men and women. Not about how men should treat women or vice versa. That's not its concern. In terms of the intended referents, the woman stands for men as much as women. She symbolizes male and female Israelites. The allegory assigns to men as well as women the status of the adopted girl/wife/prostitute.

**vi)** In the Mosaic law, adultery was a capital offense for men and women alike.

**vii)** In the allegory, the woman is burned/put to the sword, not because that was the legal punishment for an adulteress, but because that foreshadows the actual fate of the apostate Jews when Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians. That's a military image, not a judicial image. Inhabitants hacked to pieces by invading soldiers. Cities torched.

**viii)** Among other things, the residents of Jerusalem were guilty of child sacrifice (Ezk 16:20-21). That's the kind of literal infidelity which this allegory figuratively depicts.

**ix)** The allegory has elements of folklore, like Shaw's **PYGMALION**. Pauper to princess. A mentor falls in love with his youthful charge. Does Rauser think Pygmalion is "awkward enough"? Even at the allegorical level, this isn't child marriage.

Of course, it would be inappropriate for *God* to take a consort, but that objection confuses the allegory with what it stands for. In the allegory, *God* doesn't take a consort. Rather, her human benefactor does.

**x)** Instead of being offended by what God says should offend us, Rauser is offended by what God says. A complete moral inversion.

**xi)** Is this really the first time that Rauser's students at Taylor seminary had ever read Ezk 16? Christians need to know what's in the Bible.

Of course, they may be aghast, not at the real meaning of the allegory, but Rauser's twisted interpretation. You need to understand Scripture. Don't wait until someone like Rauser comes along, with his subversive agenda.

**xii)** In the allegory, a benefactor discovers a newborn girl who was left to die. He adopts her. When she matures and "blossoms," he falls in love with her. He not only makes her his wife, but his queen. But she repays his love and kindness by becoming a prostitute. He's enraged.

(There's a Hebrew pun on nudity and exile, which have the same root word.)

That's the allegory. It trades on common primal emotions. Passion, compassion, ingratitude, betrayal, rage, revenge.

Don't confuse the allegory with the reality it represents. The allegory is just a rhetorical vehicle.

**xiii)** Although the Bible would be a nicer book without Ez 16, the world wouldn't be a nicer place without Ezk 16. This chapter presages the Babylonian deportation. The horrors were only too real, as well as the wickedness which precipitated that punishment.

## Daniel and Jerusalem

*The climax to which chap. 8 looks lies in the crisis in the second century BC...The Antiochene crisis is heralded by the death of one high priest and the wickedness of another (26)...its real focus lies on the events of the 160s.*

*In Jewish and Christian tradition, Gabriel's promise has been applied rather to later events: the birth of the Messiah, Jesus' death and resurrection, the fall of Jerusalem, various subsequent historical events, and the still-future manifesting of the messiah. Exegetically such views are mistaken. The detail of vv24-27 fits the second-century BC crisis and agrees with allusions to this crisis elsewhere in Daniel. The verses do not indicate that they are looking centuries or millennia beyond the period to which chaps. 8 and 10-12 refer...The passage refers to the Antiochene crisis. J. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Word 1989), 266-67.*

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That's the standard liberal interpretation. Ironically, it backfires even on its own terms, posing a dilemma for the liberal interpretation. In particular:

**And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. (Dan 9:26).**

This predicts the destruction of the Second Temple as well as the destruction of Jerusalem. Problem is, neither event took place during the Antiochean crisis. And this isn't some incidental detail, given the central importance of both in Judaism.

If, according to the liberal reconstruction, the anonymous author of Daniel was writing "prophecy" after the fact, if he was writing history in the guise of prophecy, how could he be so inaccurate about something so important and so well-known—both to himself and his immediate audience?

Since, moreover, as Goldingay rightly points out, we need to interpret these verses as a literary unit, if 9:26 doesn't fit the 2C BC situation, then that reorients the other passages. In retrospect, Dan 9:26 is a prediction which was actually fulfilled in the Fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) and Bar Kokhba revolt (132-36 AD).

## Near to the heart of God

In many writings, John Walton promotes the view that Gen 1 presents an antiquated view of the universe. One of his supporting arguments is that this isn't the only instance of outmoded science in Scripture. In his new book, **THE LOST WORLD OF SCRIPTURE** (coauthored with Brent Sandy), he says Bible writers attributed emotional and cognitive processes to the heart, kidneys, and entrails. There are, however, several problems with his argument:

i) Walton would be the first to claim that Bible writers had negligible understanding of human gross internal anatomy. Ancient Jews didn't dissect human corpses. So not only, according to Walton, would they not know the true functions of each internal organ, but even their number or general placement.

But that raises a question: how do Bible scholars and Bible translators know what the Hebrews words are even referring to? What are the intended correlates of these terms if OT writers didn't even know what the human body looks like on the inside when you open up the chest cavity and poke around (like a surgeon or coroner)?

That's reflected in Walton's equivocal ascriptions, when he oscillates between the heart, kidneys, and entrails as the source of emotional and cognitive processes. But those aren't interchangeable organs. How can OT writers intend to attribute reason or emotion to the "kidneys" if they couldn't even point to which organ was the kidney?

So his argument generates a dilemma. To the extent that OT writers, and ancient Jewish readers, knew next to

nothing about the internal anatomy of humans, how could they attribute emotional or cognitive processes to particular organs?

**ii)** Another basic problem with Walton's inference is that OT writers also attribute divine emotional and cognitive processes to God's "heart" (e.g. Gen 6:6; 8:21; Hos 11:8). But by Walton's logic, that would mean OT writers thought God was a corporeal, humanoid being with a physical heart. If, on the other hand, Walton denies that, then why assume the attribution is figurative in God's case, but literal in man's case? Why not at least allow for the possibility (or probability) that it's a poetic or idiomatic metaphor in both cases?

**iii)** In addition, there's evidence that ancient Near Easterners believed in the afterlife. Take Biblical prohibitions against necromancy. If, however, the dead could still think and feel emotion, then emotional and cognitive processes were separable from internal organs.

Given how much stock Walton puts in the conceptual world of the ANE to supply the "cognitive environment" for OT writers, surely that should figure in his interpretation. If ghosts could still reason and feel emotion, then their psychological makeup was independent of the body.



## Why inerrancy matters

What's the practical value of inerrancy? One evangelical apologist who says he personally affirms inerrancy nonetheless demotes it to a "tertiary" doctrine. And what about those who openly deny inerrancy?

It's not hard to see the results. When people deny the inerrancy of Scripture, they no longer take it seriously. It ceases to be an authority—much less the final authority—in their lives. They cease to be guided—much less governed—by the word of God. Instead, they manipulate the Bible to endorse whatever they believe or disbelieve. They no longer live in submission to the lordship of God.

Of course, some people laud that consequence. They don't think Scripture should have that kind of authority in our lives. And that makes sense if you're an atheist. That makes sense if you don't think Christianity is a revealed religion. That makes sense if you don't think we are creatures of a sovereign God.

But that doesn't make sense if you profess to be a Christian.

## Calvinism is not the problem

Calvinism is deeply unpopular in some circles. But Calvinism is not the problem. If there *is* a problem, *reality* is the problem. Calvinism is a very realistic theology, and that's what provokes the backlash.

Same thing with Scripture. The Bible has many enemies, both inside and outside the church, because the Bible is unsparingly realistic. The Bible is not the problem. If there is a problem, reality is the problem.

For instance, you have professing Christians who are deeply offended by OT warfare. They "solve" the problem by censoring the Bible. They may consign the offending passages to fiction.

It's as if you had a film censor living in Mogadishu. He edits out all the violence in **BLACKHAWK DOWN** because that's too gruesome and graphic. After the violent scenes in **BLACKHAWK DOWN** wind up on the cutting room floor, he can revise the rating from R to PG. It's now suitable for family viewing. Problem solved!

He then exits the editing room to go outside, where he gingerly picks his way through the body-strewn streets of Mogadishu.

Likewise, you have professing believers who rewrite the story to give it happy ending. Universalists. Or Jerry Walls, with his theory of postmortem salvation. Or William Lane Craig, who supposes that God shakes the dice in his dice cup so that not a single person who never heard the Gospel

in this life would believe it even if he had he been evangelized.

Like filming a Disney Princess flick during the Siege of Sarajevo, the contrast between reality and wishful thinking is a bit jarring. Some professing believers have a very compartmentalized outlook. They take great pains to sanitize the text of Scripture, yet they live in a world that bears a striking resemblance to Scriptural depictions.

If there's a problem, it's not with God's word, but with God's world.

## I know better than Jesus

I'm going to comment on a statement by Arminian theologian Randal Rauser:

<http://randalrauser.com/2014/06/did-god-really-harden-pharaohs-heart/#comment-1439412117>

Randal Rauser

*Calling Jonah a prophet doesn't mean Jesus thought Jonah was a historical personage. A contemporary pastor could make an illustration and refer to "Bilbo the explorer". That wouldn't mean Bilbo was a historical figure.*

---

In addition to the Book of Jonah, the OT treats Jonah as a historical figure:

**He restored the border of Israel from Lebohamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher (2 Kgs 14:25).**

Back to Rauser:

***Moreover, even if Jesus did think Jonah was historical, that doesn't mean we should. See my article on Jesus' errant theological beliefs.***

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If you want to know what's true, don't ask Jesus—ask Randal Rauser. Even Jesus needs Rauser to help correct his errant theological beliefs.

## Christianity ex nihilo

Arminian theologians like Randal Rauser and Roger Olson keep trying to decouple the Christian faith from the OT :

<http://randalrauser.com/2014/06/did-god-really-harden-pharaohs-heart/>

*This is a question laden with dubious assumptions. You're assuming here that the credibility of the Deuteronomic history resides in the degree to which it corresponds with some set of past historical events.*

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How's that a dubious assumption?

*This assumption has been repeatedly challenged by biblical scholars and theologians over the last fifty years from Brevard Childs to Hans Frei to George Lindbeck to my friend Yoram Hazony.*

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Compare how little faith he has in Bible history with how much faith he has in liberal scholars. It's not as if Bible critics were eyewitnesses to OT history. It's not as if they're

in a position to correct the record because they saw what really went down.

***From a Christian perspective, my faith rests in the historical life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The faith doesn't rest on the historicity of particular OT events.***

---

Yes, the Christian faith is a hermetically-sealed religion that fell from the sky in the 1C. It doesn't rest on picayune details like God calling Abraham out of Ur. Doesn't rest on God making a covenant with Abraham to bless the Jews and Gentiles. Doesn't rest on God delivering the Jews from Egyptian bondage in fidelity to the Abrahamic covenant (Exod 2:24-25; cf. Gen 12:2-3; 15:13-16). Doesn't rest on whether David ever existed. Doesn't rest on God making a covenant with David—or attendant prophecies about a future Davidic Messiah. Doesn't rest on God restoring the Babylonian exiles to the land, in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy.

Even though Matthew, John, Luke-Acts, Romans, Hebrews, &c, constantly ground the Christian faith in particular OT events, it makes no difference if those are nonevents.

BTW, does Rauser think the Gospels are historically accurate? Given his general outlook, surely he regards many reported speeches, incidents, and miracles in the Gospels as fictional additions or legendary embellishments.

***Go back to the Adamic fall narrative as an example. Whether there was a historical fall or not, the narrative functions minimally to elucidate the universal sense of fallenness and alienation that characterizes the human race.***

---

A universal "sense of fallenness" absent a historical fall. That would be delusional.

***What about the main story of the Deuteronomic history? Well here's a concrete issue for you. The archaeological evidence doesn't support the destruction of Jericho within the timeline provided by the Joshua narrative. Is this a problem for your faith.***

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The timeline is disputed (e.g. Bryant Wood).

Moreover, Rauser fails to distinguish between the historicity of the event, and what trace evidence may survive fire, erosion, or the reuse of building materials.



## Having mercy on whom he will

I'm going to comment on a post by Arminian theologian Randal Rauser:

<http://randalrauser.com/2014/06/did-god-really-harden-pharaohs-heart/>

Let's set the stage for why God hardening Pharaoh's heart poses such a problem for Arminian theology:

**i)** Arminians (e.g. apologists, philosophers, theologians) typically argue that human agents can do otherwise in the same situation. They consider this a necessary precondition of human culpability. Moreover, they think this exculpates God.

But in Exodus, God hardens Pharaoh's heart to prevent Pharaoh from giving in too soon. If Pharaoh had the freedom to do otherwise, he'd be in a position to scuttle God's design. Divine hardening ensures his resistance to the divine command.

**ii)** Apropos (i), the narrative distinguishes between God's secret will and his revealed will:

**2 You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. 3 But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply**

## **my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt (Exod 7:2-3).**

On the one hand, Pharaoh is commanded to liberate the Israelites. Yet God's ulterior purpose is to make Pharaoh disobey his command. That's instrumental to God's goal (Exod 7:5; 9:14; 14:4). God subverts compliance to further his ends.

Yet Arminians consider the distinction between God's secret will and God's revealed will duplicitous—especially when God commands what God prevents.

**iii)** In addition, Paul uses the divine hardening of Pharaoh's heart to illustrate divine election and reprobation (Rom 9). But double predestination is anathema to Arminians.

Now let's turn to Rauser's argument:

*Let's shift gears for a moment and take a look at a passage from Psalm 104 which describes in eloquent terms God's action in the world. In the following passage the psalmist describes God's role in the flood...Note that this passage links the flow of water directly to the divine will. And it isn't just the flood. The rest of the psalm continues in similar fashion in that it describes events in nature as resulting from the divine will acting directly upon*

*the world. God governs the flow of waters into ravines (v. 10), he makes grass and plants grow (v. 14), he makes wine (v. 15) [presumably this means God controls the process of fermentation], he controls the cycling of the celestial bodies (v. 19) and the coming of night (v. 20), he feeds creatures (v. 27), he sustains life by giving his Spirit (v. 30) and takes life by withdrawing his Spirit (v. 29). Needless to say, this ancient near eastern conception of the God/world relation is very different from the way people think about divine action today. If we want to understand the flow of water in a flood, we turn not to the oracle or prophet. We turn to the hydrologist. To be sure, this is not to exclude instances of special divine action in the world. But it is to understand any such instances of special divine action to be occurring within a world of nature in which created things have their own increated properties, potentialities and law-like relations.*

---

Several glaring problems with Rauser's analysis:

i) There was no ANE conception of "the divine will acting directly upon the world." For one thing, that's because most ANE cultures were polytheistic. Israel was the conspicuous exception. In ANE religion generally, there was no one God who made everything happen.

i) Rauser acts as if Ps 104 is teaching occasionalism. That natural events happen apart from second causes. They are the unmediated effect of God's direct causation. But the psalm itself belies that. In v15, did the Psalmist think God ordinarily provides us with instant wine? No. Wine production ordinarily requires viniculture. Indeed, that's alluding to in v14.

Likewise, in v21, did the Psalmist think God made freshly killed prey fall out of the sky to feed lions? No. In order to eat, lions still had to hunt. Indeed, that's alluded to in v21.

So the Psalmist doesn't think divine provision bypasses natural means or mechanisms. Indeed, the Psalm is describing natural processes. God doesn't quench the thirst of animals apart from watering holes supplied by streams and rainfall. Ps 104 is describing an ecosystem, involving intramundane causality.

***We still read Psalm 104 with profit as an inspired poetic hymn while recognizing we don't share the same thought-world as the original author. We can share with that original author a sense of the divine***

***sovereignty and providential governance  
without sharing his direct command  
framework for divine action.***

---

i) What does Rauser think *providence* means if not natural periodic processes?

ii) Also, notice that despite his throwaway line about the inspiration of the Psalm, he repudiates the teaching of the Psalm regarding the nature of divine action in the world. "Inspiration" is a cosmetic word he uses to maintain pious appearances, but he considers the Psalm to reflect an outmoded notion of how the world works. The Psalm makes false claims about divine agency.

***I noted above that we can share the  
writer of the psalm's view of God's  
sovereignty and providence without  
accepting his denial of an autonomous  
sphere of nature.***

---

Notice the false dichotomy. The fact that natural events are normally the result of physical cause and effect relations doesn't render them autonomous in relation to *God*. God can always override the automatic setting—and sometimes does.

*Now let's turn back to the Exodus narrative. Countless readers have been perplexed by the seamless way the author describes God hardening Pharaoh's heart with Pharaoh hardening his own heart. The picture of God directly determining the human will calls to mind the images in Psalm 104 of God directly determining the water's course and other natural events. This brings us to the conclusion. Just as the ancient authors of scripture freely saw nature as the product of direct divine willing, so it was for human agents: the interrelation of divine will to human will was as seamless as divine will to water flow.*

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Having misinterpreted his prooftext (Ps 104), Rauser then deploys his misinterpreted prooftext to misinterpret Exodus. At least he's consistently wrong.

*But today we understand an autonomous sphere of human mind and will as surely as we recognize an autonomous sphere of hydrological laws.*

---

Notice how he begs the question. Many philosophers reject the attempt to compartmentalize the human mind and will from the causal nexus in which human agents exist and operate.

*Likewise, we can accept the writer of Exodus' view of God's sovereignty and providence without accepting his denial of an autonomous sphere of human willing.*

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**i)** Rauser admits that if you accept the text *as is*, divine hardening contradicts freewill theism.

**ii)** His solution is to disbelieve what the text says is true. At one level, I appreciate his concession speech. Arminianism can only defend itself against Calvinism by denying the witness of Scripture.

*In each case, God accommodates to ancient theological thought-forms to communicate important theological truths. We can recognize the truths presented without accepting the ancient thought-form through which they are conveyed.*

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**i)** That's completely ad hoc. How does he separate the true elements of the text from the false elements of the text? The text itself doesn't split into true and false elements. That distinction is imposed on the text in spite of the text, from the outside. It artificially pries the text apart.

**ii)** Moreover, his treatment cuts against the grain of the text. If, in reality, Pharaoh was an autonomous agent, then he could relent at any stage of the confrontation with Moses. The whole point of divine hardening is that God acts on Pharaoh in such a way as to ensure that Pharaoh won't relent prematurely. Rauser's dismissive treatment of the text makes the "truth" the polar opposite of what the text enunciates. The text says God hardened Pharaoh to guarantee his noncompliance with the command. Rauser counters that Pharaoh's will operates in an autonomous sphere, which shields it from the very thing the text asserts. So Rauser's treatment systematically falsifies the text.

**iii)** Since Paul's use of Exodus came up in the course of Rauser's discussion, let's consider that as well. Here's one attempt to deflect its force:

*I suggest you check out N.T. Wright. He refocuses the context of Romans 9 from soteriology and on to ecclesiology where it belongs. Wright critiques both Arminians and Calvinists for reading the text through a Pelagian/Augustinian grid. Piper is an obvious example of that*



*kind of reading which is, to my mind, a profound misreading.*

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<http://randalrauser.com/2014/06/why-a-perfect-god-might-have-hardened-pharaohs-heart/#comment-1430518121>

**i)** But that's demonstrably false. In Rom 9-11, Paul is answering the question of why most Jews in his own day rejected the Messiah. For Paul, that's a salvation issue. Accepting or rejecting Jesus goes to the heart of the Gospel. Putting faith in Jesus saves you from the wrath of God. Believing in Jesus justifies you. It *is* about going to heaven or hell when you die.

**ii)** Moreover, as Rauser admits, it would be counterproductive for Arminians to side with Wright, for Arminians traditionally read Romans (Galatians, &c) soteriologically.

**iii)** More recently, some Arminians (e.g. Brian Abascino) resort to corporate election. But one basic problem with that interpretation is that, in Rom 9-11, Jews aren't hardened by God because they reject Jesus; rather, they reject Jesus because they are hardened by God. The corporate elective interpretation has the cause/effect relation exactly backwards.

That's the question Paul is addressing. Why do so many Jews in his own day reject the Messiah? His answer: because God has hardened them.

Conversely, some Jews in his own day did believe in Jesus. Paul himself is a case in point. So are his fellow apostles. What's the differential factor? Some believe while others

disbelieve because some were chosen to believe while others were hardened. That's Paul's explanation.

Now, some commentators think that's temporary. They think Rom 11 teaches an endtime restoration of the Jews. Even if that's the case, it's too late for Paul's contemporaries. That generation was doomed—apart from a remnant.

## Archeological confirmation

Christian apologists often cite archeological corroboration of various Scriptural customs, persons, events, &c. But on the face of it, this appeal cuts both ways. If archeology is in a position to confirm Bible history, does that mean archeology is in a position to disconfirm Bible history?

Indeed, critics of the Bible cite examples where the archeological record allegedly contradicts the Bible. So where does that leave the evidentiary value of archeology in Christian apologetics?

**1)** To begin with, critics usually mount an argument from silence. They point to the lack of archeological evidence for various Biblical narratives or references. That, however, doesn't *contradict* Scripture. So the objection involves a bait-and-switch.

In addition, we wouldn't expect an abundance of archeological corroboration. Most of the evidence never survived. Moreover, place-names change over centuries, so identification can be difficult.

**2)** But there's another issue. For these are not symmetrical claims. If, say, Josephus and the NT both refer to John the Baptist, that demands a special explanation. It's highly unlikely that both would *accidentally* refer to John the Baptist. Rather, there must be a reason for their correspondence.

In principle, there are two potential reasons why two (or more) independent accounts refer to the same thing:

**i)** They refer to the same thing because they are based on the same event. A common event accounts for independent records of the same event. Because it really happened, it was reported. Indeed, reported in more than one source.

**ii)** In some cases, they may refer to the same thing because they share a common source. Even though two accounts may be independent of each other, they may be dependent on the same underlying source. In any case, their agreement commands our attention. It's impressive when two independent accounts report the same thing.

**3)** But if they disagree, that doesn't demand a special explanation. That may simply mean one had a better source of information than the other. By itself, their disagreement doesn't cast doubt on one account rather than another. One account can be true, even if it's flatly contradicted by another account. For instance, a court historian may say the king always wins, even if the king lost.

By contrast, if two different accounts correspond, this strongly suggests that both accounts are at least approximately correct, for it's not just a coincidence that two independent accounts refer to the same thing—as if they just so happen to *imagine* the same thing. Usually, an actual event gave rise to both accounts.

## Quirinius and the gunfight at O.K. Corral

I'm going to make a few observations about the census of Quirinius (Lk 2:1-2).

**i)** Richard Carrier thinks Luke contradicts Josephus. And he uses Josephus as his standard of comparison:

Josephus writes:

In the tenth year of Archelaus's government the leading men in Judaea and Samaria could not endure his cruelty and tyranny and accused him before Caesar...and when Caesar heard this, he went into a rage...and sent Archelaus into exile...to Vienna, and took away his property.[3.3]

So roughly ten years separate the death of Herod and the arrival of Quirinius. When was the census held in Judaea? Josephus says quite unequivocally that:

Quirinius made an account of Archelaus' property and finished conducting the census, which happened in the thirty-seventh year after Caesar's defeat of Antony at Actium. [3.4]

[http://infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/quirinius.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/quirinius.html)

**ii)** It's revealing to compare his confidence in Josephus with what Carrier says elsewhere:

Your doubts become stronger when you can't question the witnesses; when you don't even know who they are; when you don't have the story from them but

from someone else entirely; when there is an agenda, something the storyteller is attempting to persuade you of; when the witnesses or reporters are a bit kooky or disturbingly overzealous. John Loftus, ed. **THE CHRISTIAN DELUSION** (Prometheus 2010), 292.

Why doesn't Carrier apply his skeptical criteria to Josephus? Carrier can't very well question the ancient witnesses. He doesn't even know who they are. Moreover, Josephus is getting his information from someone else. And Josephus had an agenda.

**iii)** By conventional reckoning, the census of Quirinius took place about 40 years before Josephus was born. In the nature of the case, Josephus had no firsthand knowledge of the event. He relies on whatever his sources were. And his sources may rely on other sources.

**iv)** This also raises questions concerning how much ancient historians could know about relative chronology. Let's take a comparison. Consider the gunfight at O.K. Corral. Contemporary newspapers tell us that happened on October 26, 1881. But that's because newspapers were using the Gregorian calendar. When, however, we attempt to date the census of Quirinius, we don't have that kind of direct calendrical correlation. We have to reconstruct the date, as best we can.

Suppose our sources for the gunfight didn't give a date. Suppose they said it took place before W.W.I. Although that tells me the gunfight was earlier than W.W.I., it doesn't tell me how much earlier. It doesn't tell me if it happened before or after the Civil War.

Likewise, suppose our sources said it happened when Chester Arthur was president. But unless I know when Chester Arthur was president, that doesn't give me a date, or a year. Indeed, it doesn't even give me a relative chronology. For, unless I know the historical order of US presidents, knowing that the gunfight took place when Chester Arthur was president doesn't tell me if that happened before or after Ulysses Grant was president.

That's the thing about relative chronology: to know a little, you need to know a lot. To know that one event was earlier or later than another event, especially how much earlier or later, you have to know about the intervening events. If there are significant gaps in the record, you can't say how much earlier or later. You have a bare sequence, but the duration of the intervals is indeterminate.

**v)** The census of Quirinius and the gunfight at O.K. Corral have something else in common. These events became more famous with the passage of time. They didn't start out that way. There were ever so many shootouts in the Old West. In our own time, the gunfight at O.K. Corral is famous because Hollywood made it famous. And because Hollywood made it famous, historians go back and write about it. So you have a dialectical process. It was sufficiently well-known that Hollywood directors made movies about it. That, in turn, makes it more famous, which attracts additional historical investigation.

Likewise, Luke made the census of Quirinius a famous event. It wasn't that famous to begin with. As a result, our surviving records don't say that much about the career of Quirinius. He was just one among many barely-remembered Roman officials. More famous in death than in life. Immortalized by one verse in the Bible.





## Easter chronology

Evangelical scholars often struggle to synchronize who was at the empty tomb at what time. I'll make a few programmatic observations:

**i)** Inerrancy makes allowance for reporting events out of sequence.

**ii)** As a practical matter, it's often impossible to narrate a complex series of events in their chronological order. Take a historian writing about the Civil War. He couldn't adhere to a strictly chronological account even if he wanted to, because you have so many simultaneous or overlapping incidents at different places. What Northern or Southern politicians were doing at any given time. What Northern or Southern generals were doing at any given time.

**iii)** But here's another complication. Why assume the men and women who visited the empty tomb only did that once? If you were a follower of Jesus, and you discovered the tomb was empty, or you heard from others that the tomb was empty, would you only go there one time? Or would you return to the site several times that day, because it was so astonishing that you kept going back to see it again and again?

So, if we attempt to synchronize the relative order in which people went to the empty tomb, we should make allowance for some of the same people going there more than once on the same day.

## The Essenes on Daniel

*We now possess, in some Essene writings, works emanating from apocalyptic circles in Palestine at about the middle of the second century BC—the very setting in which Daniel is widely believed to have been composed. It is therefore noteworthy that, had the 70-Weeks prophecy been regarded in these circles as a prophecy after the event, relating to the murder of Onias III, they could by the use of their chronological scheme have provided it with a much more accurate date than 483-490 years after the Exile; but in point of fact they did not regard it as a fulfilled prophecy but as one yet to be fulfilled and did not relate it to Onias III but to the Davidic Messiah (See Table I on p257 and also pp232-234). R. Beckwith, *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian* (E. J. Brill 1996), 274-75.*

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## Christian priorities

*What I tell my students every year is that it is imperative that they pursue truth rather than protect their presuppositions. And they need to have a doctrinal taxonomy that distinguishes core beliefs from peripheral beliefs. When they place more peripheral doctrines such as inerrancy and verbal inspiration at the core, then when belief in these doctrines start to erode, it creates a domino effect: One falls down, they all fall down. It strikes me that something like this may be what happened to Bart Ehrman. His testimony in *Misquoting Jesus* discussed inerrancy as the prime mover in his studies. But when a glib comment from one of his conservative professors at Princeton was scribbled on a term paper, to the effect that perhaps the Bible is not inerrant, Ehrman's faith began to crumble. One domino crashed into another until*

*eventually he became 'a fairly happy agnostic.' I may be wrong about Ehrman's own spiritual journey, but I have known too many students who have gone in that direction. The irony is that those who frontload their critical investigation of the text of the Bible with bibliological presuppositions often speak of a 'slippery slope' on which all theological convictions are tied to inerrancy. Their view is that if inerrancy goes, everything else begins to erode. I would say that if inerrancy is elevated to the status of a prime doctrine, that's when one gets on a slippery slope. But if a student views doctrines as concentric circles, with the cardinal doctrines occupying the center, then if the more peripheral doctrines are challenged, this does not have an effect on the core.*

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<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2006/03/interview-with-dan-wallace.html>

This argument seems to be increasingly popular among some scholars and apologists (e.g. Dan Wallace, Craig

Blomberg, William Lane Craig, Mike Licona, Michael Patton). On this view, a dogmatic commitment to inerrancy is a "slippery slope" or "house of cards." Once you begin to question inerrancy, that has the "domino effect."

To this I'd say a few things:

**i)** Although we shouldn't make the Christian faith more demanding than God demands, by the same token, we shouldn't make the Christian faith less demanding than God demands. Indeed, we don't have the authority to tell people what biblical teachings they are free to jettison.

**ii)** Some professing Christians lose their faith because they had very crude notions of what inerrancy requires. Their false expectations were dashed. But there are nuanced models of inerrancy, viz.

Darrell Bock, "Precision and Accuracy: Making Distinctions in the Cultural Context That Give Us Pause in Pitting the Gospels against Each Other," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) 367-381.

<http://www.frame-poythress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/PoythressVernInerrancyAndTheGospels.pdf>

<http://www.frame-poythress.org/inerrancy-harmonization-and-the-synoptic-gospels-a-response-to-darrell-bock/>

<http://www.apologetics315.com/2008/03/book-review-historical-reliability-of.html>

**iii)** As scholars like Warfield have documented, verbal inspiration is the Bible's own doctrine of inspiration. That's not one among several theories of inspiration. That's not a "peripheral" doctrine. That's the "core" of divine communication.

**iv)** Finally, suppose, for the sake of argument, that Scripture is not inerrant. Suppose, when I die and go to heaven, I find out that I was wrong about inerrancy. Does that mean I was wrong to defend inerrancy in the here and now?

Although it's best to be right for the right reasons, it's better to be wrong for the right reasons than right for the wrong reasons. Let's take two examples:

**a)** Suppose I have a teenage daughter who's diagnosed with cancer. Unfortunately, it's a cancer with a 20% survival rate. Suppose I don't have her treated, because the odds are against her. Conversely, suppose I have her undergo treatment, but she dies anyway.

Which was the right thing to do? Well, if I have her undergo treatment, then, in a sense I was wrong, because the treatment was futile. Put another way, if I don't have her undergo treatment, there's a sense in which I was right, because even if she had undergone treatment, she was doomed.

But, of course, even though she only had a 1 out of 5 chance of survival, it was my parental duty to try to save her life. I didn't know ahead of time if therapy would be successful or unsuccessful. But there was so much to gain if it succeeded, and so little to lose if it failed.

If I deny her treatment, I'm factually right, but morally wrong. If I order treatment, I'm factually wrong but morally right.

We'd be justified in condemning a parent who denied her treatment, even if it might have proven futile. I didn't have the benefit of hindsight.

**b)** Let's take another example. Suppose I have a bedridden mother who lives with me. I have a nurse's aid visit everyday to change her or bathe her.

Suppose a category-5 hurricane is making a beeline for our neighborhood. It isn't feasible to evacuate my mother in her frail condition. I can stay behind, but I'd be risking my own life in the process. Or I can leave her behind and come back after the hurricane has passed over. It's possible that the hurricane will weaken or swerve before it makes landfall, but if I wait until the last minute to decide what to do, it will be too late to escape because the evacuation routes will be gridlocked. I'd be overtaken by the hurricane.

Suppose I stay behind. As it turns out, the hurricane swerved. My mother was never in danger. It was unnecessary for me to stay by her side.

Suppose I leave her behind. As it turns out, it was safe to leave her alone, then return a few hours later.

If I stay behind, there's a sense in which I was wrong, since she was never actually threatened by the hurricane.

But, of course, it's my filial duty to stay behind, even if that means we both die. If I leave her behind, and no harm comes to her, we both got lucky. But that hardly excuses me for deserting her in a crisis.



If I leave her behind, I'm factually right, but morally wrong.  
If I stay behind, I'm factually wrong, but morally right.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that some Christians have too much faith in Scripture. Suppose their excessive faith is misplaced.

Even if (ex hypothesi), they were wrong, they were wrong for the right reason. Their motives were God-honoring.

Even if (ex hypothesi), those who reject inerrancy turn out to be right, they were right for the wrong reason. Their motives were God-dishonoring.

## Blomberg on pseudonymity

Unfortunately, we have a number of otherwise conservative Bible scholars and Christian apologists who feel the need to hedge their bets. In this post I'm going to comment on some statements by Craig Blomberg on pseudepigrapha, from his **CAN WE STILL BELIEVE THE BIBLE?**

In fact, when it comes to postbiblical Jewish apocalypses, every known example is pseudonymous (173).

**i)** But isn't that observation counterproductive to his thesis? Why were no Intertestamental pseudepigrapha canonized? Did their pseudonymity ipso facto disqualify them from consideration?

To my knowledge, almost no Intertestamental pseudepigrapha are named after Jews who lived during the Intertestamental Period. Why is that? Does that mean there were no acknowledged prophets during the Intertestamental period? If any Jew from that period presented himself as a prophet, Jewry at large would dismiss his claims out of hand.

**ii)** Conversely, canonical writers like Amos, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (to name a few) were known to their contemporaries. Even if a later reader is coming to their works long after the prophet and his original audience lived and died, their works have a chain-of-custody.

By contrast, if a "prophecy," attributed to some luminary who lived and died centuries before, suddenly emerges out of the blue, that's inherently suspect. If it's authentic, where did it come from? If it originated in the distant past,

why is it only coming to light just now? Nothing in the present connects it to the past. It wasn't discovered.

*Plenty of other examples exist in ancient Jewish, Greek, and Roman circles for attributing a document to an author whom people would have known was no longer living, doing so as a way of crediting them for being a key resource or inspiration for the ideas contained in the newer work. Far from being deceptive, it was a way of not taking credit for the contents of a book when one's ideas were heavily indebted to others of a previous era (169).*

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**i)** That sounds almost admirable. But how does Blomberg know that's what motivated the pseudonymous author? In the nature of the case, the author couldn't maintain his pseudonymity if he named his real source. He'd had to drop the pose to credit the source. Since, therefore, the pseudonymous facade precludes him from naming his sources, what internal evidence is there from the document itself that his intention was not to take credit for the contents?

**ii)** Moreover, we have examples in Scripture (e.g. 1-2 Chronicles; Gospel of Luke) where the author explicitly names or alludes to sources of information. He doesn't

resort to a pseudonymous guise. He's upfront about sources.

In addition, Blomberg footnotes his claim as follows:

*Particularly frequently cited are Tertullian, Against Marcion 4.5 ("that which Mark published may be affirmed to be Peter's whose interpreter Mark was. For even Luke's form of the Gospel, men usually ascribed to Paul") and Mishnah, Berakot 5.5 ("a man's representative is himself") (262n102).*

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**i)** But doesn't that undercut rather than underwrite Blomberg's claim? Mark's Gospel isn't pseudonymous. Even if Peter is Mark's primary informant, the Gospel isn't named after Peter. Likewise, Paul is not the named author of Luke's Gospel.

**ii)** A problem with the Mishnaic quote is the failure to distinguish between a man's designated spokesman and someone who presumes to speak on behalf of another. Assuming (ex hypothesi) that some NT letters are pseudonymous, that's not because an apostle authorized them to speak for him.

On the other hand, it is an open question whether ancient Jews or Christians ever deemed the practice of pseudonymity acceptable for canonical Scripture (170).

**i)** Which is one of the problems. For instance, Paul signs his letters to authenticate his letters—a practice he began with 2 Thes 3:17. And that was apparently to forestall forgeries (2:2).

In that case, how could a deutero-Pauline epistle be morally innocent rather than inherently deceptive?

**ii)** Likewise, by OT criteria, a hallmark of a false prophet is speaking in God's name when God has not commissioned him and spoken to him. By that yardstick, a pseudonymous prophecy is ipso facto false prophecy.

**iii)** By the same token, Paul makes a big deal about his divine commission and direct revelation (Galatians 1-2). That's the basis of his apostolic authority. A deutero-Pauline epistle would lack those key credentials. The same considerations apply to 1-2 Peter.

**iv)** In addition, the author of 1 John claims to be a member of Christ's inner circle. An eyewitness to the ministry of Christ. (1 Jn 1:1-5). How can a pseudonymous author honestly feign that experience?

**v)** Why would anyone pay attention to Jude unless it was, in fact, written by one of Christ's stepbrothers?

**vi)** If NT pseudonymity was an accepted practice, why is Hebrews anonymous rather than pseudonymous?

David Aune conveniently summarizes...six different kinds of ancient pseudepigraphy: (1) works that are partly authentic but have been supplemented by later authors, (2) works written largely by later authors but relying on some material from the named authors, (3) works that are more generally influenced by the earlier authors who are named, (4) works from a "school" of writers ideologically descended

from the named authors, (5) originally anonymous works later made pseudonymous for one of these previous reasons, and (6) genuine forgeries intended to deceive (172).

Take the case of Jude. Is there any reason to think (1)-(5) are applicable to Jude?

All the candidates for NT pseudonymity are letters. But that's easier said than done. As Bauckham explains:

*All letters, including pseudepigraphal letters, must specify both the sender(s) and the recipient(s). In the case of pseudepigraphal letters the supposed author, named in the parties formula, is not the real author. But it is important to notice also, since the point is sometimes neglected, that the supposed addressee(s), specified in the parties formula, cannot be the real readers for whom the real author is writing. The supposed addressee(s) must (except in some special cases to be considered later) be a contemporary or contemporaries of the supposed author. Not only does the "I" in a pseudepigraphal letter not refer to the real author, but "you" does not refer to the real readers. The readers of a pseudepigraphal letter cannot read it as though they were being directly addressed either by the supposed author or by the real author*

*(except in the special cases to be noted later); they must read it as a letter written to other people, in the past.*

*The authentic real letter (type A) is a form of direct address to specific addressee(s). The pseudepigraphal letter, it seems, can only be this fictionally. The real author of a pseudepigraphal letter can only address real readers indirectly, under cover of direct address to other people.*

*The problem for the author in this case is that he wants his pseudepigraphal letter to perform for him and his readers something like the function which an authentic real letter from him to his readers would perform. He wants, under cover of his pseudonym, to address his real readers, but his genre allows his letter to be addressed only to supposed addressees contemporary with the supposed author. Thus, he needs to find some way in which material that is ostensibly addressed to supposed addressees in the past can be taken by his real readers as actually or also addressed to them.*

*However, in themselves these two expedients (AP6 and BP) only enable the pseudepigraphal writer to*

*address a general readership in general terms. They do not enable him to do what Paul did in his authentic letters, that is, to write material of specific relevance to specific churches in specific situations.*

*One way to do this was to address supposed addressees who were ancestors or predecessors of the real readers in a situation supposed not to have changed, in relevant respects, up to the present, so that the real readers are still in the same situation as the supposed addressees once were (type AP3).*

***"Pseudo-Apostolic Letters," The Jewish World Around the New Testament (Baker 2010), 129-31.***

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An obvious obstacle to that strategy is the brevity of the NT era. Except for the Apostle John (according to tradition), the Apostles and stepbrothers of Christ were dead by the 60s. So how could a pseudonymous letter, directed at the author's contemporaries, be plausibly addressed to their Christian predecessors or ancestors? How many Christian generations does the NT era allow for?



## When the Son of Man comes

**23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes (Mt 10:23).**

Liberal critics and outright unbelievers cite this as a classic case of failed prophecy. Attempts to defend the prophecy may look like special pleading.

However, even if this appears to be a failed prophecy to the modern reader, surely Matthew didn't think this was a failed prophecy. So our interpretation should be consistent with his understanding of the prophecy. That's not special pleading.

The liberal interpretation actually poses a dilemma for liberal critics. Liberal critics don't think Matthew was written by the apostle. They think it was written by an anonymous redactor. They date it late. Raymond Brown thinks Matthew might have been written anytime between 70-100 AD, although he favors 80-90. Finally, they don't think there's any presumption that Jesus actually spoke the words attributed to him in the Gospels. The authors exercised the literary license to invent sayings which they put on the lips of Jesus. But all these assumptions generate tensions for the liberal interpretation.

To begin with, the wording of 10:23 harkens back to the introductory verses:

**5 These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 And proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. 9 Acquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, 10 no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. 11 And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. 12 As you enter the house, greet it. 13 And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 14 And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. 15 Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.**

This seems to envisage a short-term mission. Something that not only took place within the lifetime of the Twelve,

but within the lifetime of Jesus. Something that happened during the public ministry of Christ.

Because Jesus can't be everywhere at once, he dispatches the Twelve as an extension of his own ministry. They are tasked to evangelize Galilee. So the context seems to be sending them out for a few weeks or months. They will rejoin him after they've completed their circuit. And, indeed, as we continue to read the narrative, the Twelve are back with Christ.

Yet liberal critics think 10:23 envisions the Parousia. But on that view, all this happened, or failed to happen, decades before Matthew was written. The mission in 10:5ff. took place around 30 AD. If, according to liberal dating, Matthew was written 50-60 years later (give or take), how could Matthew believe the Parousia occurred in the early 30s? How long would it take the Twelve to canvass Galilee? Not decades. Or even years.

Conversely, if this is a failed expectation, why would Matthew record or invent a failed prophecy?

If, however, Mt 10:23 refers to a long-range event, then when did it fail to come to pass? On the face of it, vv16-22 describes a different, more expansive mission—which includes outreach to the Gentile world. One explanation is that Matthew combined two different speeches: one about Jewish mission, the other about Gentile mission.

That complicates the question of when v23 refers to. But it's not as if vv16-22 has a specific time-frame. It's open-ended. Assuming (ex hypothesi) that v23 denotes the Parousia, it's the return of Christ which abruptly terminates *that* mission.

So this poses a dilemma for the liberal interpretation. If v23 reverts back to vv5-15, then it's too early, too self-enclosed, to fail. But if v23 takes in the more sweeping view of vv16-22, then there's nothing to limit that to a 1C Parousia.

It isn't necessary to settle on the right interpretation to show that the liberal interpretation is wrong. That's a separate issue.

Because the "coming of the Son of Man" alludes to Dan 7:13-14, R. T. France, thinks this refers to the Ascension. Conversely, Chamblin thinks the fall of Jerusalem is a type of the final judgment. In typology, certain kinds of events are both prophet and repeatable.

I'd also like to make a general observation on apparent cases of failed prophecy. I think many Bible readers forget that most Bible prophecies originate in visionary revelation.

The predictive prophecy is usually based on images of the future. Sometimes figurative imagery, sometimes more literal.

Images don't contain dates. Foreseeing the future doesn't tell the seer when that will happen. There's no time-index.

It's something you may recognize after the fact, but not before.

When critics say Bible prophecies failed, they overlook the mode of revelation. Taken by itself, an image of the future can't fail, in the sense that it doesn't come with date stamp.

Rather, it's a question of how and when the pictures of the future will align future events. That may be obvious once it

happens. That's rarely obvious before it happens.

Therefore, while it's often easy to identify a fulfilled prophecy, it's often hard to distinguish between a failed prophecy and outstanding prophecy. Considered ahead of time, an unfulfilled prophecy which has yet to transpire may look just like a failed prophecy. That's a classic case of "time will tell."

Take this passage:

**17 The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" 18 And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven (Lk 11:17-18).**

Commentators (e.g. J. Nolland, C. F. Evans) demonstrate that this is probably a visionary revelation. Exorcism represents the incipient defeat of Satan's kingdom. And the image of his fall from heaven symbolized that fact.

But the image all by itself doesn't tell you when that happened. You need more context to determine what past, present, or future event that matches.

In this case, Luke mentions the visionary source of the revelation—perhaps because it's such an arresting image. But in many cases, the visionary source may be an unstated presupposition.

## Soon for whom?

**The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place (Rev 1:1).**

This is often cited by unbelievers as a classic example of a failed prophecy. These things were "soon" to take place, but in retrospect, we know they didn't happen. Not soon. Not ever.

However, I'd like to examine the assumptions underlying that indictment. What counts as fulfillment of a prediction?

To some extent that depends on who (or what) the prediction was for or about. Who does it concern? Soon for *whom*?

Let's take a simple example:

**20 and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?'  
34 But a certain man drew his bow at random[a] and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded." 35 And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his**

**chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died (1 Kgs 22:20,34-35).**

That prediction was about Ahab. It was fulfilled when he died. A one-time fulfillment.

Now let's consider a more complex example:

**These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. 2 This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. 3 The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: 4 “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and**

daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. 8 For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, 9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.

10 “For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your



**fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile (Jer 29:1-14).**

**i)** In one respect, the fulfillment is straightforward. It was fulfilled 70 years later.

**ii)** However, who was the prophecy for or about? On the face of it, the prophecy was about the exiles. But that's somewhat ambiguous. It's not the same group for the duration. Most of the exiles who originally heard the prophecy didn't live to see it play out. So in that sense, it wasn't for *them*. It wasn't about *them*. That's why they are instructed to settle down. But it also looks ahead to the final exilic generation, who will return from exile.

Now let's take another example:

**18 If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (Jn 15:18-19).**

**i)** When was this fulfilled? The answer is bound up with the question of who it's for or about. It's a prediction about Christians generally. The kind of animus which every Christian generation can expect to face. It doesn't

necessarily apply to every individual, but to Christians as a class, in contrast to unbelievers as a class.

This prediction is fulfilled throughout the course of church history. It lacks a singular, one-time fulfillment. The fulfillment is diachronic because the prediction applies across generations of Christians.

**ii)** Suppose, for the sake of argument, this prediction included the word "soon." Suppose Jesus said, "You will soon be hated by the world."

Although Jesus didn't put it that way, that's implicit in what he said. If the world hates them because they are not of this world, then once the world becomes aware of them, they will be hated by the world. That will happen soon enough.

**iii)** Now, if this prediction was to take place "soon," does that mean it had to be fulfilled in the 1C? Would it be exclusive to 1C Christians?

It would be soon for everyone it was about. If the prediction is for Christians generally, and it will happen soon, then it's soon, not in relation to a particular period of time, but in relation to the lives of the referents. For whomever it was intended. It is soon for all interested parties. But what is soon for a 1C Christian isn't soon for a Medieval Christian, or vice versa.

**iv)** Which brings us back to Rev 1:1. When you think that was meant to be fulfilled isn't something you can derive from the adverb alone. Rather, you must determine who the prophecies in Revelation are about. It will be soon for *them*—whoever they are.

A preterist will say it's soon for 1C Christians. A premill will say it's soon for the final generation. An amil will say it's soon for Christians at different times. For instance, Revelation predicts persecution. From an amil standpoint, that's about Christians generally. For premils, that's about endtime Christians.

Likewise, Revelation predicts that dying Christians enter the rest of the blessed (14:13). That's true for all Christians, who die at any time.

## Daniel's fourth kingdom

*Our present day witnesses no Roman empire. This fact has required a slight shift from the positions enunciated in the early Jewish and Christian writings in that it has led many to postulate the coming of a "restored" Roman empire in some form. Others have tried to suggest ways in which the Roman empire might be considered to have continued in some form beyond the fall of Rome. This includes political models—of which dozens exist[12] - as well as religious models. Such "extended" empire views have changed as history has progressed. The "restored" empire view, on the other hand, has not required the same flexibility.*

*The "restored" empire view has its roots in early Church history, though the view itself is not early. When Irenaeus spoke of Rome breaking down into ten parts, he did not give any indication that he expected a gap of unknown length to intrude between the fall of Rome and the stage of the ten horns. In fact, we would not expect this gap to become part of the theory until Rome itself had*

*fallen. When do we first see this particular position, and what is its rationale?*

*Western Rome fell in 476, but interpreters of that period would not feel a mandate to adjust their view because the empire continued in the east and, of course, the Holy Roman Empire was later formed in the west. It would take no great imagination to see the fourth kingdom as still being in existence through that period.*

*The Eastern Empire fell in 1453, but even then the title of Roman Emperor continued to be used - by the Hapsburgs, for example the abdication of Francis II in 1806. Throughout this period any interpretation that saw the ten horns as still future understood that the Roman empire was still in existence.*

*It is only in the nineteenth century, when the existence of the Roman empire became much more difficult to maintain, that the view arises concerning an indeterminate length of time, a gap in prophecy, after which the Roman empire would be reconstituted as a ten-nation alliance. But this then is not the same view as that which had been*

held throughout previous Church history. Even in the nineteenth century the "restored" empire view is a difficult one to find.[13] It is more common to find the papacy identified with an "extended" empire view.

In summary, three positions are commonly held among evangelicals today, all of which posit Rome as the fourth empire: (1) The fourth empire and the ten horns are all in the past, and the kingdom of God is represented and fulfilled in the Church. Fulfillment is viewed as complete. This view is at least as old as Augustine. (2) The fourth kingdom is still in power through the continued influence (political, religious, cultural, etc.) of the Roman empire, but the ten-horns stage is still future. An early proponent of this view is Jerome, and it seems to be the most popular view, historically speaking. But it is held by very few today because of the historical difficulties. (3) The fourth kingdom is over, and we are now in a prophetic gap that will end when a ten-nation confederacy reconstitutes the Roman empire. This view is scarce, if not nonexistent, prior to the nineteenth century.

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[http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/29/29-1/29-1-pp025-036\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/29/29-1/29-1-pp025-036_JETS.pdf)

I find Walton's objection to the Roman interpretation odd.

**i)** To begin with, if we take the view that the fourth empire is past and the church age represents the kingdom of God, isn't that consistent with the Roman interpretation? You still have the chronological sequence of four successive kingdoms, leading up to Rome—and beyond. Christianity arises in the Roman era, but supplants it.

**ii)** However, why assume that "Rome" is past? Walton seems to operate with a narrowly political definition. But surely there's a sense in which "Rome" as a cultural template continues apace. European culture is a continuation of Roman civilization. European colonies in North and South America, India, and Africa, are extensions of Rome. When Western missionaries evangelized Europe, then the global south, that's an extension of Rome. Same with Eastern Orthodoxy. "Rome" needn't be restored.

So one needn't introduce a gap between Rome and the kingdom of God.

**iii)** Perhaps Walton would object that this view of Rome is too attenuated. But it's not as if the language of Daniel lays down exacting criteria.

## Blomberg on Daniel

I'm going to comment on Craig Blomberg's new book **CAN WE STILL BELIEVE THE BIBLE?** It's a useful book, but hit and miss. Some of his positions in chap. 5 are disappointing. For instance:

*Understandably, the critical consensus has concluded that Daniel 11:2-35 contains prophecy ex eventu—after the events. The author has written up his account of his people's history in the guise of prophecy sometime in the mid-second century. Other Jewish apocalyptic writing, most notably the "animal apocalypse" of 1 Enoch 85-90, also probably written in the second century BC, does exactly the same thing. Once again, the question is one of understanding the function of the literary genre or form at hand. No ancient reader was fooled or deceived by this convention. It was understood as a way of affirming God's sovereign hand of guidance throughout the whole process,*



*his ongoing purposes for his people even in difficult times, and his coming vindication of his elect and his plans for them (163-164).*

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i) Blomberg's assertion notwithstanding, it isn't clear to me that no ancient reader was fooled or deceived by this convention. To begin with, I think that depends, in part, on the provenance of 1 Enoch. If this is sectarian literature which originated in a small, close-knit religious community, then I can well imagine devotees treating this as genuine revelation. Consider cults in which members abide implicit faith in the prophetic foresight of the cult leader. Even if his claims are implausible or absurd to outsiders, that doesn't mean insiders view his claims the same way.

As a leading commentator notes:

*Different from 1 Enoch, the Book of Daniel gives no indication that it was written for a narrow exclusive community of the chosen. G. Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1, 68.*

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After 1 Enoch passed into the public domain, readers may not have been taken in. But that reflects a different audience with a different viewpoint. Moreover, it isn't clear why 1 Enoch was so popular in some Jewish circles unless they took it seriously.

ii) But assuming for the sake of argument that Blomberg is correct, this generates a dilemma. If ancient readers understood this was a prophecy *ex eventu*, how would that affirm God's providence? A genuine prediction would evidence God's providence: God knows the future because he controls the future. But how does a retrodiction evidence God's providence? It's like the "absolute monarch" in **THE LITTLE PRINCE** who demonstrates his sovereignty by commanding the sun to go down at sunset and rise at sunup.

*[Quoting Ernest Lucas] Faced with the fact that all Daniel's visions focus on the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, Collins (1993: 26) gives expression to the theological issue: "There is no apparent reason...why a prophet of the sixth century [BC] should focus minute attention on the events of the second century [BC]. (164-65)."*

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i) That begs the question. Historically, Christians don't think Daniel's prophecies are confined to 2C BC events. In fact, as Collins goes on to admit in a footnote:

*This problem is more acute in light of the modern view that the book refers to no*

*historical events later than that time, Traditionally, however, Daniel's prophecies were thought to extend at least to the Roman era, because Rome was the fourth kingdom (26n260).*

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**ii)** In addition, even if Dan 11 is inspired by Antiochus Epiphanes, he can function as a type of Antichrist. The adversary in Dan 11 is a larger-than-life figure, over and above the historical Antiochus.

*[Quoting Lucas] One response to this is to argue that the reason is that, by giving a prediction so far ahead of time, God assures the people of the second century that he is indeed in control of history, including the situation in which they find themselves (165).*

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It's worth expanding on this explanation. The survival of the Jewish people has always been precarious. In OT times, Jews had living prophets (e.g. Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel) to anchor them and usher them through an existential crisis. But by definition, Jews had no living prophets during the Intertestamental Period to play that role. Once again, they were facing martyrdom unless they renounced their faith.

But even though Jews during the Antiochean crisis had no spoken word of prophecy to steel their resolve, they had the written word of prophecy. Some of Daniel's oracles, from centuries before, were coming true in their own time. That would encourage them to remain steadfast in the face of dire persecution, for God was in control. Their enemies would be defeated.

Compare it to the situation of Frenchmen and Englishmen during WWII. We have the benefit of hindsight. Looking back on WWII, we know who won. But during the war, it wasn't clear which side was going to win. And that would affect your decisions. Is resistance futile? Do you surrender? Do you collaborate?

*[Quoting Lucas] However, an evangelical scholar, Goldingay (1977: 45), can argue that this is not consistent with the picture of God revealed elsewhere in Scripture. As he puts it, "He does not give signs and reveal dates. His statements about the future are calls to decision now; he is not the God of prognosticators. He calls his people to naked faith and hope in him in the present and does not generally bolster their faith with the kind of revelations that we are think of here" (165).*

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That's an odd statement. Pentateuchal history (e.g. the Exodus and wilderness wandering) is full of signs and wonders. Likewise, Isa 40-48 makes predictive prophecy a sign of the true God's existence and sovereignty.

*[Quoting Lucas] Both Collins and Goldingay appeal to what they see to be the balance of (theological) probability. Those who conclude otherwise should at least acknowledge that there is theological integrity on both sides of the argument (165).*

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Goldingay espouses open theism while Collins espouses methodological naturalism (a la Troeltsch). So much for "theological integrity."

## Blomberg on Isaiah

This is a sequel to my prior post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/05/blomberg-on-daniel.html>

*Despite claims to the contrary, some who argue for a composite Isaiah do so not because they ca't believe that God could inspire a prophet to name an important king more than 150 years before his reign. They simply observe that detail after detail in the later chapters of Isaiah is written in the past or present tenses. In other words, they are not even couched as predictions but as circumstances in which the author of these chapters has lived. This observation, though, is complicated by the fact that the Hebrew perfect tense often can be used to refer to future events. Still, the most natural or "literal" reading of texts like these leads to the conclusion that their author is writing in the sixth century BC, in which case it cannot be the prophet Isaiah. C.*

## *Blomberg, Can We Still Believe the Bible, 161-62.*

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Unfortunately, Blomberg drastically understates the evidence for traditional authorship:

### **1. VISIONARY REVELATION**

Isaiah was a seer. A visionary:

**The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah(Isa 1:1).**

**The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem (Isa 2:1).**

**The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw (Isa 13:1).**

**A stern vision is told to me; the traitor betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam; lay siege, O Media; all the sighing she has caused I bring to an end (Isa 21:2).**

If God gave Isaiah a literal preview of the future, then how would we expect Isaiah to recount his experience? (I'd add that visionary revelation can include auditions as well as

images.) What's the difference between describing what you see and what you foresee? If you can actually see into the future, you are observing the future as if it is present. If Isaiah literally foresaw the Jews in exile or literally foresaw the Jews returning from exile, would he express that in future terms or present terms? Although the event is future, the perception of the event is present. He's like a time-traveler who's transported forward. Like an immersive simulation. In his inspired imagination, the observer is simultaneous with event. An eyewitness to the future.

## 2. ARGUMENT FROM PROPHECY

*The testimony of the book itself certainly insists on the reality of supernatural prophecy that focusses on the future. The whole case for the sovereignty of God in Isa 40-48 is built around the Lord's ability to say beforehand what he is going to do and the challenge to the idols to do the same. Therefore, the future focus that is spread throughout this section cannot be easily neutralized. A. Hill & J. Walton, A Survey of the Old Testament (Zondervan, 3rd ed., 2009), 521-22.*

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*To claim that these are not prophecies at all, but history written to appear as prophecy, does not appear to do justice to the polemic that Isa 40-66 is conducting. If those to whom this section of Isaiah was originally addressed knew that it was not prophecy, then the polemic against the idols' inability to predict becomes vapid and impotent. G. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* (Crossway 2008), 151.*

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### 3. PALESTINIAN SETTING

*There is virtually no evidence that the writer of this section had any familiarity with the situation and life in Babylon. When the prophetic texts do address the situation of the exiles (42:22; 51:14), they bear no resemblance to those texts that describe the life of the Jews exiled in Babylon (Jer 29; Ezekiel). To the contrary, mention is made of Jerusalem, the mountains of Palestine, and trees native*

to Palestine such as cedars, cypress, and oak, but not to Babylon (Isa 41:19; 44:14). Other passages such as 40:9 indicate that Judean cities were still in existence, and 62:6 speaks of the walls of Jerusalem standing, a fact incompatible with an exilic cultural setting for these oracles. E. Merrill, M. Rooker, M. Grisanti, *The World and the Word* (B&H 2011), 370.

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For example: (a) 40:12-31 does not say that the people are in exile, so the so-called complaints of the exiles in 40:27 could have arisen from any number of reasons and from almost any geographical location. There simply is no objective evidence that these people were in Babylon. (b) Since Judah and other nations had trade and political relationships with Babylon, it most likely that people throughout the ancient Near Eastern world had general information about Babylonian life and their religious practices; thus prophecies about the future defeat of Babylon (43:14; 46:1-47:15) do not require the conclusion that the

audience was living in Babylon (any more than chaps 13-14 require the audience to be living in Babylon). Although isaiah spoke in detail about Egyptian life, religion, and culture in chaps 19 and 30-31, commentators do not put the author and his audience in Egypt.

(e) Prophecies about what will happen in the future to Babylon, to the exiles, to those who return from exile, and the eternal kingdom of God do not require the audience to be in any one setting, for these prophecies could be given anywhere. The context of a future prophecy does not determine the present location of the audience. Ezekiel could talk about what was happening in Jerusalem in 8:1-18, but his audience was in exile, not in Jerusalem. Later he could talk about the eschatological situation in Jerusalem (chaps 40-48), but he was still talking to an audience in exile.

These chapters (a) seemed to show relatively little knowledge about Babylonian culture; (b) mentioned trees that grew in Palestine rather than Babylon; (c) described making idols out of trees not available in Babylon and never referring to the popular Babylonian palm tree; (d) talked about

*enemies coming from the north and east, a sign that the people were in Judah; (e) conceived of Ur as the "ends of the earth" in 41:9, an unlikely statement if the people were living next door in Babylon; (f) spoke about people being taken "from here" (meaning Jerusalem) in 52:5; and (g) described those exiled by Assyria. Barstad argues for a setting in Judah, concluding that there was little Akkadian linguistic influence on Isaiah's writing...J. Motyer maintains that chaps 40-55 are Babylonian in orientation but not in setting. G. Smith, *Isaiah 40-66* (B&H 2009), 43-44,46.*

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#### **4. LITERARY PRIORITY**

John Walton has argued that since the exilic Book of Kings used the complete book of Isaiah as a source, that implies the preexilic date for Isaiah. Cf. "New Observations on the Date of Isaiah," JETS 28 (1985), 129-32.

[http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/28/28-2/28-2-pp129-132\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/28/28-2/28-2-pp129-132_JETS.pdf)

#### **5. ANONYMITY**

*It should be observed in this connection that an almost invariable rule followed*

*by the ancient Hebrews in regard to prophetic writings was that the name of the prophet was essential for the acceptance of any prophetic utterance... The Hebrews regarded the identity of the prophet as of utmost importance if his message was to be received as an authoritative declaration of a true spokesman of the Lord. G. Archer, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction (Moody, 3rd. ed. 1994), 388.*

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## De novo creation

Because Gen 1-2 conflicts with universal common descent, some "progressive evangelicals" contend that Gen 1-2 doesn't really teach that all humans descend from Adam and Eve. That's just how conservatives or "fundamentalists" interpret Genesis. Their literalistic interpretation.

In that regard, it's refreshing to see an outspoken theistic evolutionist admit that the traditional interpretation is correct. He simply disregards the authority of Gen 1-2. So this is not a question of interpretation, but inspiration.

*Did the apostle Paul believe that Adam was a real person? Yes, well of course he did. Paul was a first-century AD Jew and like every Jewish person around him, he accepted the historicity of Adam. In fact, he places Adam's sin and death alongside God's gifts of salvation and resurrection from the dead through Jesus. In Romans 5:12 and 15, he writes that "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned. . . . For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and gift that came by the grace of the One Man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" Paul also claims in 1 Corinthians 15:21 that "since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead*

*comes also through a Man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”*

*It is understandable why most Christians believe that Adam was a real historical person. This is exactly what Scripture states in both the Old and New Testaments.*

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<http://biologos.org/blog/was-adam-a-real-person-part-iii>

*Like every account of origins, Genesis 2 is etiological. It offers an explanation for the existence of things and beings known to the Holy Spirit-inspired writer and his readers—vegetation, land animals, birds, and humans. And typical of ancient accounts of origins, the Lord God created these de novo; that is, they were made quickly and completely formed. But Genesis 2 focuses mainly on the origin of humanity.*

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<http://biologos.org/blog/was-adam-a-real-person-part-ii>

*De novo creation is the ancient conceptualization of origins found in the Bible. This term is made up of the Latin words de meaning “from” and novus “new.” Stated more precisely, it is a view of origins that results in things and beings that are brand new. This type of creative activity is quick and complete. It appears in a majority of ancient creation accounts and it involves a divine being/s who act/s rapidly through a series of dramatic interventions, resulting in cosmological structures (sun, moon, stars) and living organisms (plants, animals, humans) that are mature and fully formed.*

*Considering the limited scientific evidence available to ancient peoples, this conceptualization of origins was perfectly logical. As with all origins accounts, including those held by us today, the ancients asked basic etiological questions (Greek aitia: the cause, the reason for this). These included: Where did these things or beings come from? Why are they this way? Who or what is responsible for their origin? There was no reason for ancient peoples to believe the universe was billions of years old, and they were unaware that living organisms changed*



*over eons of time as reflected in the fossil record. Instead, the age of the world was limited to the lengths of their genealogies, many of which were held by memory, and therefore quite short. Biological evolution was not even a consideration because in the eyes of the ancients, hens laid eggs that always produced chicks, ewes only gave birth to lambs, and women were invariably the mothers of human infants. Living organisms were therefore immutable; they were static and never changed.*

*In conceptualizing origins, ancient people used these day-to-day experiences and retrojected them back to the beginning of creation (Latin retro: backward; jacere: to throw). Retrojection is the very same type of thinking used in crime scene investigations. Present evidence found at the scene is used to reconstruct past events. In this way, the ancients came to the reasonable conclusion that the universe and life must have been created quickly and completely formed not that long ago. And this was the best origins science-of-the-day.*

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<http://biologos.org/blog/was-adam-a-real-person-part-i>

## "Out of Egypt"

I'm going to post a my replies to a commenter on my "Feserettes" post because the issue is worth highlight in its own right:

GARY BLACK

**Matthew 2:15" And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son."**

Tell me, what prophecy is this in reference to?

**Isaiah 40:3" The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."**

Was Isaiah meaning to reference Elijah?

**Matthew 13:35" That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world."**

Which prophecy is this in reference to?

STEVE

**i)** Matthew is quoting Hos 11:1.

**ii)** That doesn't contradict Hosea's meaning. Hosea himself has a typological understanding of redemptive history. He recast the threatened Assyrian deportation in terms of second Egyptian bondage followed by a second Exodus. That's in play in the very chapter Matthew quotes (Hos 11:5,11), as well as other passages in Hosea (cf. 2:14-15; 7:16; 8:13; 9:3,6).

Therefore, Hosea already understood that the same past event can foreshadow an analogous future event(s).

Likewise, "divine sonship" in OT usage can have both a collective referent (Israel) and an individual referent (David or David's heir). Furthermore, in covenant theology, an individual can represent others. So the individual and collective aspects can (and often do) merge.

**iii)** Matthew is operating with the same typological principle as Hosea. A past event (the Exodus) foreshadowed an analogous future event (the childhood of Christ). Likewise, Christ is the Davidic son who embodies Israel.

**i)** Isaiah didn't intend to pick out any particular individual, be it Elijah, John the Baptist, or both. Isaiah didn't have a specific individual in mind. He didn't know who was going to fulfill that prediction. He lacks detailed knowledge of the future.

In the case of short-term predictions, a prophet might have something more specific in mind, but not in the case of long-term predictions. And a prophet didn't necessarily (or even usually) know if his prediction was short-term or long-term.

**ii)** Rather, Isaiah is describing a distinctive role which that individual will play. The role itself selects for the referent.

**iii)** In addition, more than one individual can play or reprise the same role under analogous circumstances.

**iv)** Keep in mind that, like Hosea, Isaiah also has a typological understanding of redemptive history, as can be seen in his new Exodus motif.

So the NT appeal to this verse doesn't contradict Isaiah's "meaning."

**v)** Apropos (iv), you need to distinguish between sense and reference. What it "means" and what it "refers" to are not interchangeable concepts.

**i)** Matthew is quoting Ps 78:2.

**ii)** Minimally, Matthew is seizing on the introductory formula. What Jesus does at this point is analogous to what Asaph did under similar circumstances, making Jesus a counterpart to Asaph in that respect.

**iii)** It's also possible that Matthew is making a larger point. Just as, according to Asaph, well-known events in Israel's history can have a latent significance that only becomes evident or more evident with the passage of time, the same principle holds true at this juncture in the life and ministry of Christ—which is an extension (and culmination) of Israel's history.

Matthew's appeal doesn't contradict what the Psalmist "meant."

### STEVE

First of all, let's recall how you originally framed the issue: "the New Testament quotes the Old in a way we know contradicts the original meaning of the OT author."

In your responses to me, you are conflating two distinct issues:

**i)** What did the author/prophet intend?

**ii)** What did the author/prophet not intend?

You're acting as though, if the author/prophet did not intend the oracle to have multiple referents, that he intended the oracle not to have multiple referents. But those are not convertible propositions.

An unintended consequence can be consistent with original intent.

Likewise, as I've noted, OT prophets already understood some past creative/redemptive events as paradigmatic models for future events. So the fulfillment was, to that degree, open-ended. The prophetic significance of a paradigmatic event lacks an automatic cutoff. For it sets a precedent for similar divine actions.

By the same token, the significance of a long-range prophecy can't be exhausted by the prospective viewpoint of the author/prophet, for the simple reason that he lacks the detailed foreknowledge to intend a precise set of

historical circumstances which fulfill the oracle. To a great extent, the who, when, and how are opaque looking forward. The significance of long-range prophecy has to be completed by a retrospective viewpoint. For it's only by looking back on the outcome that a reader is in a position to fully discern the paired relationship between the prophetic description and the concrete event.

That doesn't contradict original intent, for that's the nature of long-range prophecy (or paradigmatic events which have prophetic value).

### STEVE

A fixture of the GHM is making allowance for differences in genre. In that respect, you're failing to draw another crucial distinction. Original intent has a narrower scope in prophetic literature than, say, epistolary literature or historical narration.

When, say, Paul writes Galatians, authorial intent determines both sense and reference. He chooses words to express what he wants to convey. And he also determines the identity of the referents. And that's because the identity of the referents is under his control.

But in the case of prophecy, that's only about half true. Authorial intent still determines the meaning of prophetic discourse (i.e. the meaning of a sentence).

However, the identity of the referent is independent of the prophet's intent. The referent concerns future events. That's out of his hands. That's up to God. In many cases, a prophet doesn't even know what the referent will be. His

knowledge of the future is still quite limited.  
Compartmentalized.

A prophet is a recipient of knowledge about the future. He is privy to genuine, albeit limited knowledge of the future. He's basically a reporter. Take a seer. He describes what God showed him. Whether the referent lies in the near future or far future, whether the referent denotes one or multiple events, is not something he is even in a position to intend unless God's revelation is more specific on that point.

I didn't suggest "Hosea referencing Egypt makes the argument that Hosea personally expects his prophecy of Assyria to be a 'long-range' prophecy that will also have other referents."

You're repeating the same mistake you made before. Not expecting something to happen isn't equivalent to expecting something not to happen.

Why, moreover, are you assuming that Hosea even had expectations about how often the Exodus would have future analogues? Once an OT prophet accepts the principle that past events may anticipate future events, there's no intrinsic limitation on how repeatable that is. That's something to be discovered.

### STEVE

Gary Black

"If Hosea was intending to establish or use a previous paradigm, Israel still cannot be construed to be the Savior. For both in Egypt and Assyria, it is abundantly clear from the text that Israel refers to the people

getting saved, not the savior. Matthew's interpretation cannot be construed to use the same paradigm Hosea is establishing/using. Asking me to think of Israel in a way that contradicts the plain meaning of the text is asking me to think of Israel in an analogical way."

**i)** That's not how Matthew is using Hosea. You equivocate on "salvation." "Save" can mean to redeem sinners or it can mean to deliver and/or protect from harm. The paradigm connotes divine protection. Just as Yahweh protects his "son" Israel from a murderous ruler (Pharaoh), God protects his Son Jesus from a murderous ruler (Herod). The Father is "saving" the Christchild in that sense, which is consonant with Christ (as an adult) being a Savior.

**ii)** In addition, you chronically collapse sense and reference. But what a word or sentence means and what it references are two different things.

Take "beagle." That means a particular dog breed. One kind of dog.

But that has multiple referents. All the beagles of the world.

### **STEVE**

**i)** One of the factors you fail to appreciate is that both Hos 11:1 and Mat 2:15 are special cases of a general principle. Hosea himself regards the impending Assyrian deportation and subsequent restoration as an exemplification of the Exodus motif.

It is therefore artificial for you to single out a specific application to the detriment of underlying exemplar which Hosea himself recognizes.



**ii)** In addition, if Mt 2:15 alludes to Hos 11:1, Hos 11:1 alludes to Pentateuchal passages. The "sonship" motif comes from Exod 4:22-23 while the "out of Egypt" motif comes from Num 23:22 and 24:8. In Num 23:22, the referent is plural (i.e. corporate Israel), but 24:8 is singular, highlighting a future king who will arise to defeat Israel's enemies (symbolized by Agag). So there's already a dialectical interplay between singular and collective referents, with a Messianic motif.

**iii)** Your final paragraph ignores my discussion of the prophetic genre. Additionally, you create a false dichotomy between the GHM and analogous events, even though Hosea himself relies on that principle.

### STEVE

**i)** You need to distinguish between analogical "interpretation" and analogical events. It's not that Matthew is interpreting Hosea analogically. Rather, the underlying events (i.e. the Egyptian bondage/Exodus; the Assyrian deportation/restoration; the Holy Family taking refuge in Egypt) are analogous. Hosea is an OT witness to that recurrent pattern.

**ii)** Moreover, the Exodus established a divine precedent, which—in turn—fosters the expectation God will do similar things in the future.

## Inerrancy and illocution

I'm going to quote, then comment on Walton's theory of inspiration. I believe he initially discussed this in Reading Genesis 1-2, but has a more detailed discussion in the new book he coauthored with Sandy.

*The communicator uses locutions (words, sentences, rhetorical structures, genres) to embody an illocution (the intention to do something with those locutions—bless, promise, instruct, assert) with a perlocution that anticipates a certain sort of response from the audience (obedience, trust, belief).*

*The implied audience refers to the audience as the communicator perceives it. In the same way, the implied author refers to what the audience can infer about the "author" and his or her meaning from the communicative act. That is the audience cannot cross-examine or psychoanalyze the "author." His/Her meaning is determined by unpacking the communication that has been offered by means available in the language, culture, and context in which it took place.*

*By applying the tenets of speech-act theory, evangelical interpreters are able to associate the authoritative communicative act (God's illocution) specifically with the illocution of the human communicator. God's authority in Scripture is therefore accessible through the illocution of the human communicator—that is how God chose to do it.*

*Accommodation on the part of the divine communicator resides primarily in the locution, in which genre and rhetorical devices are included. These involve the form of communication. Yet our conviction is that even though God accommodates the communicator and his audience in the trappings and framework of locution, he will not accommodate an erroneous illocution on the part of the human communicator.*

*God may well accommodate the human communicator's view that the earth is the center of the cosmos. But if God's intention is not to communicate truth about cosmic geography, that accommodation is simply part of the shape of the locution—it is incidental, not part of God's illocution. In contrast, God will not accommodate a*

*communicator's belief that there was an exodus from Egypt and speak of it as a reality if it never happened. God will accommodate limited understanding for the sake of communication—that is simply part of accommodation in the locution. But we would maintain that he will not communicate about how he worked in events (e.g., the exodus) or through people (e.g., Abraham) if those events never took place and those people never existed. Such accommodation would falsify his illocution and invalidate its reliability. Authority is linked to the illocution. Consequently there is a higher incidence of accommodation in the locutions; indeed that is entirely normal and expected. Authority is not vested independently in the locutions, and communication could not take place without such accommodation. In contrast, that which comes with authority (illocution) may involve accommodation to language and culture, but will not affirm that which is patently false.*

*We can distinguish "high context" communication as pertaining to situations in which the communicator and audience share much in common and less accommodation is necessary for*

*effective communication to take place; this is communication between insiders.*

*In the contrasting "low context" communication, high levels of accommodation are necessary because one is communicating to outsiders.*

*We believe that God has inspired the locutions (words, whether spoken or written) that the communicator has used to accomplish with God their joint illocutions (which lead to an understanding of intentions, claims, affirmations and, ultimately, meaning), but that those locutions are tied to the communicator's world. That is, God has made accommodation to the high context communication between the implied communicator and implied audience so as to optimize and facilitate the transmission of meaning by means of an authoritative illocution. Inspiration is tied to locutions (they have their source in God); illocutions define the necessary path to meaning, which is characterized by authority and inerrancy.*

*Even though people in Israel believed there were waters above the earth held back by a solid sky, or that cognitive processes took place in the heart or*

*kidneys, the illocution of the texts is not affirming those beliefs as revealed truth.*

*We propose instead that our doctrinal affirmations about Scripture (authority, inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) attach to the illocution of the human communicator. This is not to say that we therefore believe everything he believed (he did believe that the sun moved across the sky), but we express our commitment to his communicative act. Since his locutionary framework is grounded in his language and culture, it is important to differentiate between what the communicator can be inferred to believe and his illocutionary focus. So, for example, it is not surprise that ancient Israel believed in a solid sky, and God accommodated his locution to that model in his communication to them. But since the illocution is not to assert the true shape of cosmic geography, we can safely set those details aside as incidental without jeopardizing authority or inerrancy. Such cosmic geography is in the belief set of the communicators but it employed in their locutions; it is not the context of their illocutions.*

*In conclusion then, God accommodates human culture and limitations in the locutions that he*

*inspired in the human communicator, but he does not accommodate erroneous illocution or meaning. The authority of Scripture is vested in the meaning intended by the human communicator and given to him by the Holy Spirit, which is guided by an understanding of his illocutions.*

---

J. Walton & D. B. Sandy, **THE LOST WORLD OF SCRIPTURE: ANCIENT LITERARY CULTURE AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY** (IVP 2013), 42-47.

This analysis suffers from multiple problems:

**i)** Walton fails to explain how communication necessitates accommodation. This is not to deny that a communicator must sometimes accommodate his audience. But Walton lays this down as a universal principle.

**ii)** Even in cases where communication requires accommodation, it doesn't follow that communication, even at the locutionary level, requires *erroneous* accommodation.

Suppose a child asks his parents where babies come from. The parent might accommodate the child by using an illustration. The parent might use the illustration of planting a seed in the ground. Indeed, the parent might actually do that, or have the child do that. Or, to be a bit more graphic, the parent might use a turkey baster to illustrate insemination.

These accommodations employ *analogies*. But there's nothing inherently erroneous about using an analogy to illustrate insemination. Even though the parent is coming down to the child's level of understanding, the comparison can still be accurate.

**iii)** Walton fails to explain why divine communication necessitates accommodation. Perhaps the unspoken assumption is that since God is so different from man, divine revelation must resort to accommodation.

If so, that fails to distinguish what any particular revelation is *about*. For instance, an incorporeal God might use picturesque metaphors to disclose something about himself, viz. eyes, ears, arm.

However, a statement about God causing something to happen in the world needn't be accommodated. Take this statement:

**"So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind" (Gen 1:21).**

That's a statement about the world. A statement about God making avian and aquatic life. But does that require accommodation?

**iv)** Apropos (iii), if the communicator's world is the real world, why is accommodation required to describe the real world? If locutions are tied to the communicator's world,



and that's the real world, why is accommodation even necessary at that level?

**v)** Assuming for the sake of argument that ancient Jews believed in a solid sky, this is not just a question of what the Genesis narrator *believed*.

Rather, according to Walton, he is using locutions to *express* his belief. He is committing his belief to writing.

In that event, how can Walton drive a wedge between the narrator's locution and his illocution? He chooses those words with the intention of expressing what he thought the world was like. "Asserting" or "instructing."

**vi)** By Walton's own admission, the reader has no direct access to the narrator's illocution. Rather, the reader must access the narrator's illocution via his locutions. He chooses those words and sentences to express himself. Yet according to Walton, that's erroneous.

**vii)** In addition, Walton thinks the original (implied) audience believed in a solid sky. So another entry point would be what the statement meant to them. Yet according to Walton, that's erroneous as well.

How can Walton distinguish the narrator's (allegedly) inerrant illocution from his errant locution? All a modern reader has to go by is the narrator's locutions, as well as the scientific understanding of the implied audience. Those are the two reference points we have at our disposal.

We can't bypass the narrator's locutions to directly access his illocution. Our interpretive clues are confined to the locutions as well as the epistemic situation of the implied

audience. Yet according to Walton, both the locution and the understanding of the implied audience is erroneous.

So how is a modern reader supposed to discern God's illocution regarding the historicity (or not) of the Exodus?

**viii)** If God is accommodating the misconception of the narrator and the implied audience, then the narrator intended his locution to purport a solid sky. That is what he meant to convey.

**ix)** Moreover, that is what he meant it to mean to his audience. That's the correct interpretation. That's how his audience is supposed to understand his locution. The narrator wrote with a view to be understood.

**x)** Not only does this make it hard to see how Walton can distinguish the narrator's errant locution from his (allegedly) inerrant illocution, but how he can distinguish God's inerrant illocution from the narrator's illocution. How can he distinguish what the narrator communicates from what God truthfully communicates through the narrator—if the narrator's locutions and illocutions are erroneous?

God knows what the narrator intends to convey. God knows how the implied audience will construe the locution.

According to Walton, the locution is false. So God inspired the narrator to use locutions which will mislead the implied audience into believing falsehood.

According to Walton, the locution describes (or implies or alludes to) a solid sky. That's what the implied audience would take it to mean. And that interpretation would be right.

Even though God knows the sky not to be solid, the narrator and the implied audience aren't privy to God's correct understanding.

Not only is it impossible to see how Walton's illocutionary model can salvage inerrancy, but it makes God an inept communicator.

## Comrades-in-arms

I'm noticing the potential convergence of what had been two distinct theological groups. There's already a conceptual convergence.

For convenience, let's call the first group progressive evangelicals. When evangelicals move to the left, it's usually a two-step process. They begin by saying this is a question of interpretation rather than inerrancy. They become irate if you accuse them of denying inerrancy. "How dare you equate your interpretation of Scripture with inerrancy! Just because we disagree with your interpretation doesn't mean we deny the inerrancy of Scripture. Don't be so arrogant!"

But, of late, progressive evangelicals are ditching that face-saving distinction. They admit the Bible is mistaken in some of what it teaches. Three of the hot-button issues are homosexuality, the historicity of Adam, and the OT "genocidal" commands.

But the list can include other things. They may ax the historicity of the Exodus, or say Paul was a child of his times on the subject of male headship. And so on and so forth.

All these disparate issues are symptomatic of a common underlying issue: the authority of Scripture. They reject the authority of Scripture.

Basically, they distinguish between the essential and inessential teachings of Scripture. They say you can reject what the Bible teaches about homosexuality, Adam and Eve, "genocidal commands," the Exodus, &c., and still be a faithful Christian, because these aren't Christian essentials.

Their position is simplicity itself: Whatever Biblical teachings they reject are, by definition, inessential. Their very rejection automatically demotes the offending doctrine to the dustbin of inessentials.

So this group is already center-left on the ethical, political, and theological spectrum. I can't help noticing how this seems to coincide with the Obama presidency. Apparently, progressive evangelicals feel the current cultural milieu makes it safe for them to come out of hiding.

In a way, this is a refreshing development. They drop the pretense of publicly maintaining a position (inerrancy) which hitherto they privately denied. Now they've come clean.

On a related note, I'm struck by how quickly John Walton's view of Gen 1 garnered a following. There was an instant audience for his treatment. Like a neglected market niche. Progressive evangelicals who were just waiting for his interpretation to come along to justify their preexisting unease with Gen 1.

It reminds me of how little resistance there was to Darwin's **ORIGIN OF SPECIES**. If Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually satisfied atheist, Walton made it possible to be an intellectually satisfied progressive evangelical.

Many old-earth creationists, and even a few theistic evolutionists (e.g. Warfield) are committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. Their interpretation of Gen 1 is consistent with the inerrancy of Gen 1.

What makes Walton's approach different is that it erases the distinction between interpretation and inerrancy, for his interpretation commits him to the errancy of Gen 1. On his view, God accommodated the narrator's obsolete understanding of the cosmos. God did not correct the narrator's erroneous viewpoint. What the narrator purports to be the case is false. So on his interpretation, Gen 1 is simply false in that respect.

Now let's compare all this with the second group. We might call them Resurrection apologists.

Needless to say, Christian apologists have always defended the Resurrection. That goes without saying. But a more recent development is using the Resurrection to defend Christianity in general. They treat the Resurrection as both the theological and apologetical linchpin of Christianity.

To my knowledge, John Warwick Montgomery initiated this trend. Other apologists followed suit.

This is related to a "minimal facts" approach. To some extent I think the "minimal facts" approach was originally adapted to the time-limits of a live, public, formal debate. But it's taken on a life of its own.

On this methodology, an apologist brackets the inspiration of Scripture and treats the NT like any other ancient historical source. He defends the basic reliability of the relevant NT passages which witness to the Resurrection.

This apologetic strategy is spawning a corresponding theological posture, in which you distinguish between essential doctrines like the Resurrection and inessential doctrines like inerrancy. On this view, if the Resurrection never happened, Christianity would be false—but if the

Exodus never happened, Christianity would still be true. If the tomb wasn't empty on Easter, Christianity would be false—but if Adam never existed, Christianity would still be true.

Now, unlike progressive evangelicals, Resurrection apologists are center-right on the theological spectrum. Yet their fallback position on inerrancy is pretty much interchangeable with the position of progressive evangelicals. The main difference is that, at least for now, the rejection of inerrancy by Resurrection apologists is still hypothetical, whereas progressive evangelicals actually and openly reject it.

But both groups already distinguish between essential and inessential Biblical teachings. In principle (or practice), a faithful Christian can disregard inessential Biblical teachings. And I don't see any appreciable difference in the examples which both groups use to illustrate inessential Biblical doctrines. Both groups could draw up the same list. At least, their respective lists would overlap to a very considerable degree.

Although the Resurrection apologists still espouse inerrancy, it's unclear how they can maintain a stable distinction between progressive evangelicals and themselves. There no longer seems to be a fundamental distinction in principle. Perhaps the only difference is that they disagree on whether or not Scripture has actually crossed the threshold of error. But that's not a make-or-break issue for Resurrection apologists. They don't have a major stake in the outcome of that debate.

These two groups arrived at their respective positions independently of each other, yet their respective positions

are conceptually convergent. For both, the authority of Scripture is expendable.



## Is the Resurrection more important than inerrancy?

*Nick*

*Which do you think is more important? The resurrection or inerrancy?*

*The scholars Geisler has gone after do uphold inerrancy. They just don't agree with his interpretation.*

*I think Geisler's position will end up creating more Ehrmans.*

---

(For those who don't know, I believe Nick Peters is the son-in-law of Mike Licona.)

That's a good question, but a question that takes off in many different directions.

**i)** Let's begin with a bit of background. In the past, Norman Geisler went after Robert Gundry for denying the historicity of the nativity accounts in the Gospels, and Murray J. Harris for his view of the glorified body.

In fairness to Geisler, this was during the heyday of redaction criticism. As a new academic fad, redaction criticism was overused. Also, it wasn't just Geisler. John Warwick Montgomery was also an opponent of redaction

criticism—or at least the way it was being deployed by scholars like Gundry and Grant Osborne.

**ii)** That said, redaction criticism can be used to defend the inerrancy of Scripture. For instance, it's useful in harmonizing the Gospels. Craig Blomberg skillfully deploys redaction criticism to defend the inerrancy of the Gospels. So both proponents and opponents can take the issue to mistaken extremes.

**iii)** Murray J. Harris may well have had an inadequate view of the glorified body. It's been while since I've read him. However, a number of NT scholars and Christian apologists infer from what Paul says about the "spiritual body" as well as how the Risen Christ appears and disappears in Luke and John, that the glorified body can materialize or dematerialize at will.

I don't think that's the best explanation, and I think it creates problems for a physical resurrection. However, it's not a liberal denial of the resurrection. It's not that Harris et al. think a physical resurrection is too miraculous or supernatural to be credible. Rather, he's basing his position on what he thinks the NT describes or implies about the nature of the glorified body.

**iv)** Is the resurrection more important than inerrancy? Before we can answer that, we have to ask what makes the resurrection important. There are different ways of answering that question:

**v)** For instance, you might say the resurrection is important because belief in the resurrection is essential to saving faith. And you might say that makes it more important than inerrancy if belief in inerrancy is inessential to saving faith.

However, that proves too much. For instance, one might say belief in justification is inessential to saving faith. Yet even if that's the case, justification is necessary to salvation. Only the justified will be saved.

**vi)** Events are ontologically independent of the historical record, if any. Some incidents are recorded events, but most events go unreported. The occurrence of an event doesn't (causally) depend on a subsequent record of the event. It happened whether or not it's recorded.

In that sense, the Resurrection is not contingent on an inerrant record of the Resurrection. In principle, it's not contingent on having any record of the Resurrection.

Again, though, that tends to prove too much. God planned the Resurrection with a view to recording that event for the benefit of posterity. In the plan of God, the Resurrection is coordinated with the record of the Resurrection. The Father wouldn't raise Jesus from the dead if he had no intention of publicizing the Resurrection. A Resurrection that no one remembered or knew about wouldn't serve God's purpose for the Resurrection.

**vii)** Some Biblical events are more intrinsically important than others. If the Exodus never happened, that would falsify Judaism. But if the census of Quirinius never happened, that would not falsify Christianity. In that respect, Bible history has some flexibility.

**viii)** The theological significance of an event like the Resurrection may not be evident apart from an authoritative interpretation of the event. NT writers are interpreters as well as reporters. The importance of the Resurrection is bound up with the significance of the Resurrection. And that implicates inerrancy.

**ix)** Geisler tends to blur the distinction between inerrancy and historicity. But these are often distinct issues.

**x)** Yet inerrancy and historicity are sometimes intertwined. It's a hermeneutical issue as well as a factual issue. It depends on your theory of meaning. If authorial intent is an essential component of meaning, then whether or not a Bible narrator intended to report a real-world event is directly germane to the historicity (or not) of the account. To that extent, historicity can't be neatly separated from inerrancy.

**xi)** Inerrancy is important in part because it goes straight to our source of information. We lack direct knowledge of many things stated in Scripture. Not just past events, but future events, or undetectable events like the afterlife. Absent inerrancy, we don't know which Biblical statements are true or false.

**xii)** But there is, if anything, a deeper issue. There's a cause/effect relationship between inspiration and inerrancy. Just as the Resurrection is a divine event, the process of revelation and/or inspiration is a divine event. Just as the Resurrection bears witness to God's activity in the world, so does inspiration or revelation.

Take prophecy. Prophecy involves three presuppositions: (a) God knows the future; (b) God controls the future; (c) God sometimes discloses the future.

If, however, you consider prophecies to be fallible, then that reflects back on the nature and existence of God. Likewise, if you think some or all Biblical "prophecies" are really vaticinia ex eventu, then that likewise reflects back on the nature and existence of God.

Perhaps God is finite in knowledge and power. Perhaps God is the Creator of a closed-system. He doesn't break in. Perhaps God doesn't exist.

Denying the inspiration of Scripture can have far-reaching theological consequences.

Inspiration and revelation presuppose the existence of a God who's active in the world. Who communicates to and through humans (as well as angels). If we deny inspiration, then God isn't active in the world in that respect. Is God's silence an indication that he's uninvolved? Is God's silence an indication that there is no God to communicate with us in the first place? So inerrancy can indeed be as important as the Resurrection.

**xiii)** Likewise, denying inerrancy nearly erases the distinction between true and false prophecy. Yet Scripture is deeply invested in that distinction.

**xiv)** As a Calvinist, I admit that my views on inspiration are influenced by my views on predestination and providence. God is intimately involved in everything that happens. Once again, take prophecy. God is in a position to predict the future because he makes it happen. He has a plan, and he executes his plan. Directly or indirectly, he causes what he predicts.

**xv)** Some Christian apologists think we need a back-up plan in case inerrancy fails. A safety-net to break the fall in case a Christian loses faith in the inerrancy of Scripture. We need to stake out a middle ground between inerrancy and apostasy.

Their contingency plan is to view the Bible as an uninspired historical record. A historical record needn't be inerrant to be informative or reliable.

For some professing Christians, this is more than just a fallback position. This is their actual position. They approach Scripture simply as historians. They have no doctrine of inspiration or revelation.

There's a sense in which that might be better than apostasy. At least for them. But even if that's the case, what's better for some individuals isn't necessarily a good policy for the church. At best, it just means that is preferable to the dire alternative of all-out apostasy.

**xvi)** At the same time, there's a deceptive security in this profession of faith. When you deny inspiration or revelation, and simply approach the Bible as a set of historical documents (some of which are less historical than others), that's a secularizing outlook. At best, Scripture is a historical witness to what God does rather than what God says. A God who is somehow active in (or behind) certain redemptive events, but inactive in communicating to and through certain individuals. But is that dichotomy plausible?

**xvii)** I don't think creating more Bart Ehrmans is necessarily a bad thing. Separating light from darkness (Jn 3:19-21) can purify the church. To the extent, however, that inerrancy is a make-or-break issue, we need to make reasonably sure that truth is what is driving some folks away from the faith. I think scholars like Bock, Blomberg, and Poythress are much better models than Geisler when it comes to general harmonistic strategies.

## Boyd on inerrancy

Someone asked me to comment on Gregory Boyd's view of Biblical inerrancy. I've excerpted some relevant statements from his series:

<http://reknew.org/2012/05/caught-between-two-conflicting-truths-2/>

<http://reknew.org/2012/05/why-christ-not-scripture-is-our-ultimate-foundation/>

<http://reknew.org/2012/05/scriptures-god-breathed-imperfections/>

At the outset, I'd note that Boyd's position has several presuppositional layers, so you have to peel back the layers. He derives a conclusion that's premised on an assumption he takes for granted. The conclusion in turn becomes the premise for another conclusion. If, however, you reject one or more of his presuppositions, then the multistoried argument collapses.

Boyd is, of course, a pioneering open theist. Since the God of open theism is fallible, the Bible can't very well be infallible. According to open theism, humans have libertarian freewill, which renders them unpredictable. In that event, God can only make an educated guess about what we will do next. So in that respect it's only logical that an open theist will deny inerrancy. Indeed, open theism is a more consistent version of freewill theism. Consistent to a fault.

*In fact, it seems to me that the “Christocentric” label is often close to meaningless inasmuch as it doesn’t meaningfully contrast with anything. If a “Christocentric” perspective doesn’t conflict with the portrait of God commanding his people to murder every last woman and child while threatening to punish anyone who shows mercy, then honestly, what does the label even mean? To remedy this, I proposed that we adopt a cross-centered approach, arguing that this sharper focus is justified inasmuch as the cross is the thematic center of everything Jesus was about.*

*I’d now like to begin unpacking some of the implications of this cross-centered approach to Scripture. And a good place to begin is with the genocidal portrait of God I just mentioned. While some may imagine that a Christocentric view of God doesn’t rule out God commanding the merciless murder of women and infants, I submit that a cruciform portrait of God certainly does. Jesus reveals a God who chose to refrain from using his power to crush enemies and chose instead to give his life for them. And he reveals a God who taught us, and modeled for us, a completely non-*



## *violent, loving, servant way of responding to hostile enemies.*

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**i)** God didn't command the Israelites to "murder" the Canaanites. That libels God. Does Boyd think killing a human being, regardless of the circumstances, is murder? If so, his position is contrary to Scripture. Moreover, it reflects a lack of basic ethical discrimination on his part.

**ii)** God didn't command the execution of the Canaanites because they were *his* enemies, but because they were *Israel's* enemies. The Canaanites pose no threat to God. He's invulnerable. But the Canaanites were a clear and present danger to Israel. God was protecting the chosen people from their mortal enemies.

**iii)** Does Boyd seriously think ancient Israel could unilaterally disarm and still survive?

**iv)** Boyd fundamentally misunderstands the cross. The purpose of the cross is not to model nonviolence. Rather, the Incarnate Son underwent crucifixion because "**without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins**" (Heb 9:22).

The reason Christ didn't fight back is because that would thwart the atonement. Christ provoked his arrest, conviction, and crucifixion. He deliberately played into the hands of his enemies. That was part of the plan. That was predicted. Naturally, Christ is not going to scuttle the plan of salvation by resisting arrest.

v) Blood atonement, penal substitution, and human sacrifice bespeak a far "harsher" view of God than Boyd's pacifist God. And it's quite consistent with the OT view of God.

*But this immediately presents us with a problem. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus expresses absolute confidence in the OT as the Word of God. In fact, a number of scholars have argued that this conviction lies at the heart of Jesus' self-understanding. While I don't believe Jesus was omniscient while on earth, I find it impossible to confess him as Lord while correcting his theology, especially about such a foundational matter. He once asked, "Why do you call me 'Lord' when you don't do the things that I say?" I think he could have made a similar point by asking, "Why do you call me 'Lord' when you don't believe the things I teach?" And one of the things Jesus taught was that the OT is the Word of God!*

*So I find myself awkwardly caught between two seemingly contradictory yet equally non-negotiable truths. On the one hand, I feel compelled to confess that God looks like Jesus, choosing to die for enemies and at the hands of enemies rather than use his power to crush them. On the other hand, I*

*feel compelled to confess that all Scripture is God-breathed, including its portraits of God that look antithetical to the God who died on a cross for his enemies.*

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Unless I missed something, in his subsequent posts I don't see where Boyd solves the problem he posed for himself.

*Evangelicals typically ground the credibility of their faith on the inspiration of the Bible. If they were to become convinced that the Bible was not inspired, their faith would crumble. I think this posture is as unwise as it is unnecessary.*

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There are nominal Christians who don't believe Christianity is a revealed religion, yet they still go to church, sing hymns, participate in the church calendar. It's play-acting.

*If the reason you believe is anchored in your confidence that Scripture is “God-breathed,” then your faith can’t help but be threatened every time you encounter a discrepancy, an archeological problem,*

*or a persuasive historical-critical argument that a portion of the biblical narrative may not be historically accurate. Your faith may also be threatened every time you encounter material that is hard to accept as “God-breathed” — the genocidal portrait of Yahweh I discussed in my previous blog, for example.*

---

That only follows if you think there's a standing presumption against the inspiration of Scripture which Scripture must constantly overcome.

*When biblical inspiration is made this important, people are forced to go to extreme and sometimes even silly lengths to explain each and every one of the “encyclopedia” of “difficulties” one finds in Scripture (I’m alluding Gleason Archer’s apologetic book, *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*).*

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**i)** To begin with, I don't think that's fair to Archer. His book is uneven. He was an OT scholar, so he's better on the OT than the NT. And some of his explanations are flat-footed. But there's a lot of good material in his book. It's a useful resource.

**ii)** There are, moreover, more hermeneutically sophisticated defenders of inerrancy than Archer, viz. Beale, Bock, Blomberg, Carson, Stein.

**iii)** It isn't necessary to explain every difficulty in Scripture. Given the historical distance between the modern reader and Scripture, we'd expect difficulties to crop up. But that's consistent with the inerrancy of Scripture.

**iv)** Finally, denying the inspiration of Scripture leads to superficial exegesis. Every time you run into a problem, you conclude the Bible is wrong, and move on. Your first impression carries the day. You already know it must be a mistake. You've prejudged the interpretation before you even read the text.

*As has happened to so many others, throughout my seminary training this foundation became increasingly shaky and eventually collapsed. I know a number of former-evangelicals who completely lost their faith when they experienced this. One is Bart Ehrman, who I'm sure many of you recognize as one of Christianity's most well-known*

*contemporary critics. He and I were in the doctoral program at Princeton Seminary at the same time, and we fell through our crumbling Scriptural foundation at roughly the same time and for many of the same reasons.*

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It's a useful winnowing process. It weeds out nominal Christians. Better to have a tested faith than an untested faith.

*I have a lot of reasons for believing in Christ, but the inspiration of Scripture is not one of them. I don't deny that there are a handful of fulfilled prophecies about the coming Messiah that are rather compelling (e.g. the suffering servant of Isa. 53 and the pierced Lord of Zech. 12:10). But I also think evangelical apologists are misguided when they try to use this as the rational foundation for the Christian faith. When Gospel authors say Jesus "fulfilled" an OT verse, they don't mean that the OT verse predicted something that Jesus did or that happened to Jesus. If you check out the OT verses Jesus is said to have "fulfilled," you'll find there is absolutely nothing predictive about them. The*

*Gospel authors are rather using a version of an ancient Jewish interpretive strategy called “midrash” to simply communicate that something in the life of Jesus parallels and illustrates a point made in an OT verse.*

*In any event, if the intellectual credibility of your faith is leveraged on the prophecies that Jesus is said to have “fulfilled,” I’m afraid your faith will be literally incredible.*

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That's a common allegation. It says a lot about Boyd, and little about Scripture. There are several fine monographs on Bible prophecy. How the OT is fulfilled in the NT. Many good commentaries address these.

*As a conservative evangelical who accepted the “inerrancy” of Scripture, I used to be profoundly disturbed whenever I confronted contradictions in Scripture, or read books that made strong cases that certain aspects of the biblical narrative conflict with archeological findings. Throughout my college and graduate school career, I spent untold hours and no small amount*

*of anxious energy trying to figure out ways to reconcile Scripture's many contradictions, harmonize problematic narratives with archeological data, and refute a host of other "liberal" views of Scripture (e.g. the documentary hypothesis, the late dating of Daniel, etc.).*

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If you begin with the presumption of guilt, a "hermeneutic of suspicions," then your faith will be insecure. If you think the onus is always on Scripture to prove its innocence, then your faith will be insecure. But why think that's where the burden of proof ought to lie?

*At least twice during this period I came dangerously close to abandoning my faith because, despite my best efforts, I could not with intellectual honesty find my way around certain problems.*

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I'd say he left his faith behind long ago. He just doesn't know what he lost.

*In my previous blog, I expressed one of the reasons why these things do not*



*bother me anymore. The ultimate foundation for my faith is no longer Scripture, but Christ. I feel I have very good historical, philosophical, and personal reasons for believing that the historical Jesus was pretty much as he's described in the Gospels. I also feel I have very good reasons for accepting the NT's view that Jesus was, and is, the Son of God, the definitive revelation of God, and the Savior of the world. I, of course, can't be certain of this, but I'm confident enough to make the decision to put my trust in Christ, and live my life as his disciple. I continue to believe in the inspiration of Scripture primarily because Jesus did, and his Church has done so throughout history. But because the intellectual feasibility of my faith no longer hangs in the balance, I simply don't need to get bent out of shape if I conclude that it contains contradictions, historical inaccuracies, or other human imperfections.*

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One of the problems with that position is that it fails to appreciate the significance of inspiration. Inspiration is a major instance of God's activity in the world. The God of Scripture is a God who speaks and acts. A God who speaks to and through others.

When you deny the inspiration of Scripture, that drastically subtracts from God's activity in the world. Put another way, if you deny the inspiration of Scripture, then it's unclear if there is a God who speaks and acts. Is there a God who speaks to and through others? Or is God just a projection of the Bible writer's overwrought religious imagination?

*I find that if you accept that God is real, and accept the possibility of miracles, the arguments for highly skeptical views of Scripture tend to be surprisingly weak.*

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He's right about that.

*But the more important point is that I no longer feel I need to end up on the conservative side of things (for on certain matters, such as the dating of the book of Daniel, I actually don't). I don't any longer feel that anything of great consequence hangs in the balance on where these debates end up, for my faith*

*is anchored in something much more solid than what either side of these debates can offer.*

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If Daniel was written after the fact, if it's pious fiction, then God was not in fact active in the lives of the exilic community, as Daniel narrates. On that view, Daniel testifies to the miraculous intercession of a God who, in reality, did not intercede. And why draw the line with Daniel? Boyd's position is the thin edge of a secular wedge.

*In any event, there's a second and more recently discovered reason why these flaws no longer bother me. I simply no longer see any reason why God's infallible Word should exclude human flaws. In another blog, I shared why I believe the cross expresses the thematic center of everything Jesus was about. God was most perfectly revealed when, having become a human in Christ, he bore our sin and our curse on the cross. On this basis, I argued that our theology must not only be Christ-centered; it should be, from beginning to end, cross-centered.*

*If we accept this perspective, it fundamentally changes the way we think about the nature of biblical inspiration (as well as a host of other things). If the ultimate revelation of the perfect God*

*took place by God making our imperfections his own – that is by, in some sense, becoming our sin (2 Cor. 5:21) and our curse (Gal 3:13) – on what grounds could anyone assume that the process by which this perfect God reveals himself in his written Word must exclude all human imperfections? I would think a cross-centered approach to biblical inspiration would lead us to the exact opposite conclusion. Think about it. If the cross reveals what God is truly like, it reveals what God has always been like, in all of his activities.*

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**i)** That's arbitrary. The cross does not express "everything" that Jesus is about. The cross doesn't reveal what God is truly like *in contrast to* the Exodus, Final Judgment. The cross isn't more fundamental than the Incarnation, Resurrection, Ascension and Session, or return of Christ.

**ii)** Moreover, Boyd is trying to create a loose analogy between the weakness of Scripture and the weakness of God on the cross. But that fails on two accounts:

**a)** Jesus isn't modeling divine weakness on the cross. Rather, he's practicing vicarious atonement. Of course, in order to be sacrificed, he must permit himself to be sacrificed. But assuming a defenseless posture is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

**b)** His voluntary weakness is not analogous to errors in Scripture. Indeed, it's not a mistake that Jesus refused to

defend himself. That's deliberate. By parity of argument, Scripture is inerrant.

*Does this mean that we must reject biblical infallibility? It all depends on what you mean by “infallible.”*

*“Infallible” means “unfailing,” and for something to “fail” or “not fail” depends on the standard you are measuring it up against.*

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That's an idiosyncratic definition of infallibility. "Infallibility" means without possibility of error.

*So when you confess Scripture is “infallible,” what standard are you presupposing? If your standard is modern science, for example, I’m afraid you’re going to have a very hard time holding onto your confidence in Scripture, because last I heard, scientists were pretty sure the sky wasn’t a dome that was “hard as a molten mirror” (Job 37:18) as it held up water (Gen. 1:7) with*

## *windows that could be opened so it could rain (Gen. 7:11).*

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**i)** Examples like that no doubt explain why Boyd rejects inspiration. He comes down on the side of the critics. Naturally, if you think Scripture is mistaken, you will reject the inerrancy of Scripture. But that merely shows us how Boyd interprets Scripture.

**ii)** It's funny how liberals like Boyd impute selective rationality to Bible writers. On the one hand, this is how they think the ancients reasoned about rain:

Water comes down from the sky. So there must be a source of water up there. Indeed, the sky is blue-like water! But there must be something to restrain it from coming down all at once. So the sky must be solid. But how can water get through a solid barrier? There must be windows in the sky.

But if the sky is solid, how can we see the blue water? It must be made of something transparent or translucent, like crystal.

So they think the ancients did give serious consideration to the logistics of rain. On the other hand, they don't think the ancients asked elementary questions like:

If the source of rain is a reservoir above the sky, why do we see rain coming from clouds below the sky? Likewise, why don't we ever see it rain on a clear day? After all, if clouds are not the source of rain, if it's really that cosmic ocean above the firmament, why does it only rain on cloudy days?

Liberals like Boyd think the ancients were smart enough to draw logical inferences as long as they were constructing a false view of precipitation, but their rationality and powers of observation abandoned them when it came to scrutinizing common sense problems with a false view of precipitation. He also ignores evidence that the ancients were aware of the water cycle (Eccl 1:7).

Back to Boyd:

*So too, if your standard is perfect historical accuracy, or perfect consistency, you're going to sooner or later run into trouble as well for similar reasons. In fact, I would argue that you're going to run into problems if your standard is even uniformly perfect theology. For example, we instinctively interpret references to Yahweh riding on clouds and throwing down lightning bolts to be metaphorical (e.g. Ps. 18:14; 68:4; 104:3). But ancient biblical authors, along with everybody else in the Ancient Near East, viewed God and/or the gods as literally doing things like this. They were simply mistaken.*

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**i)** That anthropomorphic image is literally inconsistent with the invisibility of God. Yet OT piety stresses the essential invisibility of God.

**ii)** It's a poetic depiction of the Sinai theophany. But the Israelites didn't literally see God riding on a cloud.

**iii)** In addition, it's polemicizing against Baal, who was a pagan storm god. Baal is vanquished by Yahweh.

For detailed exegesis, cf. A. Ross, **A COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS: 1-41** (Kregel 2011), 1:466.



## Trajectories of violence

Some "progressive" Christians try to defang OT passages about "divine violence" by claiming there's a trajectory in Scripture, where the final revelation of God in Christ abrogates the OT view. But there's a glaring problem with that strategy. Indeed, several glaring problems, but for now I'll focus on one in particular.

As a rule, "progressive" Christians who pursue this strategy don't think God changed his view of man; rather, they think man changed his view of God. They think OT writers had a xenophobic outlook. They viewed Yahweh as a tribal God of war. By contrast, NT writers have a cosmopolitan outlook. They view the Father as a God of peace.

But other issues to one side, we're not talking about what God is *really* like, but what fallible Bible writers happen to *think* he's like. It's not God revealing his true character to man, but a culturally-conditioned record of what Jews and Christians *believed* about God.

So it comes down to a choice between fallible OT writers and fallible NT writers. It's not as if OT writers were uninspired while NT writers are suddenly inspired. In both cases, it's just a human projection. Supposedly, OT writers were mistaken, but what's the standard of comparison? Appealing to the NT won't solve the problem, for that's not a *fact* about God, but a *belief* about God. And if Bible writers can be as profoundly mistaken as "progressive" Christians think many OT writers were, what exempts NT writers?

Indeed, many "progressive" Christians take issue with NT writers. They think Paul was sexist and homophobic.

The same is true when they try to distinguish different strands within the OT. Conflicting *opinions* about God.

In theory, some theologians who believe God changes, that God acquires human understanding via the Incarnation, might say the NT represents a paradigm-shift in God's own viewpoint. He went from being a sociopath in OT times to a peacenik in NT times. Of course, that's a very unstable deity. What happens to us if he gets bored with his human pets?

## Losing faith in Santa

Atheists routinely compare faith in God to childish faith in Santa Claus. According to one study I read about, conducted by two Cornell professors, children generally outgrow belief in Santa Claus around the age of 7-8.

It's striking that kids that young already have the cognitive development to become skeptical of Santa Claus. This is something they generally figure out on their own.

Let's compare that to another claim. Atheists, as well as "progressive Christians," think Bible writers espouse a three-story universe. So, for instance, Bible writers allegedly thought the dead descended to the Netherworld.

The origin for that belief supposedly goes back to burial customs. If the dead are buried, then it's natural to associate the place of the dead with the underworld. It must be underground.

There are, however, obvious problems with that inference. To begin with, it's not as if the average grave had backdoor or trapdoor that tunneled down to the Netherworld. You dig a shallow grave for the corpse, and that's that. And, of course, the skeleton remained.

Another problem is traditions of the dead going up rather than down. The soul ascending to heaven.

But here's the larger issue. On the one hand, many children around the age of 7-8 lose faith in Santa Claus. They begin to ask common sense questions about the feasibility of that scenario. They do this without any prompting from adults.

On the other hand, atheists assure us that adults in the ANE were incapable of posing logistical questions about the feasibility of a three-story universe.

## Oceanus

It's fashionable in some "scholarly" circles to claim that Scripture assumes an antiquated cosmography in which there's one central continent encircled by an ocean. Let's examine that claim for a moment.

What was the observational experience of people living in the Levant? The Mediterranean is ocean they were acquainted with.

Is the Levant a central landmass surround by the ocean? Just the opposite: a central ocean surrounded by land, viz. coastal countries, as well as landlocked countries further inland.

In addition, liberals and outright unbelievers think Israel borrowed her cosmographical ideas from the major civilizations surrounding her.

But Egypt, Ras Shamra, and Philistia (to name a few) are Levantine civilizations.

Surely ancient Mediterranean mariners didn't think the Mediterranean was boundless. Both for purposes of trade and naval warfare, they knew that it was encircled by coastal countries. Some countries had fleets which crossed the Mediterranean to invade other Levantine countries, or import and export goods. The Mediterranean was well-explored.

## Mt. Olympus

In evangelical circles, John Walton has done a lot to popularize the notion that Bible writers rely on an antiquated three-story cosmography. Of course, he's hardly alone in this. He's merely the most influential. It's a case of reintroducing an old idea to a new generation under the auspices of an "evangelical" scholar.

One of the striking things about this academic fad is the overemphasis on this particular cosmographical model. There's so much written on the three-story cosmography. On how Bible writers, as well as ancient Near Easterners generally, viewed the world in these terms.

According to this depiction, God, or the gods, live in the sky. There's a celestial palace above the "firmament" where he or they reside.

When the gods visit men, then come down from the sky. Indeed, Daniel Dennett calls them sky-gods (how original!).

What's striking about this claim is how it neglects and conflicts with another ancient cosmographical depiction. And that's the notion of a cosmic sacred mountain where the pantheon dwells.

Mt. Olympus is a familiar example. Many of us are acquainted with that depiction from Greek mythology, or Hollywood movies based on the same.

But that's not an isolated case. It has ANE counterparts. In Canaanite mythology, Mt. Zaphon (i.e. Mt Casios in northern Syria) was Baal's dwelling place.

Moreover, in an instance of polemical theology, Ps 42:2 betrays a critical awareness of this tradition. Mt. Zion supplants Mt. Zaphon. Indeed, Mt. Zion theology is generally thought to trade on the cosmic mountain motif in ANE culture.

However, that doesn't mesh with the tripledecker universe. For on this alternate depiction, the dwelling place of God or gods is *terrestrial* rather than *celestial*. Not *above*, but *below*, the firmament. A mountaintop is *earthly*, not *heavenly*. God or gods are descending from a *mountain* rather than the *sky*.

It reflects the hidebound character of Biblical scholarship that so much attention is given to the three-story cosmography, while basically ignoring, or failing to relate that depiction to a conceptual rival.

Why don't Enns, Walton, Seeley et al. champion the cosmic mountain as the paradigm of ANE cosmography? It's not as if Walton, for one, is unaware of this. It's something he briefly discusses in his monograph on **ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN THOUGHT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT**. But it doesn't seem to occur to him that this presents *opposing* locations for the divine dwelling place. The two are not naturally integrated.

In addition, while a celestial palace is empirically unfalsifiable, a terrestrial place is empirically falsifiable. It would be a simply matter to confirm or disconfirm whether God or gods reside on mountaintops. Indeed, on a clear day, you could see whether there was a palace up there. Not to mention hiking to the summit.

So did they really think that's where their gods resided?  
Maybe *some* did, but what about the locals?

On a related note, we can see how OT writers embellish Mt. Zion in ways which are clearly symbolic. Although an omnipotent God could raise Mt. Zion to an elevation higher than Everest, the expanded base of the mountain would destroy Jerusalem. That would necessitate relocating Jerusalem. Likewise, if the river of paradise flows from Mt. Zion, that's nowhere near the original river of paradise.

OT writers are simply manipulating *imagery*. It was never intended to be a realistic description.

Another example is the cosmic tree motif (e.g. Dan 4; Ezk 31). It's not as if Bible writers actually saw a tree that tall, in real life. It's patently symbolic.



## Apparent motion

Does Scripture teach geocentrism? Many unbelievers claim it does, and use that to disprove Scripture. A few Christians defend geocentrism. By way of reply:

**i)** Astronomers want to translate observations into objective third-person descriptions. But in ordinary language, a statement like "the sun goes around the earth" is shorthand for "I see the sun pass overhead." It's inherently indexical: a statement which takes the earthbound observer as the frame of reference.

That's the origin of the statement: the experience of the earthbound observer.

To treat that as a geocentric claim involves translating it into a different kind of statement.

**ii)** An observational statement about the apparent motion of the sun is not a statement about the sun moving in relation to the earth, but the sun moving in relation to the observer.

Compare climbing a staircase to riding an escalator.

When I climb a staircase, I'm in motion in relation to the staircase and the room, while the staircase and the room are stationary in relation to me. I go from one step to another step.

When I ride an escalator, I'm stationary in relation to the escalator, but in motion relative to the room. I remain on the same step moving up or down. I'm not moving, the escalator is.

Am I moving in relation to the room? That's ambiguous. In one sense, I'm *motionless*. I remain in the same *position* relative to the step I'm standing on.

I'm *moving* in the sense that I'm *being moved*. The escalator is *moving* me from one location to another. So, in another sense, I'm in motion—even *though* I'm stationary.

That's like standing still on a revolving earth, and watching the sun shift position throughout the course of the day.

And it *does* shift position from one side of the horizon to the other. Does that mean it shifts position by *moving*? But that's ambiguous in the same sense as the escalator.

When I ride an escalator, does my position shift? In relation to the escalator? No. In relation to the room? Yes.

Biblical descriptions of apparent motion are consistent with more than one underlying explanation. They don't single out geocentrism. The language is not that specific. It's not a direct statement about the sun shifting position in relation to the *earth*, but a direct statement about the sun shifting position in relation to the *earthbound observer*, who is stationary on a revolving earth. At best, it's an indirect statement about the sun's shifting position, via the stationary earthbound observer.

Suppose I'm in a valley. The sun is just above the eastern side of the horizon. I'm standing on the western side. Suppose I sprint to the eastern side. The sun is now shifting position in relation to my changed perspective. When I'm in motion, moving from west to east or east to west in the valley, the stationary sun shifts position. It's at a different angle, relative to me.

Some people are impatient. In a hurry. They both ride and climb the escalator. They are moving in relation to the escalator while the escalator is moving them in relation to the room.

**iii)** Here's an anecdote by William James, which exposes the ambiguities of relative motion:

*SOME YEARS AGO, being with a camping party in the mountains, I returned from a solitary ramble to find every one engaged in a ferocious metaphysical dispute. The corpus of the dispute was a squirrel – a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree's opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn*

threadbare. Every one had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: "Which party is right," I said, "depends on what you practically mean by 'going round' the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any farther dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb 'to go round' in one practical fashion or the other."

*Although one or two of the hotter disputants called my speech a shuffling evasion, saying they wanted no quibbling or scholastic hair-splitting, but meant just plain honest English 'round', the majority seemed to think that the distinction had assuaged the dispute.*

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## Child mortality

"Progressive Christians" labor to relativize "divine violence" in the Bible—especially the OT. For instance, they find it morally problematic that God would command the death of children.

As I've noted on various occasions, their solutions fail to solve the problem they pose for themselves. If it's morally problematic for God to command the death of children, then it's morally problematic for God to allow millions or billions of children over the millennia to die from preventable causes. If the divine commands are morally problematic, they don't pose a special problem, over and above problem of child mortality in general. So it's illusory to imagine that domesticating the OT solves the problem which they raise.

But let's approach this from another angle. Suppose there was no child mortality. Suppose no one died of natural causes. Everyone stopped aging after reaching 18 (give or take).

If, however, humans continued to reproduce, at some point that would lead to overpopulation. And, of course, that expands exponentially. If you have 5 kids, if each of your kids has 5 kids...

Overpopulation would lead to mass starvation as well as warring over scarce resources.

In theory, God could prevent that if, after human population reached an optimal sustainable level, God rendered humans infertile.

Mind you, children contribute a great deal to the quality of life. A childless world would be a diminished world.

But let's play along with the hypothetical. I don't know how long it would take, but wherever the cutoff occurred, there'd be no future generations. No more children.

Human mortality, including child mortality, creates room, both in time and space, for more children to be born. Children will be born further down the line who would not be born in a world without child mortality—or human mortality. Once the population becomes static, there's no more room for new children.

Child mortality results in the existence of heavenbound children down the line who'd never exist in a deathless world.

In Biblical eschatology, the collective saints in glory, who comprise a subset of the human race, will be restored to the new earth. The saints in every generation, who go to heaven when they die, will resume life on earth. And the latter-day Christians have human mortality, including child mortality, to thank for that.

One could also speculate on how many humans the earth can sustain at optimal levels. Technology can make a larger population feasible.

## Fighting words

One of the current dividing lines between the evangelical right and the evangelical left (for want of a better term) is "divine violence" in Scripture. Where Scripture, especially the OT, depicts God committing, commanding, or otherwise sanctioning "violence."

The critics deny that God said and did the violent things imputed to him in Scripture. A God who said and did those things would be morally monstrous.

Critics also justify their complaint by saying this isn't just an academic issue. If we defend OT "genocide," we forfeit the right to condemn modern atrocities.

Moreover, they contend that OT "genocide" has actually inspired some medieval massacres and modern atrocities. And it's been used to rationalize that action.

However, this generates a dilemma for the evangelical left. For it simply relocates the problem of evil. If God accommodated influential portrayals of himself in Scripture which have been used to justify or even inspire real-world atrocities, then how can the critics (who still claim to be Christian) exempt God from complicity in the outcome?

And this isn't just a misinterpretation of Scripture. Many critics admit that Scripture does, in fact, represent God saying or doing those things. So you can't shift blame to the reader. It goes right back to the text.

Having inculpated Scripture, how do they exculpate God for the real-world consequences of accommodating a "genocidal" portrait of himself in Scripture?





## Was Samson a suicide bomber?

*Did your Sunday school teacher present Samson as a hero? He was not so, says James McGrath, the Clarence L. Goodwin Chair in New Testament Language and Literature at Butler University. This act is “almost a ‘suicide bombing,’” he told me. And yet, the New Testament book of Hebrews (11:32-34), in what many ministers refer to as the “hall of faith,” portrays Samon’s act as redemptive.*

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<http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2014/04/04/let-there-be-violence/31599>

**i)** What's funny about this comparison is how it exposes a potential rift between the religious left and the political left, even though they are usually soulmates. Many leftwing academics defend suicide bombers. They side with the so-called "Palestinians." They think the "Palestinians" have a just cause. Israel is an "occupation force." They like to tell us that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

**ii)** "Suicide bomber" has invidious connotations, based on the typical suicide bomber. Take a Muslim who rides a bus into Jerusalem, then denotes the explosive belt, killing or

maiming the passengers (himself included). That's his ticket to paradise, with 72 virgins eagerly await his arrival.

How you evaluate the morality of that action depends on how you view the Arab/Israeli conflict, Islam, Jihadist theology, the status of noncombatants, &c.

**iii)** In principle, there's nothing wrong with being a suicide bomber. We need to clear away the popular image that phrase conjures up. It all depends on the example.

Suppose a terrorist state is developing a biochem weapon deep underground. They will unleash it on millions of innocents.

Suppose a "suicide bomber" infiltrates the underground factory/laboratory, the denotes an explosive belt which kills the scientists as well as destroying the samples and equipment. Because it happens underground, there's no contamination above ground.

At one stroke he spares the lives of millions of innocents. That's a noble action.

**iv)** Was Samson a hero? We need to distinguish between a hero and a heroic action. Judges portrays Samson is a deeply morally flawed individual. A man who generally failed to fulfill his calling.

However, his final action is heroic. The Philestines were mortal enemies of Israel. God providentially maneuvers Samson into a situation where he can defend Israel by striking a crippling blow against the Philistines. Samson seizes the opportunity. It's a military action. In the context of the narrative, he did the right thing.



## Dissonant messages

The consistency and infallibility of Scripture is a traditional presupposition of the Calvinist/Arminian debate. Both sides traditionally assume that Scripture consistently teaches one or the other position. And that's a revealed truth. It's just a question of ascertaining what the Bible teaches.

However, modern Arminians (especially in academia) often have a more liberal view of Scripture. For instance, Asbury Seminary is the flagship of Arminian seminaries. Here's what Bill Arnold, who's an OT prof. at Asbury, recently said:

*I agree that there are many topics in the Bible for which we have diverse voices that sometimes present dissonant messages. Christian biblical theology takes all the dissonant voices and traces progressive messages and themes across the canon, but always including every text. A truly “biblical” theology does not set out deciding which texts fail to express the mind of God. The very presence of a verse in the Bible is witness to its lasting value. These texts are Israel’s witness (Brueggemann’s “testimony”) to the mind of God, and the*

## *early church's witness to God's continued work through the Messiah.*

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<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2014/03/15/a-response-to-adam-hamiltons-3-buckets-approach-to-scripture/#comment-1289335436>

**i)** On this view, there's no expectation that Scripture has a consistent position on the Calvinist/Arminian debate. It could, by turns, teach Calvinism and Arminianism alike, expressing dissonant messages.

It that case, it would be artificial and reductionistic to harmonize these discordant voices.

**ii)** In addition, even if consistently taught Arminianism, once you repudiate inerrancy, that could be consistently wrong. And Arnold is far from alone in this respect. It's not uncommon for Arminian academics to deny the inerrancy of Scripture.

## He is coming soon

**The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place (Rev 1:1).**

**i)** What does "soon" mean in this verse? Not so much what does the Greek word mean, but to what does it refer?

Preterists think they have a straightforward answer: "soon" means soon in relation to the fall of Jerusalem, in 70 AD. They make fun of how futurists try to explain "soon." David Chilton quipped that you wouldn't send a futurist to buy hot sandwiches.

The preterist interpretation isn't quite as straightforward as it appears at first blush. For one thing, "soon" depends on when you date the book. Soon would mean soon after the book was written. Of course, that itself makes "soon" a relative concept. A matter of degree. How many years must go by before it's too late? The word itself doesn't specify an exact cut-off.

**ii)** More to the point, even if that's a straightforward interpretation of the adverb, the preterist buys that straightforward interpretation at the expense of a very convoluted interpretation of what Revelation says about eschatological judgment, the return of Christ, the new Eden, new Jerusalem, cessation of sin, suffering, death, disease, and grief. That's a high price to pay for a single word. Surely there's a less costly interpretation for the book as a whole.

**iii)** However, that's not the main issue. Let's explore the fluidity of this adverb. Suppose a husband becomes a

widower at the age of 70. Perhaps they were a childless couple. Or perhaps they had a son who died in battle. Or a daughter who died in a traffic accident. So she's all he had. After she dies, he loses the will to live. Although he's free to remarry, he feels that it's too late in the life to begin a new life. He made his life with her. He can't go back and he can't go forward. She was it for him.

Suppose he prays that God will take him "soon." When he first begins to pray for that, "soon" means soon after she died. He prays that God will let him die shortly after his wife died.

But suppose, to his consternation, he's still alive 5 years later. Every day, he prays the same prayer. But "soon" has shifted. Even though he continues to use the same adverb, it no longer has the same referent. At this point it's too late for him to die soon after she died. So "soon" now means soon after the last time he prayed. "Take me soon," meaning, take me soon after I ask you to end my life. "Soon" is relative to the timeframe. If the timeframe shifts, the adverb follows the timeframe. Later is still "soon" in relation to the shifting timeframe.

**iv)** For the preterist, "soon" (in Rev 1:1) has reference to an *event*: the fall of Jerusalem. But what if soon has reference to the *audience*? Indeed, isn't that unavoidable? What is *soon* for them. For the reader. Isn't that the natural frame of reference?

But that in turn raises another question. The identification of the audience. *Which* audience?

Is it the *original* audience? The seven churches of Asia Minor? They are certainly included in the audience for the book as a whole.



Preterists like to emphasize that Scripture must be meaningful or relevant to the original audience. And that's true enough. Indeed, that's a component of the grammatico-historical method.

However, the audience for Scripture isn't monolithic. Scripture has more than one audience. God inspired the Bible for the benefit of Christians in every generation. So the audience for Revelation isn't a fixed frame of reference. In which case, "soon" lacks fixity as well.

More so when we consider the audience for *prophecy*. Suppose you have an oracle that's fulfilled just a generation after the prophet delivered his oracle. Even in that brief turnaround time, there's been some turnover in the composition of the audience. Some members of the original audience have died by then, while others were born afterwards.

"Soon" and "late" are indexical markers. Soon in relation to where you happen to be in history. Because we're born at different times and die at different times, what is soon for you may be late for me. What is soon for me may be late for you.

If Christ had returned in the late 1C, that would be too soon for subsequent generations. You and I wouldn't be here in that event.

I had a devout grandmother who, when I was a boy, used to tell me about how she was hoping that Jesus would return in her own lifetime. In her mind, the sky would part like a curtain and Jesus would descend.

But he didn't return in her lifetime. And unfortunately, she lived too long for her own good. Her final years were darkened by tragedy. Whenever Christ returns, it will be too late to spare her what she suffered in her final years. But in that respect, the return of Christ will always be too soon for some and too late for others.

v) In Rev 1:1, "soon" may mean soon for the final Christian generation. For Christian readers who happen to be alive when he comes back. "Soon" tracks the salient audience. "Soon" picks out the applicable audience.

Every Biblical promise isn't equally applicable in time and place. Not everything that happens in Revelation happens to everyone.

Christina Rossetti was a Victorian poet who wrote devotional commentary on Revelation. She no doubt found Rev 20-22 edifying. Promises like that give us the hope to persevere. But the situation it describes isn't directly applicable to the reader until it happens. That isn't directly applicable to the reader unless it happens to the reader. In which case it's directly applicable to the final Christian generation.

It wasn't soon for her. But then, it wasn't meant to be. Not everything in Revelation is meant for you and me. Not directly. Revelation describes some kinds of events which happen to some Christians, and other kinds of events which happen to other Christians. Things *like* that happen. Every Christian isn't going to recapitulate the narrative in Revelation. That was never in the cards. You and I will find out by experience how much of that describes our own experience.

## Dousing Sparks

I'm going to comment on some statements that Kenton Sparks made in the comment thread of this post:

<http://andynaselli.com/whats-evangelical-about-this>

Sparks published a book in 2008 which made a big splash. I don't know why. Books attacking the inspiration of Scripture have been around since the Enlightenment. Indeed, you had pagans attacking the Bible in early church history. Moreover, as one sympathetic reviewer admitted:

*After his discussion of epistemology Sparks ranges impressively through a lengthy treatment of critical problems arising in biblical interpretation, in New Testament studies as well as Old. There will be little new here to those familiar with critical scholarship, but Sparks rightly recognizes the need to cover this ground thoroughly in view of his intended audience.*

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<http://peterennsonline.com/book-reviews/gods-word-in-human-words-by-kenton-sparks-a-review-by-stephen-chapman/>

So this is turning back the odometer on a used car.

Sparks is a former evangelical who lost his faith in graduate school. I'm struck by how impressionable some people are.

To judge by both critical and sympathetic reviews, his book presents a familiar liberal dilemma. Liberals like Sparks typically employ a two-stage strategy. In the first stage they do their best to trash the inspiration of Scripture. This stage is indistinguishable from atheist attacks on Scripture.

However, liberals like Sparks don't wish to leave it there. After all, they still claim to be Christian. They are "rescuing" the Bible from fundamentalism. They still want the Bible to be relevant in the life of the church.

So the second stage is to salvage the Bible from their own demolition job. Having dismantled the inspiration of Scripture to their own satisfaction, they stand over the bullet-riddled corpse, attempting to harvest some useable organs. It's a dilemma of their own making.

*After all, in the end, even if we had inerrant human authors we'd only have our errant interpretations of the text. If that's the case, then there's no need to start with perfect discourse. We start with adequate discourse and end with adequate interpretation.*

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That's a popular cliché. Some critics use it to dismiss the value of inerrant autographa. Some critics use it to justify

the Roman Magisterium. But the contention is specious.

Let's consider a counterexample. When you buy prescription medicine, the bottle has directions. However, some patients misread directions. They underdose or overdose. Both can be fatal. Either they fail to take enough medicine to stay alive, or they inadvertently take a toxic dose.

Does it follow that because some patients made a mistake in reading the directions, the directions might as well be mistaken too? Since some patients misread directions, it is unnecessary to have accurate directions?

If the original directions are erroneous, that compounds the problem. You will have more dead patients.

*Allegories, Accommodation, Speech-Act theory ... all of these are interpretive theories that find a way of keeping parts of the biblical discourse by relativizing other parts of it. This is necessary because Scripture really is diverse in its viewpoints.*

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**i)** He seems to be criticizing accommodation, yet he himself appeals to accommodation.

**ii)** It depends on how we define accommodation. Accommodation isn't synonymous with error.

*Central to my epistemology is that human beings only need—and can only have—adequate understandings of the real world and never God-like, error-free perceptions.*

*At any rate, I stand by this point: any epistemology that believes human beings can have inerrant knowledge of the world stands in the modern Cartesian tradition, according to which we are able to sufficiently escape our human context to see things “as they really are”; no postmodernist would ever say something like this. We are ever and always looking at the world from a social and cultural perspective, and that perspective is always warped by our finiteness and fallenness.*

*But Jeremy is right about my book, in that I don't believe human beings write inerrant books about God, history and theology, even if they are biblical writers. That is, it is clear to me that the illocutionary acts of the biblical authors—the very things that they wished to say—can sometimes be recognized as errant.*

*For postmodernists like myself, to be right is literally to be “like” ... our understanding is close to reality*

*in a useful way, but in no respect does it precisely match reality. Such an inerrant stance on reality (and here we must speak as fools) is only available to God. Now for those who still stand in the modernist tradition, they affirm that human beings have partial “atoms” of inerrant knowledge (true propositions) mixed with “atoms” of errant knowledge (“false propositions”).*

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One problem with this dichotomy is that he is exempting God from error. But to do that, Sparks must tacitly exempt himself as well. His very dichotomy presupposes that his understanding of God escapes our warped perception. But if, by his own admission, our outlook fails to match up with reality, then that extends to his view of God. How does he know what's only available to God? Isn't Sparks viewing the world through dusty glasses? So he has no standard of comparison. How can he erect a wall, then tell us what's on the other side of the wall?

*You recognize this as the propositional school of epistemology associated especially with Biola U. On this theory, the biblical authors—with God’s help—managed to include in their discourse only the true propositions and to avoid all false propositions. This last assertion*

*seems totally false to me, both because Scripture is filled with human errors (because humans err) and because it fails to appreciate the contextual nature of interpretation (humans don't know enough context to inerrantly interpret and then write about reality).*

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Among other things, he fails to distinguish between inerrant writers and inerrant readers.

*Speech-Act theory, as you are employing it, is just another tool that turns the human authors of Scripture into inerrant authors. It says something like this: "We must judge the locutionary stance of the author of Genesis 1 in light of his illocutionary stance, which was, to tell us that Yahweh alone created the cosmos. The fact that he tells us (apparently, in error) that there are waters above the heavens is irrelevant because he was not trying to give us science but theology." Now I do think that we should attend carefully to what authors are trying to do when we read their discourse, but that doesn't (in my opinion) change the fact that his cosmology was at some points wrong and that he*



*clearly communicated that cosmology in his disourse. I'd prefer Calvin's approach, which is that the cosmology in Genesis is mistaken and that God accommodated his speech to errant human views. In this way, God does not err, but the human author and audience of Scripture are in error (although, in a twist, Calvin wants Moses to know about the accommodation so that he is "in" on the matter).*

*I quite agree that Scripture's testimony about itself must be taken seriously, but it seems to me that Scripture's testimony has to be weighed along with Scripture's actual features. Even if we find a biblical text that says something like, "God's word in the Bible never communicates any errant human viewpoints" (not something we'll find, but for the sake of discussion), that biblical word will not be God's final word on the subject if the Bible has human errors in it.*

*If all of the scientific evidence shows that the earth is really old and life emerged over the course of a long process, then we'll simply have to believe it and try to understand how that fits with Scripture.*

---

Now we witness a fundamental contradiction in his epistemology. On the one hand, he denies that humans can ever have an inerrant understanding of things "as they really are." On the other hand, he's sure that Scripture is errant. He has unquestioning confidence in his interpretation of Scripture to conclude that Scripture is full of errors. He's certain that science has given us a correct description of the world, which—in turn—corrects the faulty description of the world in Scripture.

Sparks is trapped in the familiar dilemma of the relativist. On the one hand, he assures us that humans lack access to an infallible source and standard of knowledge. On the other hand, he can only disprove the Bible by retrieving the yardstick he summarily threw away.

***God never errs, so in all of Scripture—every page—he never errs in his discourse. However, because God accommodates his speech to us through human beings who inevitably err, there not a single page of Scripture that is entirely free of human error.***

---

In principle, there are three logical options:

- i)** Bible writers *never* err
- ii)** Bible writers *sometimes* err
- iii)** Bible writers *always* err

Now Sparks can only say humans always err on pain of self-refutation. If every human statement is errant, then every sentence in his own book is errant. Then his book is systematically errant, from start to finish.

So, to be minimally coherent, Sparks has to grant that humans are sometimes right. Otherwise, he instantly falsifies his own claims.

But if humans can sometimes be right, why can't they always be right? If the authors of Scripture can be right some of the time, why can't they be right all of the time? Once you concede the possibility of true speech some of the time, how can you rule out consistently true discourse? Is there a quota? Isaiah can be true 37% of the time, but not 43% of the time?

*Again, and I don't mean this with any arrogance at all: If to be a Christian is to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible's human authors, then to my mind Christianity has been proved wrong a hundred times over. I am still a Christian because of the sorts of things I write in my book; if anything, Archer's "Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties" and the books of conservative evangelicals only drive me farther from the faith.*

---

Sparks is a postmodernist with a modernist inside him, clawing to get out. On the one hand you have his faux modest disclaimers about how humans can't be inerrant. On the other hand, you have his supreme self-assurance is proclaiming that "If to be a Christian is to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible's human authors, then to my mind Christianity has been proved wrong a hundred times over."

A postmodernist skeptic about human knowledge who's absolutely certain that not a single page of Scripture is free from error. If that's the standard, then Christianity has been proven wrong "hundreds of times over." His lack of elementary objectivity is comical.

BTW, note my quotation from Archer in which he tells us that the Israelites wrongly thought that rabbits chewed the cud and that the biblical author accommodated himself to that errant view;

That's a very deceptive account of what Archer said. Here's what Archer actually says:

*In this technical sense neither the hyrax nor the hare can be called ruminants, but they do give the appearance of chewing their cud in the same way ruminants do... We need to remember that this list of forbidden animals was intended to be a practical guide for the ordinary Israelite as he was out in the wilds looking for food (126).*

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Let's elaborate on this explanation:

**i)** Lev 11 is one of the OT purity codes. It distinguishes clean from unclean animals. That distinction is, itself, somewhat arbitrary. It's concerned with *ritual* purity. That's a *symbolic* distinction rather than a *natural* distinction. So the text doesn't intend to be scientific.

**ii)** In addition, the aim is to alert the reader to superficial anatomical and behavior markers that enable him to recognize and avoid unclean animals. It isn't meant to be a scientific taxonomy. Rather, it's a rule of thumb for identifying unclean animals, in distinction to clean animals. "Eat this, don't eat that!"

That's not divine accommodation to error. Rather, that's hitting the intended target. You can't miss the target unless you were aiming at that target in the first place.

***Notice too his view that the author of Acts quoted from a faulty Septuagint, thus providing an incorrect chronology, but that this doesn't matter because it didn't concern his purpose. Now I agree with this, but Archer didn't realize the implications.***

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I assume that Sparks is alluding to Acts 7:4. However, it's likely that the LXX preserves the original reading. That reading is multiply attested in Philo, the LXX, the Samaritan

Pentateuch, and the Pentateuch Targum. Cf. E. Schnabel, **Acts** (Zondervan 2012), 367n16.

*Texts are, strictly speaking, neither errant nor inerrant. Rather, they are the artifacts of human actions that are the source of any correctness and error. Hence, to say that a text is “errant” or “inerrant” is always a metaphor that means, “The views of the author that gave rise to this text were not in error, and/or the author did not err in the effort to express his/her views.”*

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Not clear what he means by this. Perhaps he means language encodes true or false beliefs.

*As for the resurrection, your question about it already assumes the Cartesian epistemology (i.e., any epistemology that believes humans can know that they have perfect, incorrigible knowledge) that I critique in the book. The simple answer is that the testimony to the life of Jesus and his resurrection is flawed in*

*certain ways, as one can see by comparing the gospels. And even if they were identical, that wouldn't prove that the testimonies were right. So I don't "know" (in the Cartesian sense) that Jesus resurrected and ascended; I do truly believe it and live by it because there is evidence for it. But of course, I could be wrong. Maybe the universe is just a pack of little strings held together by impersonal forces and we all die and turn to dust ... but that's not what I believe.*

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That's not what he *wants* to believe, but his view of Scripture leaves him with little recourse.

## Is Yahweh the Christian God?

There are professing Christians who essentially reject OT theism. They treat OT Judaism as a different religion. What are the differences between the OT and the NT?

**i)** In a broad sense, the OT represents promise while the NT represents fulfillment. Mind you, even that contrast presumes underlying continuity. The NT can only fulfill the OT if the OT is true.

**ii)** In addition, this contrast is somewhat overstated. Both the OT and the NT contain eschatological promises whose fulfillment remains future. Some OT prophecies are fulfilled in the NT, but others remain outstanding.

**iii)** The NT contains far less military and political history than the OT. The OT contains extensive historical narratives of palace intrigue, civil war, siege-warfare, and war with Israel's neighbors. It also narrates conditions of cyclical national apostasy. So there's a lot of violence and unsavory material in these pages.

The four Gospels and Acts are the main historical books in the NT. The Gospels are tightly focussed on the public ministry of Christ while Acts is tightly focused on church-planting. If the NT devoted as much attention to narrating life in the Roman Empire that the OT does to life in the ANE, the NT would be just as violent and unsavory.

The difference has to do with selection-criteria. The OT has more occasion to narrate brutality and depravity. It narrates the history of a nation.



**iv)** Because Israel was a nation-state, the OT includes a law code. The law code includes a penal code as well as laws of war.

This doesn't make for pleasant reading. However, it's not as if the new covenant obviates the need for a penal code or national defense. Most Christians aren't pacifists or anarchists. So Christian social life will require a counterpart to the OT law code. A penal code and military.

I daresay that many Christian pacifists are only pacifists on paper. If an armed assailant broke into their home, threatened to rape their wife and slit the throats of their children, their theoretical pacifism would fly out the window. This is just a radical chic pose.

**v)** The OT also contains purity codes, the violation of which can result in capital punishment or direct divine execution. The NT lacks the same purity codes. However, there's a principle which carries over. If anything, it's heightened:

**29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?  
30 For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people."  
31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:29-31).**

**vi)** The fatal judgment exacted on Ananias, Sapphira (Acts 5), and Herod Agrippa (Acts 12), is very reminiscent of divine violence in the OT. Although it's not on the same scale as some OT judgments, that's a difference in degree rather than kind.

**vii)** Likewise, the sack of Jerusalem, which Jesus threatens against apostate Jerusalem, is an example of large-scale divine violence, comparable to many OT judgments.

**viii)** The NT contains a certain amount of martial imagery in describing the final judgment. I don't think Jesus literally swoops down from heaven on a war horse and puts his enemies to the sword (Rev 19). However, Revelation does involve the forcible subjugation of God's enemies. And we can't rule out the possibility that this involves physical violence.

## Inerrancy and the enlightenment

One popular line of attack on the inerrancy of Scripture is the oft-repeated claim that the very concept of inerrancy is a product of the Enlightenment. A concept of truth that only developed during or after the Enlightenment. I've never seen people who say this document their claim. It seems to be a thirdhand claim that began in Philosophy 101 courses on postmodernism, then seeped into theological literature. From there it gets repeated time and over by people who don't bother to trace the claim or check the facts.

I'd simply point out that attacks on the inerrancy of Scripture antedate the Enlightenment by centuries. Take pagans like Celsus (2C) and Porphyry (3-4C), or the medieval Muslim polemicist Ibn Hazm (11C). It would be grossly anachronistic to say they were operating with an Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment concept of truth.

## Is there a tipping point?

I'm going to examine an anxiety that some Christians may be struggling with. Christian apologists field many objections to the faith. But sometimes the intellectual objections to Christianity may seem to be overwhelming. When there are so many objections on so many different fronts, is there a tipping point at we should reconsider our original commitment? Even if we can explain—or explain away—each objection, one by one, yet when we find ourselves on the defensive so often, isn't there a point at which this becomes an exercise in special-pleading? If, even before we hear an objection, we've made up our mind ahead of time that any objection must be wrong, doesn't that mean we've put ourselves in a position where our beliefs are impervious to reality?

By way of response:

**i)** If Christianity is true, the truth of Christianity doesn't depend on our ability to argue for the truth of Christianity. If Christianity is true, we'd expect God to make the truth of Christianity accessible to believers who don't have prepared answers for every conceivable objection. Supporting arguments can be very useful, but they are not indispensable.

**ii)** Cumulative fallacies don't add up to single cogent objection. Critics multiply objections to the Christian faith, but the objections are typically fallacious. Critics have fallacious expectations about the kind of evidence that should exist. Take the minimalist school of archeology, and its critics (e.g. Kenneth Kitchen).

They have fallacious preconceptions about what inerrancy entails. For instance, when Craig Blomberg or Vern Poythress write monographs defending the inerrancy of Scripture, although they discuss specific passages of Scripture, they also give the critics a lesson in hermeneutics. They discuss the crude notion of error which critics bring to Scripture.

**iii)** If the secular alternative to Christianity undermines rationality (e.g. Plantinga's argument against evolutionary epistemology), if the alternative undermines epistemic duties (e.g. moral relativism or moral nihilism), then we can safely ignore the alternative. If the alternative can't ground truth or logic (e.g. the argument from logic to God), then the alternative is a losing proposition. It's not worth pursuing. It commits intellectual suicide.

Indeed, some atheists torpedo reason (e.g. Alex Rosenberg, Daniel Dennett, Paul and Patricia Churchland).

Now, an unbeliever might counter that Christianity undermines intellectual standards. However, that's equivocal. That objection doesn't operate at the same level. Usually the atheist means one of two things. He may mean Christianity is false. However, there's a basic difference between claiming a position is irrational, and claiming a position undermines rationality. The latter is far more radical.

To say a position is irrational is to claim that a particular position is unreasonable. The position lacks sufficient evidence. Or the position runs counter to the evidence.

That's quite different than saying a position conduces to global skepticism. That questions the ability to know anything, the ability to prove or disprove anything.

Or he may mean Christians have an irrational mindset. They are credulous. According to the popular caricature, faith is believing in the absence of evidence or believing in spite of counterevidence.

And some Christians are fideists. But at most, that only means fideistic Christianity is irrational.

Likewise, if atheism negates the obligation to be intellectually honest, then that too is self-defeating.

Now, one could debate whether the secular alternative undermines rationality, but if it does, then objections to Christianity are not symmetrical with objections to secularism.

**iv)** In addition, the tipping-point is bidirectional. When distinguished philosophers (e.g. Thomas Nagel, Jerry Fodor) and scientists (e.g. Stuart Newman, Denis Noble, James Shapiro, Richard Sternberg) who are sympathetic to evolution, or think something like evolution must be true, nevertheless lodge fundamental objections to the current theory of evolution, isn't there a point at which Darwinians should reconsider their commitment?

## Daniel the seer

**i)** Critics regard the Book of Daniel as a mid-2C BC composition, ostensibly set in the 6C BC. They take that position in part because of alleged historical inaccuracies. For a useful rejoinder, cf. A. Millard, "**DANIEL IN BABYLON: AN ACCURATE RECORD?**" J. Hoffmeier & D. Magary, eds. **DO HISTORICAL MATTERS MATTER TO FAITH** (Crossway 2012), 263-280.

However, their primary evidence for dating the book is chap. 11. They regard most of Dan 11:21-39 as a retrodiction concerning Antiochus Epiphanes, whereas they regard vv40-45 as a failed prediction concerning the demise of Antiochus Epiphanes.

When you think about it, it's striking that their major piece of evidence comes down to just 5 verses.

**ii)** Some critics defend vaticina ex eventu as an accepted literary convention. I've discussed the Antiochean interpretation before, in Appendix I of this review:

<http://calvindude.org/ebooks/stevehays/Infidel-Delusion.pdf>

Now I'd like to make a few additional observations:

**iii)** The same critics who regard Dan 11 as retroactive regard the references to Cyrus in Isa 44:28 and 45:1 as retrodictive. Just as they use the assumed allusion to Antiochus in Dan 11:40-45 to help date the book, they use the references to Cyrus in "Second Isaiah" to help date the

book. That establishes a terminus ad quem for the book. It ("Second Isaiah") can't be written any earlier than the postexilic era.

Of course, Christians regard both Isaiah and Daniel as authentic, accurate predictions. They regard Dan 11:40-45 as an allusion to the future Antichrist rather than Antiochus, who is a type of the Antichrist. Critics reject the Antichrist interpretation, in part because there's no literary break between 11:39 and 11:40ff.

**iv)** One problem with the critical position is how their evidence for dating Daniel is in tension with their evidence for dating "Second Isaiah." Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Isa 44:28 and 45:1 are retrodictive, notice that the author didn't merely allude to Cyrus. He names Cyrus. The danger with alluding to someone is that your reader may miss the allusion. So "Second Isaiah" leaves nothing to chance. He spells out the identity of the culprit.

By parity of argument, if Dan 11:40-45 is retrodictive, why does the author content himself with merely alluding to Antiochus, when—given the "Second Isaian" precedent—he could be more explicit? That would guard against a misidentification on the part of his readers. If Dan 11:21-45 refers to Antiochus, why not come out and say so? Why leave it to the imagination of the reader to draw the right inference? "Second Isaiah" wasn't so trusting.

**v)** The Book of Daniel presents the person of Daniel as a seer. Even if the critics regard that as a fictitious facade for the narrator, why assume the visions in Daniel are a literary artifice? After all, critics think real people can have visions. Visions can be self-induced. Consider the "vision quest" of American Indians, or Vedic sages doping up on mushrooms. Likewise, critics routinely dismiss the postmortem



appearances of Jesus as visions. Even a hallucinatory vision is still a genuine vision. It may be inverdical, but it is a bona fide vision.

**vi)** But if the prophetic visions in Daniel are real visions rather than a literary convention—and even on critical assumptions, there's no reason to deny that—then why assume the seer knew what he was seeing?

If (ex hypothesi), the visions in Dan 11 are vaticina ex eventu, then the narrator is consciously writing with a particular referent in mind. He's writing history under the guise of prophecy. If, however, he's recording his visions, then he doesn't necessarily know what they refer to. He's the passive recipient of these images.

I'd add that the same holds true if the visions are inspired, veridical previous of the future. Unlike a retrodiction, where the faux prophet knows, with the benefit of hindsight, exactly what he's writing about, a seer isn't in control of the process. He lacks a retrospective or prospective viewpoint. He simply writes down what he saw in the vision.

**vii)** That also involves translating information from one medium to another. Translating visual information into propositional information. Turning pictures into words. Drawing word-pictures.

But if, in Dan 11:40-45, the seer is describing a vision, then that's more ambiguous than someone who's writing about the future from scratch. For that's literally a depiction of the future. Picturing the future. In his vision he sees a landscape. He sees ships and charioteers. He sees a mountain and an ocean. He puts that into words.

In his vision, is this generic geography, or specific geography? Does he see what the "King of the North" actually looks like? Or does he see a generic figure in period costume?

Even if the imagery refers to the distant future, the imagery itself will be anachronistic. It will depict ancient technology, ancient geography, and ancient attire. Ancient cities. Ancient battlefields. It's a placeholder for a future scene, but cast in terms familiar to the original audience.

**viii)** By the same token, if there was a break between 11:39 and 11:40ff., why would we expect a literary marker to that effect? Visionary scenes can change on a dime.

The expectation of a smooth transition from one scene to the next assumes the text is essentially literary. But if the text is recording a visionary experience, then abrupt scene changes are to be expected.

## Monkey's uncle

**i)** One of the prima facie challenges for Bible-believing Christians is how, if at all, we are related to extinct "hominids." I'm going to use "hominid" for convenience. By conventional definition, that term implies a relationship. My use of the term doesn't prejudge our relationship, if any. I use it for ease of reference.

I'm no expert, but since Christians are expected to take a position on this issue, I'll give my 2¢,

**ii)** In terms of fossil evidence, from what I've read this usually consists of skeletal fragments, sometimes collected from different sites. So our understanding (if you can call it that) of extinct hominids usually consists of composite reconstructions, in which paleoanthropologists rearrange fragments into an assumed pattern, resorting many interpolations and extrapolations to fill in the trace evidence.

More recently, this has been supplemented by comparative genomics.

Our popular impression of extinct hominids is based on highly imaginative artistic representations. The raw evidence in situ is far more ambiguous. Or so I've read, from multiple sources.

**iii)** Both Darwinians and creationists often make very self-confident statements regarding the human or inhuman status of fossil hominid evidence. From what I can tell, their confidence is often overrated. Due to the shifting sands of paleoanthropology, remains are frequently reclassified.

**iv)** On YEC chronology, extinct hominid remains are postdiluvial. On OEC chronology, extinct hominid remains could be prediluvial to varying degrees.

**v)** One putative evidence for human evolution is encephalization. Bigger brains indicate a later stage in human development—or so goes the argument. But that's subject to significant qualifications:

**a)** To some extent, brain size is correlated to body size. How much did a given hominid weigh? A smaller brain of a smaller hominid might be proportional to a human brain. So we must make allowance for the brain to body mass ratio.

**b)** The relationship between brainpower and intelligence is mysterious. Social insects famously exhibit intelligent behavior. Even the lowly amoeba exhibits intelligent behavior. That's not attributable to brainpower. How to interpret intelligent behavior in "brainless" organisms poses an interesting question. At the very least, they mimic intelligence. And that's something to take into account when we try to gauge the intelligence of extinct hominids from trace evidence of intelligent behavior. That can be deeply misleading. We are tacitly using ourselves as the frame of reference, because we understand what that would mean if we were doing it. Yet we discount that facile inference in the case of "brainless" organisms.

**vi)** The definition of "species" in modern biology is unsettled. There are competing concepts. Wider and narrower definitions.

**vii)** Did some hominids actually become extinct? Or were some of them absorbed into "modern man" through interbreeding?

**viii)** Consider all the different dog breeds. If all dogs became extinct, and all we had to go by were skeletal fragments, imagine a Darwinian arranging the fossil evidence into an evolutionary sequence of different species. Proto-dogs. Imagine how Darwinians would fight over the right classification for this or that canine fossil.

**ix)** To some extent, human eidenomy is adaptive to climatic conditions. If all paleoanthropologists had to go by were skeletal remains of Eskimos, Maasai, and Watutsi, would they classify these as members of the same species or different species? Would they arrange them in an evolutionary sequence?

**x)** Suppose the great apes (bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans) were extinct. Would paleoanthropologists classify them as hominids?

**xi)** Apropos (x), compare the great apes to Australopithecus or Homo erectus. Because chimps, gorillas, and orangutans are our contemporaries, because we can study them, both in the wild and in the laboratory, we have a fairly good understanding of how they are both like and unlike us. As one wag put it:

*The idea that human beings have been endowed with powers and properties not found elsewhere in the animal kingdom—or the universe, so far as we can tell—arises from a simple imperative: Just look around. It is an imperative that survives the invitation fraternally to consider the*

great apes. The apes are, after all, behind the bars of their cages and we are not. Eager for the experiments to begin, they are impatient for their food to be served. They seem impatient for little else. After years of punishing trials, a few of them have been taught the rudiments of various primitive symbol systems. Having been given the gift of language, they have nothing to say. When two simian prodigies meet, they fling their signs at one another. More is expected, but more is rarely forthcoming. Experiments conducted by Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth—and they are exquisite—indicate that like other mammals, baboons have a rich inner world, something that only the intellectual shambles of behavioral psychology could ever have placed in doubt. Simian social structures are often intricate. Chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas reason; they form plans; they have preferences; they are cunning; they have passions and desires; and they

*suffer. The same is true of cats, I might add. In much of this, we see ourselves. But beyond what we have in common with the apes, we have nothing in common, and while the similarities are interesting, the differences are profound.*

**D. Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion* (Crown Forum 2008), 155-56.**

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Keep that in mind when paleoanthropologists draw confident inferences about the humanity of extinct hominids. Appearances are often deceptive. If the great apes were extinct, imagine how paleoanthropologists might readily overinterpret the signs of their incipient humanity. But because they happen to be our contemporaries, we have a direct basis of comparison. By contrast, that's conspicuously lacking in the case of extinct hominids.

In the case of "cave men" who left paintings and petroglyphs, we can see human intelligence staring back at us. But that's exceptional evidence.

## Redefining history

I'm going to repost some comments I left at Michael Kruger's blog:

[James McGrath] "Well, people often assumed that it was how sin entered the world. But when they did so, they often took the story in directions that are at odds with what the story actually says – including most notably turning the serpent into a supernatural angelic being."

Actually, people in the ancient world often viewed "snakes" as supernatural beings. They believed in snake-gods, fire-breathing cobras guarding the Netherworld, &c.

"But I am not persuaded that Paul understood the text as you claim. He focuses on Adam only because Christ was one man and it makes for a nice contrast. If he were a literalist, he would have said 'Just as through two human beings sin entered the world.'"

Here's what Joseph Fitzmyer has to say:

***"Paul treats Adam as a historical human being, humanity's first parent, and contrasts him with the historical Jesus Christ...Some commentators on Romans have tried to interpret Adam in this symbolic sense here...but that reading***



*does violence to the contrast that Paul uses in this paragraph between Adam as 'one man' and Christ as 'one man,' which implies that Adam was a historical individual much as was Jesus Christ," Romans (Doubleday 1993), 407-08.*

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This is despite the fact that Fitzmyer rejects the historicity of Adam and disagrees with Paul's interpretation of Genesis. But even though he's just as liberal as McGrath, he's honest enough to let Paul speak for himself.

"And the fact that the ancient authors of Genesis thought that living things came into existence either when God formed them with divine hands, or through spontaneous generation at God's command, has no more bearing than the fact that they thought the sky was a solid dome."

To say they thought the sky was a solid dome says more about McGrath's naivete than theirs.

"It has nothing to do with anyone's naivete, and has only to do with the meaning of Hebrew words."

**i)** To begin with, words can be used metaphorically.

**ii)** Even liberal scholars dispute the solid dome interpretation (e.g. Baruch Halpern). John Walton now rejects the solid dome interpretation.

**iii)** The OT contains various passages attesting the fact that ancient Israelites knew that rain came from rainclouds.

**iv)** Ancient Near Easterners could see for themselves that rain came from rainclouds.

“But it is noteworthy that at these points the poetic hyperbole of the psalmists is taken literally, while other things that are problematic like the Earth’s immobility are treated as metaphors, when the ancient Israelite assumptions if anything seem to have been the reverse.”

McGrath is so confused. He acts as if Ptolemaic astronomy supplies the background for the Psalms. But that’s grossly anachronistic. In the Psalms, the “Earth’s immobility” has reference to God protecting his people from catastrophic earthquakes, not celestial mechanics.

No, not “convenient.” I gave a reason. Notice that McGrath has no counterargument.

I understand that you don’t care to interact with people who call your bluff, forcing you to fold and head for the nearest exit.

Notice McGrath’s modus operandi. Because his claims are indefensible, he resorts to adjectives (“Liars!”) and self-serving characterizations.

“I don’t think that any view which misrepresents evidence the way young-earth creationism and Intelligent Design do is compatible with the moral teachings of Christianity. If you reject the clear teaching of Jesus about truth in order to defend that ancient human beings were somehow prescient in their

knowledge of modern science, there is really no way you can seriously call yourself a Christian, or your views Christian."

In the name of truth, McGrath is dissembling:

**i)** Does McGrath believe the Gospels are historically accurate records of what Jesus taught? Seems highly unlikely.

**ii)** And even assuming he does grant their accuracy, does McGrath believe that Jesus was the infallible Son of God Incarnate? Does he believe what Jesus said about hell, Jonah, Noah's flood, the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, the creation account (Gen 1-2) in relation to marriage, &c.? Clearly not. He regards Jesus as a child of his times.

"Hebrews 7 reflects an ancient understanding of procreation, not a modern one informed by genetics and biology."

Once again, McGrath is hopelessly confused. The author of Hebrews indicates that he's speaking hyperbolically. How did McGrath manage to miss the parenthetical disclaimer (hos epos eipein)?

Needless to say, there are creationists and intelligent design theorists who work in the relevant scientific fields. Notice that in the name of honesty, McGrath can't bring himself to honestly represent the opposing side. And, of course, his definition of "Biblical scholars" is anyone who thinks like him.

"Young-earth creationists (I say this as someone who used to be one) are only liars and people who repeat

what liars say uncritically. That is incompatible with Christianity at its most fundamental level.”

Since McGrath thinks the Bible is riddled with falsehoods, what’s his standard of comparison for true Christianity?

“So too is inerrancy, which treats ancient authors or a book as though they have an attribute which belongs to God alone.”

In that event, we can safely disregard everything McGrath says as errant. After all, he’s only human.

“It is a form of idolatry”

By whose definition? The Bible’s? Or McGrath’s?

“I think Chris Heard’s suggestion, that the word (not used elsewhere in the Greek Bible) recalls the story of Adam.”

That makes precious little sense. Far more likely is that “God-breathed” is a metaphor for divine speech. Breath=spoken word. Therefore, Scripture is divine speech committed to writing.

“Historical questions are answered using the tools of historical study. The fact that texts happen to be part of a collection that is given the status of Scripture by this or that religious body is irrelevant to the answering of historical questions. What matters is historical evidence.”

**i)** And McGrath has said in the past that methodological atheism is a guiding principle of historiography. So he will automatically discount a miraculous report as unhistorical.

**ii)** He also begs the question of whether Scripture is, itself, historical evidence.

**iii)** Notice, too, how he acts as though the Bible is no different than the Koran or Upanishads. It's just a collection of ancient texts that happens to be given the status of Scripture by a religious community. Nothing inherent in the nature of the text itself to merit that status. Rather, that status is merely ascriptive and sociological. Something conferred on it from the outside. This just tells you that McGrath lacks a Christian view of Scripture.

“We have letters from someone who had met Jesus’ brother. We do not have something similar in the case of Adam.”

Notice how McGrath excludes revelation and inspiration. He has a purely secular outlook.

“What we do have is a story the genre of which is made clear by the presence of a talking animal.”

**i)** The genre of Gen 2-3 isn't different from the genre of Pentateuchal narratives generally, many of which are characterized by supernatural incidents and agents.

**ii)** And why does he classify the “snake” as a talking animal? In the ancient Near East, “snakes” could be numinous beings. Supernatural beings.

“But alas, some Christians have been indoctrinated that they are supposed to ignore everything that they have learned about reading and literary genres when it comes to the Bible.”

McGrath is talking out of both sides of his mouth. He is imposing his secular perspective on Gen 2-3. But that confuses what he is prepared to believe with what the narrator was prepared to believe. The narrator doesn't share his naturalistic worldview.

To take the genre into account means viewing the narrative on its own terms. Assuming the viewpoint of the narrator. That's the polar opposite of what McGrath is doing. He views the world as a closed system.

Notice that McGrath is tacitly rigging the definition of history, by tacitly defining the historical method naturalistically. Yet that prejudices what did happen as well as what can happen. McGrath talks about the "available evidence," but his "rules" filter out any evidence that doesn't slip through his secular sieve. So his approach to reality is artificial. He doesn't begin with reality. He doesn't take the world as it comes to us. Rather, he begins with his "rules." Rules that dictate in advance what reality is permitted to be like.

"Although as I have already said, I have no interest in interacting with Steve Hays again given his behavior on a previous encounter..."

McGrath was hoping to get off a few free rounds attacking Christianity, then escape without a nick. He wants to be free to make tendentious assertions that go unchallenged. He resents having to defend his tendentious assertions.

"...I would point out for anyone else interested in discussing this that there is no movement, even on the part of ultra-conservative Christians, to redefine the judicial system to allow for miracles and the conclusion that God simply wanted someone dead."

That's McGrath's canned example. But notice that although he pays lip-service to the "available evidence," he has stimulative rules that preemptively exclude evidence of the miraculous. So even if all the evidence pointed to the fact that "God simply wanted someone dead," McGrath would default a naturalistic explanation despite all the evidence to the contrary. His rules precommit him to a false naturalistic explanation over a true supernatural explanation every time.

"We set up methods that deal with the ordinary."

"The ordinary" is a euphemism for McGrath's ignorance or inexperience. What's extraordinary for McGrath may be ordinary for a Christian exorcist (e.g. Kurt Koch, John Richards, Gabriele Amorth), or a paranormal researcher (e.g. Stephen Braude, Rupert Sheldrake, Mario Beauregard).

For instance, M. Scott Peck was a famous psychiatrist trained in secular medical science at Harvard University and Chase Western Reserve. But towards the end of his career he performed two exorcisms. He didn't originally believe in demonic possession. It was the empirical evidence of two patients that forced him to make that diagnosis. That was the best explanation of the evidence. Cf. **GLIMPSES OF THE DEVIL: A PSYCHIATRIST'S PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF POSSESSION, EXORCISM, AND REDEMPTION.**

"That they cannot reach verdicts about the truly extraordinary is simply part of the method."

Notice how McGrath divorces methodology from truth. The method becomes an end in itself. It's no longer about discovering the true explanation. For if the true explanation happens to be "extraordinary," then the method discounts the true explanation out of hand.

McGrath uses methodology to mask his ulterior position. McGrath rejects Bible history, not on methodological grounds, but metaphysical grounds. He doesn't think the world works in the way Scripture depicts. McGrath doesn't believe those miracles happened. His metrology is based on his notion of reality.

"A Christian can obviously believe in miracles and also practice historical study. What they cannot do is claim that historical tools and methods, which assess probability, can judge an inherently improbable event (a parting sea, a resurrection) to be probable. This should not be controversial."

That's grossly simplistic and deeply confused. In what sense is a miracle like a resurrection or a parting sea "inherently improbable"?

**i)** It can be improbable in the sense that if nature is left to run its course unimpeded, then that event is highly unlikely (or even impossible).

**ii)** If, however, a personal agent (of sufficient power) deflects or redirects the course of nature, then that event is not improbable.

For instance, if Yahweh intends to part the sea, then that event is not improbable. To the contrary, the event is certain to happen under those conditions.



So is McGrath saying it's "inherently improbable" that Yahweh intended to part the sea? How is McGrath in a position to know that?

McGrath's definition of history is self-refuting. History is the past. History is whatever happened. If miracles occur, then historians had better make allowance for miracles. To say historians ought to disallow miracles is synonymous with saying historians ought to disallow the past.

Moreover, historical evidence for miraculous events isn't in a class apart from historical evidence for other past events. Historians must rely on the same kinds of evidence.

It would only make sense for historians to exclude miracles from consideration if historians knew that miracles don't happen. But that's a metaphysical prejudgment. That can't be settled by appeal to made-up rules.

McGrath needs to come clean. He lost his faith in Scripture. He's moved from the far right end of the theological spectrum to the far left end of the theological spectrum. He disallows miracles, not because that commits some methodological faux pas, but because he doesn't think they happen. So, if he were honest, that's where he would engage the argument. But instead, he struggles to rationalize his apostasy by ad hoc definitions of history.

Notice McGrath's bait-n-switch. The Bible doesn't "show itself" to be errant. This isn't "evidence from the Bible itself." Rather, McGrath is imputing mistakes to Scripture based on his faith in some external sources of information, which he compares to Scripture. He applies criteria extrinsic to Scripture to Scripture. So he's judging Scripture from the outside, not the inside. He disregards the self-witness of Scripture.

“Or for that matter any Muslim or Mormon who views their sacred text as self-authenticating.”

That comparison is confused on multiple grounds:

**i)** A document “viewed” as self-authenticating is not equivalent to a self-authenticating document. To take a comparison, suppose two students ask to be excused from class due to headaches. One student actually has a headache. And her experience is self-authenticating.

She feels pained in her head. That’s not something she can be mistaken about.

The other student feigns a headache to cut class. She falsely claims to have a headache.

These are both self-authenticating claims, but they are hardly equivalent. The fact that a claim to self-authentication may be bogus doesn’t negate genuine cases of self-authentication.

**ii)** By the same token, McGrath fails to distinguish between different levels of justification. If I have a headache, I’m justified in believing I have a headache. That may not be sufficient justification for you to believe that I have a headache, since you’re not privy to my experience. Likewise, the self-authenticating character of the Bible may be sufficient for defensive apologetics even if it’s insufficient for offensive apologetics. It can be adequate for Christians, even if it’s unpersuasive to an outsider.

**iii)** Muhammad falsified his own claims to be a prophet when he appealed to the Bible to validate his message.

**iv)** Joseph Smith falsified his own claims to be a prophet when he claimed to translate an Egyptian document into English, and cited an Egyptologist who supposedly vouched for his translation. Well, we have the Egyptian document, which we can compare with Smith's alleged translation. We also have a letter from the Egyptologist disowning Smith.

What makes McGrath imagine that Hindus operate with a concept of plenary verbal inspiration?

Keep in mind that Islam and Mormonism are Judeo-Christian heresies. Naturally they're imitative. So what?

"Some of us think that what fallible human beings need most is to become mature, responsible, discerning individuals, and that if God had given what fundamentalists claim God gave, that would have been crumbs rather than bread."

Of course, that raises the question of what God McGrath believes in. Clearly not the God of Biblical theism.

[Jeff] "It would be great if Christians would stop giving us reasons to leave the Faith (since, in this case, Adam is not historical), and instead focused on reasons why we ought to be a part of it."

**i)** If you don't believe the Bible, then you ought to leave the faith. That's a natural winnowing process.

**ii)** Christians give abundant reasons for why you ought to be a part of it. It's called Christian apologetics.

[Gary] "Wow, what a depressing thread of comments. All I can say is that I don't need Adam in order to need

Jesus. I have enough sin of my own on my hands that I don't require any of his to still need the redemption that only Christ can bring."

According to Luke's gospel, you can't have Jesus without Adam: "23 Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli...38 the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (Lk 3:23,38). So, actually, you do need both.

And according to Paul (Rom 5, 1 Cor 15), Jesus and Adam go together.

Are you just making up your own theology out of thin air?

"Nor do I think that either Luke's history or Paul's rhetoric are invalidated in any way without Adam."

So what are you saying? That the Lukan genealogy of Christ is fictional? If so, how much else of his Gospel is fictional?

Since Paul's "rhetoric" centers on an extensive comparison and contrast between Adam and Christ, how does reducing Adam to pious fiction not invalidate his argument?

Christianity is a revealed religion. If you reject the revelatory status of the Bible, then there's no basis for you to believe Christianity is true.

You're drawing an ad hoc distinction between an errant messenger and a partially inerrant message. Even then, you must further distinguish between the erroneous part of the message involving Adam, and the inerrant, timelessly true part of the message involving sinful man and Jesus Christ. Your distinction is arbitrary and unstable. Why think Paul

was wrong about the historical Adam but right about the historical Christ? Adam is not “incidental” to the argument as Paul frames the argument.

You have a makeshift position isn't consistently naturalistic, consistently supernaturalistic, or consistently exegetical. Your alternative is a logical mess. Either be a consistent secularist or be a consistent Christian.

“In other words, he was delivering an inerrant, timeless spiritual truth from the standpoint of an ancient phenomenological perspective.”

You don't seem to grasp the concepts you're using. To classify the existence of Adam as a “phenomenological” perspective is a category mistake. The phenomenological perspective is used to denote how the world appears to an earthbound observer. Descriptions using observational language. It has nothing to do with existential claims like the historicity of Adam.

“I thought the phenomenological perspective was clear, pardon me if I didn't explain it well enough. Paul would have had an ancient cosmology, ancient geology, an ancient view of biology, and associated with those he would have had ancient views on the origins of both life and death.”

And the Bible has a designation for folks like you: “unbelievers”. You've given candid expression to your naked infidelity.

“This provides the phenomenological perspective that explains Paul's belief in a literal Adam.”

You're using "phenomenological" idiosyncratically, but I suppose that's the least of your problems.

"You say that Christianity is a 'revealed religion', fine, but I object to your assertion that I reject the revelatory status of the bible, I do not."

You openly rejected the revelatory status of Scripture when you said "Paul would have had an ancient cosmology, ancient geology, an ancient view of biology, and associated with those he would have had ancient views on the origins of both life and death." Thanks for corroborating my allegation.

"Also, it's an entirely orthodox position to claim that God has provided two books of revelation – the bible as special revelation and creation itself as general revelation."

That hoary comparison is equivocal. The Bible is literally bookish. By contrast, nature is, at best, figuratively bookish. Nature is nonverbal communication. Nonpropositional revelation. So it's quite disanalogous to the verbal revelation of Scripture.

"But since they are both God's revelation, they both contain truth that leads us to God, and they should not be in conflict with one another. You claim that I make arbitrary distinctions, when in fact you are the one implying the false dichotomy between the way we treat these two books."

Your position is self-contradictory since you assert that Scripture contradicts the natural record, as interpreted by science—which you accept unquestioningly.

“No, if you re-read his comment you’ll see he clearly accepts the historical portions of scripture as history.”

He only accepts the “historical portions” of Scripture to the extent that critics have sterilized the accounts of their miraculous contaminants. He only accepts secularized editions of Bible history.

“However he is able to distinguish between genres, unlike you.”

His genre distinction is artificially imposed from the outside. He determines genre by whether the account contains supernatural elements. That mirrors his modernism.

And the “genre” of Gen 2-3 isn’t essentially different from the genre of the Gospels and Acts. These contain the same offending elements that he disdains in Gen 2-3. They narrate angels, demons, demoniacs, ghosts, nature miracles, telepathy, levitation, premonitory dreams, &c.

“No again, it only tells me that he lacks your view of scripture, and who are you to decide what is the correct ‘Christian view’ of scripture.”

No, it’s a choice between accepting or rejecting the Scriptural view of Scripture.

“Wrong again, his views on these things may differ from yours, but I didn’t see him reject them anywhere.”

You’re naive and easily duped.

“Steve, would it kill you to at least try grasp the concept that there may be other ways to read and interpret various

portions of the bible other than your own simplistic way of doing it, and yet still remain within the pale of orthodox Christianity?"

You're dissembling. By your own admission, the question at issue isn't the interpretation of Scripture, but the veracity of Scripture.

Your position is outside the pale of orthodox Christianity. Your position (as well as McGrath's) is squarely in the historic tradition of infidelity, viz. Anthony Collins, Jean LeClerc, Samuel Clarke.

Throughout the Bible, disbelieving God's spokesmen is the acid test of apostasy and infidelity. You'd been excommunicated from the NT church. Your attitude reprimates the attitude of the Exodus generation, which was condemned to pine away in the wilderness through persistent disbelief in anything too far out of the ordinary to comport with their reflexive naturalism.

"I don't expect you to agree with them, but are you able to even acknowledge the fact?"

I acknowledge that you're self-deceived.

"I think we need to have a bit more humility when we approach scripture."

That advice is always a one-way street. You think the opposing side needs to be more humble.

"The idea of incarnation is very important. God became flesh and walked among us. One thing He is saying to us in doing so is that who we are and how we live is important to Him, and He wants to work all things



within and through His creation in that incarnational model. The scriptures bear this out as well.”

**i)** The Bible never uses an incarnational analogy for inspiration. You’re substituting an artificial analogy (which you cribbed from Enns) for the self-witness of Scripture.

**ii)** And even if we play along with that analogy, unless you subscribe to the Kenotic heresy, Jesus was an infallible teacher. So, by parity of argument, Scripture is infallible.

“They did not drop out of the sky fully formed and written in God’s own hand, He moved men to write, but to do so within their own cultural and historical context and understanding of God.”

**i)** You’re burning a straw man. You seem to be ignorant of the organic theory of inspiration, championed by Warfield, which is entirely consonant with inerrancy. Inspiration has a providential dimension.

**ii)** You also act as though God has to play the hand that history dealt him. But God is behind the cultural conditioning of the Bible writers. He made them what they are. He prepared them for the task.

**iii)** Moreover, Scripture is often countercultural. Have you ever noticed that?

“So the bible itself is a very human book containing a progressive understanding of God, to the point that we even see Jesus reshaping people’s views of God that they had developed from Hebrew scripture.”

**i)** Progressive revelation doesn’t mean progression from error to truth.

**ii)** Jesus never corrected OT history or OT theism.

**iii)** The veracity of the OT is foundational to the Messianic claims of Jesus.

“The bible should point us to God, but should not be equated with Him.”

Once again, you’re burning a straw man. That said:

**i)** Systematic theology has a category of communicable attributes. The Bible exemplifies some of God’s communicable attributes.

**ii)** In addition, just as apostles wrote letters in lieu of their personal presence, the Bible is God’s stand-in for his personal presence. The written word takes the place of the spoken word. But it carries the full authority of the original speaker.

“So the bible itself is a very human book containing a progressive understanding of God, to the point that we even see Jesus reshaping people’s views of God that they had developed from Hebrew scripture.”

**i)** If you’re alluding to Christ’s position on divorce, remarriage, and the Sabbath, he appeals to other parts of the OT to warrant his position. So there’s no progression. Indeed, he often appeals to the Pentateuch. So he ends where Scripture begins.

If you’re alluding to the six antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:21-48), many commentators think he’s alluding to the oral Torah rather than the Mosaic law. If so, there’s no progression. That interpretation would also be

consistent with his programmatic reaffirmation of OT ethics (Mt 5:17-19).

**ii)** In some respects the new covenant supersedes the Mosaic covenant, but that doesn't involve an altered view of God.

"I consider that pretty good company and do admit to being a casual follower of some of his stuff, but I haven't read any of his books and don't know that I've ever seen this from him, it's actually come from some conversations I had with my pastor a couple of years ago."

Let's see: *you* told me, in a 9/8/13 comment, that:

"The idea of incarnation is very important. God became flesh and walked among us. One thing He is saying to us in doing so is that who we are and how we live is important to Him, and He wants to work all things within and through His creation in that incarnational model. The scriptures bear this out as well. They did not drop out of the sky fully formed and written in God's own hand, He moved men to write, but to do so within their own cultural and historical context and understanding of God. So the bible itself is a very human book containing a progressive understanding of God, to the point that we even see Jesus reshaping people's views of God that they had developed from Hebrew scripture."

And *Peter Enns*, in a 9/5/13 post, just happened to say:

"...the Bible—even where it talks about God—is not a heavenly tablet dropped from heaven, but a relentlessly contextual collection of ancient literature that takes wisdom and patience to handle well. God is

bigger than the Bible—and frankly, I see Jesus in the Gospels already sounding that note when he began reshaping common views of God based on Israel’s traditions, but I digress” (“God is bigger than the Bible”).

What an amazing coincidence! If I didn’t know better, I’d almost suspect you are more than a casual follower of his stuff.

## Three-story eschatology

It's become fashionable on the evangelical left to say the creation account in Gen 1 reflects a hopelessly obsolete three-story cosmography. We should just admit the narrator or redactor was mistaken, given his inevitable prescientific ignorance. That's a case of God accommodating his revelation to the primitive audience. That's culturebound. That's passé.

But one often-overlooked problem with that position is that it's terribly shortsighted. For that position doesn't conveniently terminate at the water's edge of protology or creation. Rather, it carries right over into the Gospels and NT eschatology. To the end times as well as the beginnings. After all, you could just as well say the Incarnation reflects a three-story cosmography, what with all those references to angels coming down to earth, or the Son of God coming down to earth. Likewise, what about depictions of the three-story Parousia, where Jesus comes back by coming back down to earth?

Logically, this means members of the evangelical left should also relegate the Incarnation and the return of Christ to a mythical world picture. Why not go all the way with Bultmann?

## The Italian Job

I'm going to comment on Michael Heiser's theory of inspiration. I'm going to quote some representative statements from his series, then respond.

<http://michaelsheiser.com/TheNakedBible/naked-bibles-inspiration-discussion/>

*I've been thinking about inerrancy a good bit lately—not whether I want to surrender it, or whether it's a term that has any value or not. My thoughts have focused on the Peter Enns dismissal from Westminster. I think they made the wrong decision, and the reasoning behind the decision has troubled me as to the state of clear thinking in a theological institution I have admired for a long time. You may or may not be familiar with Enns or his dismissal or its circumstances, so I don't want this discussion to be about Peter. That said, his book, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (which led to his dismissal)*

*raised some very important issues for any coherent articulation of inspiration and inerrancy. I think he was doing the Church a great service. It's really been appalling to see how the side opposite Enns seems to be painfully unaware of the reality of the issues the book raises and has retreated to 17th century articulations of inerrancy as authoritative, or to more recent articulations produced by scholars who seem under-informed (i.e., they aren't in the field of OT, the ANE, and Semitics) as to what Enns is trying to address. Like me, Peter's field is OT and ancient Near East (his PhD is from Harvard).*

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**i)** In one respect I agree with Heiser. I think it's best not to frame the issue in terms of the Westminster Confession. The Westminster Divines weren't prophets. They couldn't foresee certain modern challenges. So the Westminster Confession isn't designed to address certain modern challenges.

It would be better if confessional seminaries supplemented their traditional doctrinal standards with modern statements that specifically address modern challenges.

**ii)** However, Enns had no cause for complaint. He sought employment at a confessional seminary. He knew that going in. He sought tenure with eyes wide open. Those were the terms of his employment. So the administration has every right to fire him if he flouts the doctrinal standards of his institution.

**iii)** The classic Protestant doctrine of inspiration is based on the self-witness of Scripture. That can't be sidelined by modern challenges.

**iv)** Enns took an interdisciplinary approach. He didn't confine himself to the OT. He also discusses apostolic exegesis. So NT scholars (e.g. Beale, Carson, Poythress) are qualified to challenge his analysis.

Likewise, Enns proposed an "incarnational" model of inspiration. However, That's an issue of philosophical theology. So that makes some Christian philosophers and theologians (e.g. Frame, Helm) qualified to challenge his analysis.

Finally, Heiser's statement is dated. At the time of writing, OT scholars hadn't weighed in, but several years later, his position has been challenged by OT scholars like John Currid, Noel Weeks, and Bruce Waltke.

*Just as no one would argue God whispered which books were “in” to those people debating such a thing, we do not need God to whisper each word into the ear or mind of the Scripture authors. There is no need for dictation or automatic writing, any more than there was a need to dictate the canon*



*list or seize the minds of those making such decisions. It was providence.*

*The next obvious question is “How well did the process work?” This is another way of asking whether God preserved the human agents from making any mistakes. In the case of the canon, mistakes would mean not recognizing a book that ought to have been recognized. I exclude the notion in that statement that something got in that shouldn’t be in. That is theoretically possible, but in my mind highly unlikely, especially for the Protestant evangelicals that I’m guessing make up most or all of my readership. Evangelicalism has a minimalist canon – the smallest of the lists that emerged in any widespread Christian tradition, so the problem becomes whether something that ought to be in was excluded in what has become the evangelical Protestant Bible. Moving back to the inspiration issue, mistakes would mean errors in the text. This brings us full circle back to 2 Tim. 3:17.*

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That analogy is equivocal. Indeed, Heiser himself seems to be sensitive to the equivocation. If the analogy were tight, it would go something like this:

*If God could providentially prevent the church from making mistakes in which books to canonize, God could providentially prevent Bible writers from making mistakes.*

The problem with that analogy is that Heiser thinks Bible writers *did* make mistakes. So the analogy is disanalogous.

*Let's face it - once God made the decision to use people to produce Scripture rather than dictate content to us that would have been mostly incomprehensible to our puny minds, he had chosen a very limited resource. I imagine God looking down and shaking his head as it were, knowing the only way to communicate with us would be to use us to that end. God had specific purposes in mind and more or less said "Well, I'll prompt them with my Spirit, other believers, and general providential intervention to get them to write down a record of my dealings with humanity, my purposes, who I am and what I'm like, how they can know me and be forgiven*

*for their sin, how I came to them in human form and then the incarnate Son. . .” etc., etc. “I’ll make sure they get across what I want them to get across, not only for them but for all those who will follow, especially those who believe.” God knew that letting men do this would be ugly (relatively speaking, with respect to his perfection) – that they’d bring their pre-scientific ignorance to the table, along with a specific, localized cultural perspective. But hey, that’s what he chose to work with. What else would they be?*

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**i)** What content does Heiser think would be incomprehensible to our puny minds?

**ii)** Heiser constantly uses "dictation" as his foil, but he fails to define what he means by that.

**iii)** Why does he assume the alternative to "dictation" is accommodating prescientific ignorance?

**1.** *While God certainly knows how to use human language, does the human language in question have the*

vocabulary that would allow God to communicate scientific truths to the original recipients? Could God have communicated full, precise scientific information about, say, how human reproduction works (cf. the 1 Cor 11 article here, where Paul connects this to women's hair; and the information has to be full and precise, lest God accommodate himself to humans!). So . . . what are the ancient Greek words for: zygote, oocyte, chromosome, DNA, etc.? It's about an ancient language being insufficient for a host of scientific issues, not God's ability.<sup>2</sup> While God certainly knows how to use human language, do the human recipients have the capability to understand what is being said? Let's say there was a way for God to communicate 20th and 21st century science in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (think about that statement for a moment and ask yourself if you really want to side with Grudem here). Let's say God uses those words –

*and he would certainly be capable if those words existed in the languages – and really spells out exactly how the cosmos was created (never mind the fact that the writers wouldn't be aware of what a cosmos is) and where babies come from (it isn't implanting a seed in a woman for it to grow – we need genetics here).*

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Why does Heiser think Paul's argument requires "full, precise scientific information" to go through? Why assume Paul's argument can't be based on *general* truths about human procreation? In addition, it's possible to *simplify* scientific truths without misrepresenting scientific truths. A statement can be accurate even if it leaves out many technical details.

*This example is both simple and inescapable. Here are the bare facts:(1) We do indeed have synoptic gospels that have conversations between Jesus, the disciples, and other people.(2) The synoptic accounts frequently disagree as to the precise wording of the dialogue in those accounts. They cannot all reflect*

*the ACTUAL “in real time” words of the people who speak them, since “in real time” people uttered only one set of words in any given conversation.*

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This equivocates over what it means to "disagree." Does he mean they use different words, or does he mean they are contradictory? For instance, two sentences can use different words, but share the same meaning because they employ synonyms.

Likewise, one writer might paraphrase a conversation while other writer might quote verbatim. But both could be accurate records at the level of meaning.

*(3) No one was around in the first century with a tape recorder taping the conversations. As such, the gospel writers are writing down their recollections of the dialogue.*

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That's misleading. It's true that gospel writers relied on their memories. However, inspiration refreshed their memories (Jn 14:26). So Heiser erects a false dichotomy between inspiration and memory, as if unaided memory was all they had to go by.

*(4) The Spirit cannot be dictating the words of the dialogue since the dialogue disagrees. Aside from the fact that we'd have a schizophrenic Spirit if we insisted on the Spirit being the originator of divergent utterances in dialogue (this is yet another reason to see humans as the immediate source of the words), since the conversations occurred once in real time, there is only ONE set of precisely correct utterances that were uttered. There cannot be three, and so we cannot say the Spirit is whispering the EXACT words that were uttered into the ear or mind of EACH author.*

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**i)** I don't subscribe to the dictation theory of inspiration, but as long as critics treat it as a limiting case of verbal inspiration, let's play along with that theory for the sake of argument. It would be possible for God to dictate verbally different accounts of the same event. For instance, the same human writer may give variant descriptions of the same event. To take one example, Ruskin had an experience in Siena that left a lasting impression on his mind. He wrote about it on at least three different occasions:

**#1** The fireflies are almost awful in the twilight, as bright as candles, flying in and out of the dark cypresses.

**#2** While in Siena, in a hill district, has at this season a climate like the loveliest and purest English summer, with only the somewhat, to me, awful addition of fireflies innumerable, which, as soon as the sunset is fairly passed into twilight, light up the dark ilex groves with flitting torches or at least, lights as large as candles, and in the sky, larger than the stars. We got to Siena in a heavy thunderstorm of sheet-lightning in a quiet evening, and the incessant flashes and showers of fireflies between, made the whole scene look anything rather than celestial.

**#3** Fonte Branda I last saw with Charles Norton, under the same arches where Dante saw it. We drank of it together, and walked together that evening on the hills above, where the fireflies among the scented thickets shone fitfully in the still undarkened air. How they shone! moving like fine-broken starlight through the purple leaves. How they shone! through the sunset that faded into thunderous night as I entered Siena three days before, the white edges of the mountainous clouds still lighted from the west, and the openly golden sky calm behind the Gate of Siena's heart, with its still golden words, "Cor magis tibia Sena pandit," and the fireflies everywhere in sky and cloud rising and falling, mixed with the lightning, and more intense than the stars.

**ii)** Heiser has a deficient concept of truth. A true description needn't use the same words. There's a one-to-many relation between words and meaning. Look at Ruskin's description of the Sieneese fireflies. He gives us three



verbally different accounts of what happened, yet these can all be true. Indeed, Ruskin was a stickler for detail. He had a keen eye, and a precise vocabulary.

*(5) All the above can apply to ANY conversation or dialogue in the Bible. No one recorded it. We are only brought to this realization (most clearly) when we have synoptic accounts, so I use them as illustration.*

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God has a mental record of everything everyone ever said (even before they said it). If need be, God can reveal that to the narrator.

*What this means is that we have certain possibilities when it comes to the dialogue of the gospels:(1) ONE of the gospel writers got every word exactly correct – he has recorded each and every word as they were uttered in real time. (2) NONE of the gospels got every word right. That is, ALL of the dialogue in the gospels or any given passage may be simply recalled by the writer (in different ways) in a manner sufficient (to God) for*

*giving us a faithful representation of a conversation that occurred. This is sort of “small f” fiction – since each writer is using whatever words that seemed best to communicate the conversation.*

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It is not "fictitious" to convey the sense of what was said, even if you use different words. Heiser's characterization is tendentious.

*And so we have the dilemma. I put the question this way: Is there a coherent explanation of how God did not dictate the Scriptures or seize the mind of the human author, but where the words are produced only by God so that the human writers are in no to be viewed as the source of the writing that was produced? Put another way, How can you deny anthropopneustos, that humans are responsible for what is produced, while at the same time avoiding both dictation and automatic writing?*

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**i)** Well, that's a straw man. classic exponents of verbal inspiration, like Warfield, don't take the position that the words of Scripture were "only" produced by God.

**ii)** God can cause, determine, or predetermine what words a Bible writer through predestination and providence. At one level, God has a "script" for whatever happens. At another level, God implements that script in time and space.

**iii)** God created the Bible writer by creating a system of second causes. God creates the Bible writer's historical situation by prearranging the course of history. All of his experiences are part of God's master plan. What the writer does is the effect of those often subliminal influences.

Let's take an illustration: In **THE ITALIAN JOB**, Lyle hacks into the traffic light system to reroute the armored car. The driver is unaware of the fact that he's being guided to go wherever Lyle redirects him to go. The driver makes conscious decisions, based on the available forced options.

***1. The term theopneustos refers to the IMMEDIATE source of the Scriptures - and so we have God breathing out the Scriptures directly to the writers. How did he do that? Did it happen as some sort of audible "whisper in the ear," or did God implant each word into the head / mind of the author? The former is quite clearly dictation. The latter is very close***

to that — Is there a difference between aural and mental dictation? Whether you want to call it dictation or not, you have God PROVIDING each word; he is the immediate source of each word. This is probably where most evangelicals are in their understanding of inspiration. This view not only takes theopneustos as meaning God provided each word as the immediate source of all the words, but it also requires that humans aren't the immediate source of any of the words (remember the Westminster Addendum's firm denial of anthropopneustos). But humans have to have some sort of role (no one denies the Scripture was \*written\* or that God was literally holding the pen as it were). This is where the notion that humans are "secondary sources" of inspiration comes in. So, to summarize, God is the immediate and primary source of inspiration, and humans are secondary sources. None of the words of the text ORIGINATED with humans. But again, if we are saying that

*none of the words of Scripture originated in the mind of a human author, how does this escape some sort of dictation or automatic writing (where the human agent goes into a trance state and is taken over by an outside invisible force that writes for him / her)? What I want to see is an explanation of how this understanding simultaneously avoids both of these dictation options and still has no words ORIGINATING with the human authors. Good luck.*

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There's more than one mode of inspiration. But in visionary revelation, the seer *is* in a trance state. In that altered state of consciousness, he not only sees things but hears or overhears speakers using sentences. When he awakens, he transcribes what he heard. In a sense, he is taking dictation. He's a stenographer for what he heard. Take the reported conversations in the Apocalypse.

*These ideas fail to view inspiration as a PROCESS, rather than an event. There was no "event" of inspiration with respect to an entire book. Yes, there were divine encounters, and on rare*

occasions those resulted in written material, but that material was actually only part of a bigger book. Inspired books, though, were not the product of an event or a series of supernatural encounters. They were the result of a long process of successive providences and hard work on the part of the human writers. Here's how most conservative evangelicals seems to view inspiration (as event). Imagine with me, if you will, Isaiah getting up for breakfast. His alarm clock goes off, he rolls out of bed, brushes his teeth, and goes to the kitchen for breakfast. He rustles up some eggs (hold the bacon and sausage) and toast and sits down to enjoy it. Suddenly he's zapped by a bright light, his mind is seized and overtaken by God. He probably doesn't hear God speaking (we must deny dictation, remember), but he knows the Spirit has overtaken him. In what seems like only a few moments, he comes to and voila! Before him lays a scroll filled with words. God has chosen

*him once again to be the conduit of revelation! The prophet Isaiah carefully rolls up the scroll and deposits it with the rest of the inspired material before the ark of the covenant. Then he goes back home and reheats his breakfast in the microwave.*

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**i)** Heiser fails to distinguish between revelation and inspiration. Revelation is an event, whereas inspiration is a process. Take visionary revelation, where the seer *is* "zapped" by God.

**ii)** Is the seer's mind "seized by God"? In one respect, what's the difference between a revelatory dream state and a waking state? In both, the mind is processing stimuli. The human mind didn't produce this stimuli. Both seer and observer are on the receiving end of this process. In the case of visionary revelation, he's processing simulated visions and auditions. It's psychological rather than physical. But in both cases the source is external to the recipient.

**iii)** Now, that's not a correct model for how Luke wrote his Gospel. Luke's Gospel was inspired rather than revealed. Contrast that with the Apocalypse.

## Number-crunching

One stock objection to the inerrancy of Scripture concerns numerical discrepancies between Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. However, this raises several issues:

**i)** It's easy to miscopy numbers. Some of these could be transcriptional errors.

**ii)** Coregencies are another consideration, where you have overlapping reigns.

**iii)** One Bible writer (or his primary source) may be using a different calendrical system than another Bible writer. Keep in mind that inerrancy concerns truth and falsehood. By contrast, calendrical systems are social conventions. For instance, if you have conflicting dates because one writer uses the Jewish New Year as a starting point while another writer uses the Chinese New Year as a starting point, that's not an error. Same thing with the Julian and Gregorian calendars.

**iv)** Numerology is a further consideration. To cite a few cases:

*The immediate successors of kings who receive news of impending judgment on their royal houses, for example, characteristically reign for "two years" in Kings (1 Kgs 15:25; 16:8; 22:51; 2 Kgs 21:19). Are we really being told exactly*



how long they reigned, or are we to see this as an example of narrative art, linking these kings together and inviting reflection upon them as a group? And what are we to make of the highly schematic ending to the book, where the last four kings of Judah are described as reigning successively for three months; eleven years, three months, and eleven years (2 Kgs 23:31-24:20)? I. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Hendrickson 1995), 18-19.

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[20:15] “All the Israelites, 7,000.” It is, of course, a curious coincidence that 7,000 is the number of the “remnant” destined to survive the onslaught described in 19:15-18 (153-54).

[22:30] The various numerical links perform the same function (400 prophets in 18:19 and about 400 in 22:6; 7,000 Israelites in 19:18 and 20:15; 32 kings in 20:1 and 32 commanders in 22:31 (166).

[24:16] It is interesting to find the figure seven thousand occurring yet again, since that is the

*number of “the remnant” in 1 Kgs 19:18 (cf. also the additional note to 1 Kgs 20:15) (281).*

*[2 Chron 7:4-7]. Here the numbers appear, but they are astounding: “twenty-two thousand...and a hundred and twenty thousand” (7:5). In all likelihood these numbers are hyperbolic. 144,000 sacrifices in the period of fourteen days (7:8-9)... R. Pratt, 1 and 2 Chronicles (Mentor 1998), 244.*

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Pratt says these are hyperbolic, but notice that 144,000 is a multiple of 12 while 14 is a multiple of 7—both of which are theologically significant numbers. So these seem to be symbolic rather than hyperbolic. Provan’s data invites the same interpretation.

## Adam in Scripture

Currently, the historicity of Adam is a hot button topic in evangelicalism. In one sense, this is nothing new. Back in the 1970s, the inerrancy of Scripture was a hot button topic in evangelicalism. In addition, the historicity of Adam has been an issue ever since Darwin.

So these debates go through generational cycles. Nothing really changes. In every generation, you have conservative Christians and liberals. You also have some professing Christians who try to split the difference. The players change, but the play remains the same.

Every generation will have a remnant of Bible-believing Christians, along with however many nominal Christians. That will continue until Jesus returns.

The current controversy, represented by spokesmen like Peter Enns and Daniel Kirk. Kirk and Enns focus on Paul's view of Adam in Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15—although Enns has his own take on Gen 1-5.

Now, from a Christian standpoint, if all we had to go by was **Gen 1-5, Rom 5, and 1 Cor 15**, that would be more than sufficient to establish the historicity of Adam.

However, I'd like to point out that this focus is misleading, for the Biblical witness to Adam is broader than Genesis, Romans, and 1 Corinthians. Here are five more passages that clearly bear witness to Adam:

**1 Adam, Seth, Enosh (1 Chron 1:1).**

**4 He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt 19:4-6).**

**38 the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God (Lk 3:38).**

**26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place (Acts 17:26).**

**13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve; 14 and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor (1 Tim 2:13-14).**

In addition, 2 Cor 11:3 refers to Eve—which presupposes Adam.

Over and above passages that clearly bear witness to Adam are some other passages that possibly or probably bear

witness to Adam: Job 31:33; Ps 82:7; Hos 6:7.

For instance, David Clines defends the Adamic referent in his commentary on Job, while Thomas McComiskey defends the Adamic referent in his commentary on Hosea.

Finally, there's a secondary reference to Adam in Jude 14.

I'd point out that the references to Adam in Matthew, Luke, and 1 Chronicles aren't merely conventional, but theologically significant.

## The spoils of war

And Samuel said to Saul, “The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. 2 Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. 3 Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’”

4 So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. 5 And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. 6 Then Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.” So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. 7 And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. 8 And he

**took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. 9 But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction (1 Sam 15:1-9).**

OT holy war is a favorite target of unbelievers. Mind you, the same unbelievers who wax indignant at OT holy war generally support abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

In light of the popular new TV drama **VIKINGS**, it's instructive to compare OT holy war with traditional warfare. Although **VIKINGS** isn't strikingly historical, I think it's accurate with respect to what motivated their raiding parties.

In that regard, Saul would make a great Viking. The incentive for Viking warfare was booty. They were looters. Murderous looters. Pillage everything of material value. Enslave the able-bodied survivors. Rape the women. Slaughter the "useless" men, women, and children. Burn whatever you leave behind.

By contrast, OT holy disincentivized warfare for personal aggrandizement. Israelites did *not* wage holy war for plunder. They were denied the conventional spoils of war.

I'll make one related observation. To my knowledge, social ethics in "primitive" cultures is mainly a tribal code of honor. Unwavering allegiance to your kith and kin.

For instance, in primitive cultures, I don't think rape and adultery were considered intrinsically evil. That's an outrage rather than a sin.

Although it may sound counterintuitive, I suspect that in most traditional cultures, rape doesn't dishonor the *woman* so much as it dishonors the *male* members of her family. Indeed, sometimes rape is committed with that in mind. In traditional cultures, the male members of the family are the protectors of the female members. So raping a woman is an affront to her father, uncles, brothers, cousins—or the entire clan. A slap in the face. Look what we did to your women! It's an expression of dominance, not over the woman so much as the men in her family or clan who were impotent to defend their honor (not her honor) by defending their women.

It's not the woman who brought shame on the family; rather, the rapist is using the woman to shame her father, brothers, &c. They were powerless to protect her.

I think that sort of thing underlies many classic blood feuds. Before you had a police force, it was up to family members (mainly the men) to protect the women and children. That reinforced the sense of in-group solidarity and camaraderie. "You come after my brother...you come after me!"

Likewise, I suspect that adultery is similar. It dishonors her husband. Brings shame on her husband. Consider the old literary/dramatic convention of the cuckolded husband. He can't protect his honor.



In a similar vein, adultery was treated more harshly than fornication because adultery blurs the lines of inheritance. That's especially problematic in tribal cultures where the major land holdings belong to the clan, not the individual.

The **ILIAD** is a good example. Agamemnon is the commander, not because he's the best warrior (Ajax, Achilles, and Diomedes are all better fighters), but because he's the tribal chieftain. Paris dishonored the Achaeans by stealing the wife of Menelaus, who is—not coincidentally—the brother of Agamemnon.

Conversely, Paris has endangered Troy. Yet Priam defends his son rather than extradites his son out of family loyalty.

We can see a similar dynamic in Judges 20. In the history of Israel, there's a constant tension between the Mosaic covenant and the tendency of Israelites to revert to their pagan social mores. Likewise, Islam is a throwback to tribal morality. Dishonor instead of sin.

Although the socioeconomic system of Israel was tribal, the Mosaic law cuts against the grain of tribal morality. In the Mosaic law, some things are wrong, not because they are shameful or dishonorable in the sociological sense, but because they are sinful or intrinsically evil. From what I can tell, that's a novel concept in human history.

## Can the Bible be proven wrong?

Some professing Christians reject a dogmatic commitment to the inerrancy or inspiration of Scripture. In some cases they actually reject the inerrancy and/or inspiration of Scripture, while in other cases they regard the inerrancy/inspiration of Scripture as a dispensable doctrine. I have in mind people like Michael Patton, F. F. Bruce, and Craig A. Evans.

Their justification for this position is that if your Christian faith is founded on the inerrancy or plenary-verbal inspiration of Scripture, then it only takes a single mistake to destroy your faith. There's no give in your belief-system.

From their viewpoint, that's a very brittle, precarious faith. One hairline crack in the granite façade and a moment later the entire edifice crumbles in a heap of dust.

And they'd say, in defense of their position, that this isn't just a hypothetical danger. They can point out that in real life, you have devout Christians who lose their faith when they become disillusioned with the inerrancy of Scripture. One mistake, however trivial, and their whole faith came crashing down.

Therefore, it's more prudent to have some expendable beliefs. Have something to throw over the back of the sled to distract the wolves. That includes inerrancy, inspiration, the historicity of Gen 1-11, perhaps the historicity of the Exodus, *vaticina ex eventu* (e.g. Dan 11; Isa 40ff.).

It's sufficient for Christian faith to treat the Bible like any other generally reliable historical witness. That's a safer position.

Notice that this isn't a question of apologetic method or evangelistic strategy. This isn't a question of how to witness to unbelievers. Rather, this is about how we should frame the Christian faith for *ourselves*.

Now, I'll grant you that this concern points to a genuine danger, although I'd draw some distinctions. There are professing believers who commit apostasy because they had a very crude understanding of what inerrancy entails. Likewise, there are professing Christians who commit apostasy because they because they invested their lifesavings (as it were) in a particular interpretation of Scripture. And I do think Christians need to take precautions against simplistic defeaters like that. They need to distinguish between infallible Scriptures and their fallible interpretations. They need to develop a more sophisticated model of inerrancy. They need to appreciate the limitations of archeology.

However, the position I'm examining goes well beyond that. And it's time to examine the operating assumption that undergirds that position. It assumes, in theory or practice, that we might discover some evidence which falsifies a Biblical claim. The question then is, how should we brace ourselves for that eventuality before it happens, assuming it ever happens, so that our faith won't be reduced to rubble?

But what about that presupposition? Should we grant that presupposition?

Let's begin with a question:

*Can the Bible be proven false?*

Some professing Christians take that possibility for granted. Given that Scripture can be proven false, we need to loosen or decouple the connection between the Bible and the Christian faith so that if the former takes a hit, the latter doesn't suffer collateral damage.

But should we answer the question in the affirmative? Let's explicate the question by rephrasing the question:

*If the Bible is the word of God, can the Bible be proven false?*

Which amounts to asking:

*Can God be wrong?*

Another variant:

*Can God be **shown** to be wrong?*

Now, if you're an open theist, you could answer that reformulated question in the affirmative. Ditto: if you're a pagan. But if you're a classic Christian theist, then an omniscient God can't be wrong.

To prove God wrong, you'd have to have some standard of comparison that's superior to God. But if there is no higher standard, or even comparable standard, then there's no benchmark against which to measure God, and conclude that God comes up short.

By the same token, if Scripture is the word of God, then how could Scripture be proven wrong? By what standard? Is there something more certain, more trustworthy than the Bible, which we can use to gauge the Bible?

Now at this point, some people might be getting nervous about where my argument is going. To preemptively immunize the Bible from possible disproof is special pleading. Fanatical or fideistic. The last-ditch refuge of desperate Christians on the run.

To that objection I'd say several things:

**i)** Seems to me that Christians who take the opposite position are open to the charge of special pleading. When they make preemptive concessions to shield their faith from disproof, why isn't *that* special pleading? Why isn't *that* last-ditch prepositioning to save face?

**ii)** If it's legitimate to consider the possibility that Scripture could be proven wrong, why is it illegitimate to consider the possibility that Scripture could not be proven wrong?

**iii)** Moreover, my question is not an ad hoc question. The Bible claims to be the word of God. Well, if that's true, then can the Bible be proven wrong? Seems to be that my question follows logically from an unavoidable premise. Even if you treat the Bible's claim to be inspired as a hypothetical proposition, you still need to consider the implications of that hypothetical. A critic has to make allowance for whether his objections have any purchase if the hypothetical is true. Even if he lacks a dogmatic commitment to the inspiration of Scripture, he must still take that seriously as a hypothetical option. What if it's true? Then what? What would follow, given *that* alternative?

**iv)** Suppose you say the Bible could be proven wrong by sense knowledge. But in that event, why do you privilege sense knowledge as your criterion? If sense knowledge is your standard of proof, how do you prove sense knowledge? Do you have some independent standard, over and above

sense knowledge, to validate your empirical standard? If not, then why isn't your appeal to sense knowledge special pleading?

And keep in mind that we do think sense knowledge is fallible, even if we regard sense knowledge is generally reliable. Moreover, what preconditions must be met for sense knowledge to be reliable? Does that require theistic preconditions?

Perhaps, though, someone would object that the question is misleading. The real question is *whether* the Bible is the word of God. If so, then, by definition, the Bible can't be proven wrong. It could only be falsified if it was false. If not, then the Bible can be proven wrong. To stipulate that the Bible can't be proven wrong because the Bible is the word of God begs the question.

**i)** But by converse logic, isn't the opposing side begging the question? If they think the Bible *could* be proven wrong, which is why we need a fallback position, then aren't they prejudging the status of the Bible? If they treat that as a live possibility, then they are striking a preliminary stance in reference to the Bible.

**ii)** They also seem to be assuming that if the Bible is true, it would always appear to be true. But is that a reasonable assumption? Surely there are truths which have the appearance of falsehood because we lack a larger context. Because we don't have all the facts. Isn't that a commonplace of human experience? Aren't there often situations in life where two things both seem to be true—even though we can't tell which is which (assuming one is wrong), or tell how to harmonize them (assuming both are right)?

This goes back to the issue of what they are judging the Bible by. What's their frame of reference? This is a persistent difficulty in epistemology. Cf. Roderick Chisholm, "The Problem of the Criterion"; William Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Knowledge*; William Alston, *Beyond "Justification": Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation*.

Someone might also object that the alternative I'm proposing opens a Pandora's box. Couldn't Muhammad, Swedenborg, or Joseph Smith use the same defense?

**i)** First of all, there's a difference between verification and falsification. To say the Bible can't be proven wrong doesn't mean it can't be proven right. These are asymmetrical propositions.

Take prophecy. An explicitly short-term prophecy might be quite susceptible to falsification. Likewise, a long-term prophecy might be clearly verifiable—after the fact. Once it happens, you can see how everything falls into place.

However, a long-term prophecy might not be easily falsifiable. If you don't know how long it's supposed to take for the prophecy to be fulfilled, how can you know ahead of time if it's true or false?

**ii)** If the Bible is true, then whatever contradicts the Bible is false. You wouldn't have to directly disprove Muhammad or Swedenborg or Joseph Smith.

**iii)** Keep in mind, too, that both Muhammad and Joseph Smith did condition their claims on external standards. So we're not imposing an external standard on their claims.

For instance, Muhammad set a trap for himself, then stepped into his own trap, when he made the Bible the

standard of comparison.

Likewise, Smith snared himself in a trap of his own devising when he said he translated an Egyptian text. He also said an Egyptologist (Charles Anthon) vouched for his translation. Well, we have the Egyptian text. So we can compare that to the Book of Abraham. We also have a letter from the Egyptologist in which he denies vouching for the "translation."

**iv)** There's also the question of whether God has given us any reason to expect prophets to arise, centuries after the Bible was finished, and add their own revelations to the corpus of Scripture, as a supplementary canon—which effectively usurps the Biblical canon.

One can't very well invoke passages like Num 11:29, Acts 2:17-18, and 1 Cor 14:5, for those don't single out a select few prophets who pop up centuries apart. Even if we interpret those passages charismatically, to predict continuing revelation, they'd apply to Christians generally. (Of course, if most Christians don't have that experience, then that's a reason to question or qualify the charismatic interpretation.)



## What if God told you to kill someone?

Atheists, as well as some theological liberals, like to ask this question to make Christians squirm. It's intended to create a dilemma. If the Christian says "No," then the atheist will gleefully exclaim, "So why do you believe those Old Testament commands about killing"? But if the Christian says "Yes," then the atheist will gleefully exclaim, "That just goes to show how dangerous religion is. It will make you do anything. Suspend your normal moral inhibitions."

So how should a Christian answer this question?

**i)** We should begin by pointing out that it's a trick question. It's intended to trap the Christian into giving the wrong answer however he responds. But the question is deceptively simple.

**ii)** Suppose, for the sake of argument, you answered in the affirmative. Does that mean religion is dangerous? No. It's not religion that makes you kill someone, but the hypothetical.

That's the thing about hypothetical questions. Because it's a hypothetical situation, we can make it do exactly what we want it to do. We can frame a hypothetical to yield any desired result. The answer is inescapable because the hypothetical artificially narrows your range of options. Given those options, you can only give one or two answers. But why is that a given?

If your answer is morally unacceptable, blame the hypothetical, not religion. That's just an artifact of the hypothetical. The shocking consequences isn't the result of religion, but the hypothetical framework.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), it's easy to dream up hypotheticals that generate moral dilemmas. Ethicists like to do that:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas/>

That doesn't single out religion. It's easy to dream up non-religious moral dilemmas. If religious moral dilemmas discredit religion, do non-religious moral dilemmas discredit secularism?

**iv)** However, the atheist might press the point. He might say this isn't just hypothetical. He might say there really are people who think God told them to kill someone.

But that's ambiguous. Does the atheist mean there are people who hear voices telling them to commit murder? That may well be true. But in that event, we have to recast the question:

"If you were psychotic, and you heard a voice telling you to kill somebody, would you do it?"

I suppose the answer would be "yes." So what? Don't blame religion. Blame schizophrenia.

After all, the atheist doesn't think God is *really* telling anyone to commit murder, since the atheist doesn't believe in God in the first place. So even if the psychotic thought he was following orders from God, the atheist doesn't think he was following orders from God, even if the psychotic is convinced God was speaking to him.

So why would religion be to blame, rather than mental illness? You don't have to be religious to be criminally insane. A psychotic atheist can hear voices too.

**v)** Let's recast the question in atheistic terms. Suppose the atheist is a physicalist. Indeed, many atheists subscribe to physicalism. And even secular dualists are usually grudging dualists. They'd rather be physicalists.

But in that case, the atheist is really asking: "If your brain told you to kill someone, would you do it?"

Well, within the framework of physicalism, the answer would be "yes." Given physicalism, you have no choice but to obey whatever your brain tells you to do. That's because you *are* your brain. There's no *you*, over and above *your brain*; there's no mind, distinct from your brain, to censor what your brain is telling you to do.

You're in no position to evaluate what your brain is telling you is real. For you rely on your brain to tell you what's real.

Suppose a Christian thinks he hears God telling him to kill someone. According to physicalism, that just means his brain is telling him to kill somebody. Is religion to blame, or his brain?

In fact, if physicalism is true, then everybody who commits a heinous crime was doing so because his brain told him to do it. If an atheist commits murder, his brain told him to commit murder. Does that prove how dangerous atheism is? Does that just prove how dangerous physicalism is?

**vi)** If someone says they hear voices telling him to commit murder, a common Christian explanation is demonic possession. It's not the Holy Spirit, but evil spirits, telling him to do that.

Of course, Christians can also believe in psychotic behavior. Maybe he hears voices because he has brain cancer.

An atheist might counter, "But what if you were sure that God was telling you to kill someone—even though we know that's delusive"?

But in that case, the hypothetical stipulates that you can't help yourself. You don't know any better. You lack control. In that situation, aren't you in a condition of diminished responsibility?

**vi)** The atheist might say this isn't just hypothetical, for we have divine commands to kill people in the Bible. Take Abraham and Isaac.

But the atheist challenge is ambiguous. If God really does command you to kill someone, then you should obey God's command. But if God really isn't commanding you to kill someone, then you shouldn't. So what does the ostensible dilemma amount to?

After all, there are atheists who believe in moral obligations to kill people. There are secular utilitarians who think that we should take one innocent life to save ten innocent lives. Their value system requires them to do that. Yet utilitarianism is a respectable position in secular ethics.

**vii)** Moreover, most Christians aren't voluntarists. We don't think God would command just anything for the heck of it. That's a problem with this hypothetical questions, viz., "What if God commanded you to blow up a bus full of school children."

We have no reason to think God would command that. And if he really wanted them dead, he could do it himself.



## Daniel in the lion den

Unbelievers reject the traditional date and authorship of Daniel.

i) In theory, Daniel could be written much later, and still be historical, as well as prophetic. By way of comparison, take Donald Weinstein's recent biography of Girolamo Savonarola, **SAVONAROLA: THE RISE AND FALL OF A RENAISSANCE PROPHET** (Yale University Press, 2011).

Imagine a "skeptic" using the following argument:

*Since this "biography" was written centuries after the fact, the Quattrocento setting is obviously fictional. Likewise, since the book was published in 2011, the prophecies attributed to Savonarola are clearly vaticina ex eventu.*

*Indeed, on linguistic considerations alone, this is fictional. After all, it's quite impossible that a 15C Italian monk spoke English, yet all of the sayings attributed to Savonarola are in English!*

ii) But let's examine the liberal objection from another angle. If Daniel is really about events during the Maccabean period, why would the author situate the story during the 6C Babylonian Exile?

One liberal explanation might be that it would be politically hazardous for the writer to directly attack the Seleucid regime. That would be seditious. That would expose him and his readers to reprisal on a charge of high treason. So he veils his attack as a political allegory, set in a bygone era.

**iii)** At first blush, that seems logical, but it's immediately beset by problems when we compare the liberal explanation to the actual text. For Dan 1-6 doesn't read like a political allegory of the Antiochean crisis. According to extrabiblical sources—the very sources which unbelievers rely on to “disprove” Daniel—Antiochus ordered the destruction of the Hebrew Scriptures, forbade circumcision, kosher food, and Sabbath-keeping. On top of that, he desecrated the Temple by sacrificing pigs on the altar.

But if Dan 1-6 constitute a political allegory of the Antiochean crisis, then we'd expect the narrative to have a central, juicy villain who does things comparable to Antiochus. Yet Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, and Cyrus are depicted in a fairly sympathetic light. Hardly the arch-villain of Antiochean proportions. The only bad guy is Belshazzar, and his career is cut short.

For his part, Nebuchadnezzar isn't attempting to suppress the Jewish religion. That didn't even occur to him. The command to prostrate oneself before the golden statue doesn't specifically target the Jewish captives. Rather, it's directed at Babylonian bureaucrats, as a way in which his official subordinates pledge their fealty to the monarch. Daniel's friends are swept up in this because they happen to be courtiers, and not because they are Jewish, per se.

Chaps 1-6 contain other examples of palace intrigue, but that cutthroat treachery is pretty generic for life at court.

In fact, liberals like Collins and Goldingay admit that chaps 1-6 don't mesh with a Maccabean *sitz-im-leben*. They date that to the Persian period.

Put another way, they dispute the unity of Daniel. They think chaps 1-6 were composed independently. But other issues to one side, if chaps 1-6 aren't allegorizing the Antiochean persecution, then that dissolves the rationale for a fictional, Babylonian setting, at which historical distance the author can safely critique the contemporary policies of Antiochus Epiphanes.



## Making the Bible unbelievably believable

I notice an increasing trend within evangelicalism. We might identify this with the evangelical left, although it's becoming more widespread and mainstream. Right now I'm picking on a segment of evangelicalism, but we have parallel developments in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, so don't foster the illusion that you can take refuge in those alternatives.

I notice the freedom that many professing Christians feel to just set aside whatever they don't like. To openly and brazenly disbelieve whatever they find displeasing or hard to believe. They have no sense of obligation to submit their hearts and minds to the wisdom of God speaking in his word. No sense of duty to believe anything that happens to rub them the wrong way.

As a result, they feel free to make the Bible more acceptable or credible (as they deem it) by any means necessary. To unilaterally recreate the Christian faith or creatively reinterpret the Bible.

This takes as many forms as what is held to be morally or intellectually offensive. If the creation account is thought to be hopelessly unscientific, then men like Enns, Seely, and Walton tells that that's because the narrator inherited an antiquated conception of the world. Employed obsolete cosmological notions. People back then didn't know any better.

If evolutionary biology is thought to put too much pressure on the historical Adam, we simply redefine Adam. Adam becomes a metaphor for Israel. Or Adam becomes one man among many preexisting hominids, whom God singles out.

If we don't like the Bible's masculine linguistic bias, we retranslate it to our liking. If we find male headship offensive, we either reinterpret the offending passages or say the Bible is irremediably misogynistic in that regard, which we're at liberty to disregard (e.g. R. H. Evans). Same thing with homosexuality.

If we take umbrage at God's command to execute the Canaanites, we reinterpret that to mean it's just the conventional rhetoric of violence, which needn't be confused with actual events (e.g. Rowlett).

And we readjust our theory of inspiration to accommodate these modifications. God superintends error, and it's our calling to discern the voice of God in the cacophony of jarring voices within Scripture.

If we perceive an irreconcilable conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom, then we cut the Gordian knot by denying God's knowledge of the future. Or we declare that God must play the hand he was dealt (W. L. Craig).

If we don't like everlasting punishment, we substitute annihilationism or universalism. Easy as that.

If we think it's unfair for death to terminate the opportunity for salvation, we stipulate purgatory and postmortem salvation (e.g. Jerry Walls).

If we think it's unfair that everyone didn't enjoy the same spiritual opportunities, we posit that "God could place a person anywhere He wants in human history, regardless of how that person might freely behave in different circumstances. But my suggestion is that God, being so

merciful and not wanting anyone to be damned, so providentially orders the world that anyone who would embrace the Gospel if he were to hear it will not be placed in circumstances in which he fails to hear it and is lost. Only in the case of someone who would be saved through his response to general revelation would a person who would freely respond to special revelation, if he heard it, find himself in circumstances where he doesn't hear it" (W. L. Craig).

If Calvinism rankles, we preemptively dictate that whatever the Bible means, it can't mean *that* (e.g. Wesley, Rauser, Olson).

Now the problem I have with all these efforts to make the Bible more believable is that, if I granted their assumptions, their efforts to make the Bible more believable would make the Bible *less* believable. And that's because they are clearly manipulating Scripture or theology to yield a desired result. Whenever there's any tension between the Bible and their prior commitments, Scripture must always adapt to their prior commitments, not vice versa.

But that becomes an exercise in make-believe. Theology as fiction, where you rewrite the story to provide an alternate ending which you find more agreeable.

By contrast, the Bible contains a lot of flinty, gnarly, intractable material. Material that resists domestication.

Take Judges. Along with Lamentations, this may be the nastiest book of the Bible. It contains a series of atrocities. Mutilation, dismemberment, disembowelment, eye-gouging, human sacrifice, gang rape &c. This is not a nice book. Not a hymnal.

But, unfortunately, that's what makes it so believable. Because, unfortunately, that's very true to life. The Bible has that raw, gritty, gruesome verity. The very effort to sanitize the Bible makes it less realistic. And in so doing, makes it less credible. That's projecting how we'd *like* things to be, rather than how they actually are.

All this moral squalor supplies the dark backdrop for the Bible's bright redemptive vision. Hope in the shadow of despair. A fallen world is an ugly world. But only a fallen world can be redeemed.

As we reject the offending passages of the Bible, we ironically sink back into the very depravity at which we take offense. We revert to the heathen brutality which the Bible graphically depicts, as a warning to God's people. That's the lesson of Judges.

## Test of faith

**If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deut 13:1-5).**

When Christians confront intellectual challenges to their faith, one stock response is to say that God is testing their

faith. Indeed, that's a Christian cliché in some circles.

People who are struggling with intellectual doubts can resent that appeal. It seems like you can explain away anything by invoking that principle. Isn't that a dodge? After all, one can imagine a cult using that line to squelch rising doubts about their prophet. Yes, he *seems* to be a hypocrite; yes, he *seems* to be contradicting himself; yes, he *seems* to mispredict the future—but that's a test of faith. God is testing your faith.

So I agree that this appeal can be overused. To say, in the face of every intellectual challenge, that God is testing our faith, take it too far. The appeal needs to be more qualified.

That said, this appeal does have its basis in a Scriptural principle. Deut 13:1-5 is a classic case in point. God is, indeed, testing their faith. And the test takes the form of an intellectual challenge. There *is* some corroborative evidence for the prophet's claims. His claim seems to receive supernatural confirmation.

And when you think about it, this is more impressive, more formidable, than objections from modern science. For instance, modern theories of cosmic or biological origins involve very long, tenuous chains of inference, with interpolations and extrapolations connecting all the missing links, with many sheer postulates and freely-adjustable variables. There are many steps along the way where the inference could go awry.

By contrast, the supporting evidence envisioned in Deut 13:1-5 is very direct and rationally compelling. This confronts the believer with a stronger dilemma than stock objections to Scripture. For, to some extent, this piggybacks on Scriptural assumptions and Scriptural criteria.

Now, a “skeptic” might say that Deut 13:1-5 is, itself, an exercise in special pleading. A preemptive escape clause. He might say this was written to head off a prophetic counter-challenge to the prophets of Yahweh, or something like that.

To that I’d say to things:

**i)** Deut 13:1-5 honestly acknowledges the limitations of formal criteria to verify or falsify prophecy. Formal criteria can be very useful. That can eliminate some candidates. But formal criteria can only take you so far. There will always be some things we just know to be the case, even if we can’t prove it. Some things we have to know without recourse to a formal demonstration.

**ii)** Deut 13:1-5 isn’t a technicality that immunizes the faith *by definition*. For this hypothetical situation grants the possibility that a false prophet might really be able to predict the future or work a genuine miracle. He isn’t just *apparently* able to pull this off. Deut 13:1-5 doesn’t say, “Who are you going to believe—Moses or your lying eyes?” The passage doesn’t deny the evidence.

Rather, it concedes the phenomenon, but places that in a larger interpretive framework. And there’s nothing ad hoc about that framework. Since this type of false prophecy is admittedly supernatural, there’s nothing ad hoc about explaining it by noting that in back of the false prophet is God, who is manipulating the false prophet for his own ends.

## Does Scripture condone child sacrifice?

Thom Stark wrote a longwinded attack (“Is God a Moral Compromiser?” available online) on Paul Copan’s Is God a Moral Monster?

Stark is a “Christian” of the John Spong variety. He’s a theological soul mate of Randal Rauser, who’s often written sympathetically about Stark’s material. I’m going to concentrate on one of Stark’s prooftexts:

After quoting Ezk 20:23-26, Stark says:

*Some Israelites were appealing to the law of Moses to justify the institution of child sacrifice. Exod 22:29b says: “The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.” With good reason, Israelites interpreted this as a command to sacrifice their firstborn children to Yahweh.*

*Ezekiel admits that Yahweh did in fact command the Israelites in the wilderness to sacrifice “all their firstborn” to him. But Ezekiel reinterprets this as a “bad command” ... (89).*

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Stark’s analysis suffers from multiple confusions:



i) He assumes that Ezekiel is alluding to Exod 22:29. However, that's not the only passage which uses this type of language. As one commentator points out:

*Part of the vocabulary of v26 ("every opening of the womb," "make over") echoes the law of the redemption of the firstborn particularly represented in Exod 13:12-13. It ruled that, whereas firstborn male sacrificial animals were to be sacrificed, firstborn sons were to be redeemed with money paid to the sanctuary. L. Allen, Ezekiel 20-48 (Word 1990), 12.*

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If that's what Ezekiel is actually alluding to, then that's hardly a command to perform child sacrifice. Just the opposite: it's a command to redeem firstborn sons.

ii) But even if Ezekiel is alluding to Exod 22:29, Stark misconstrues that passage. As one commentator explains:

*The giving of the firstborn of animal and child to the Lord has already surfaced in Exodus (13:1-2, 11-13), and will appear later in 34:19-20. There is one major difference between the data in chap. 22 and*

that in chaps. 13 and 34. Both chaps. 13 and 34 urge the parent to “redeem” (with a sheep maybe?) every firstborn son (Exod 13:13b; 34:20b). Exod 22:29 omits any reference to the “redemption” of the firstborn son.

In response, I say that the primary emphasis on these two verses is on giving to the Lord the first and best of one’s agricultural and animal products. The statement about the giving of the firstborn son is terse and almost parenthetical. Hence, the data is truncated and is to be “filled in” with the fuller data from chaps. 13 and 34.

Second, there are other passages in the Bible of individuals “given” to the Lord with no mention of their being “redeemed.” For example, when Hannah prayerfully vows, “If you will...give [me] a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life” (1 Sam 1:11), does she mean “sacrifice” the child, or dedicate/hand over the child? Similarly, Num 8:16 refers to the Levites as those “who are to be given wholly to me.” “Wholly given” surely does not mean “sacrificed,” but “dedicated.” V. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker 2011), 418-19.

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In other words, Exod 22:29 is just a shorthand statement, qualified by other statements of the same kind in the same book.

**iii)** Stark has Ezekiel deliberately opposing the Mosaic law. Yet Ezekiel revered the authority of the Mosaic law (Ezk 22:26). His indictment of Israel in Ezk 5-6 invokes the curse sanctions in Lev 26. His indictment of Israel in 8:5-18 has its background in the Mosaic prohibitions contained in Exod 20:3-6, Num 33:52, Deut 4:1-20, 5:1-12, and 17:2-5.

**iv)** Ezekiel is addressing the exilic community. But why were the Jews exiled in the first place? Because they were covenant-breakers. Because they disobeyed the Mosaic law.

And they were exiled, not merely because they disobeyed God's law. Rather, their disobedience took a specific form. They disobeyed God's law by defiantly doing the very things which God solemnly forbade. By emulating the abominable practices of their pagan neighbors. That's the very thing which the Mosaic law forewarned them to studiously avoid (e.g. Lev 18:21, 20:1-6; Deut 12:31, 18:9-13).

Now, on Stark's interpretation, he has Ezekiel telling the Jews that God banished them, not for disobeying his commands, but for obeying his commands. According to Stark, God originally commanded the Jews to practice child sacrifice, the Jews complied, then God punished them for obeying his command. Of course, that interpretation is utterly nonsensical.

**v)** As one commentator notes,

*Some interpreters even take 20:26 as implying that Yahweh commanded the Israelites to sacrifice their children to Molech, but it is clear in 16:20-21 that Jerusalem acted against Yahweh's will and express command when, as the folding baby girl turned whore, she slaughtered the children she had borne to Yahweh by making them pass through the fire (the same act of which the people are accused here. H. Hummel, Ezekiel 1-20 (Concordia 2005), 596-97.*

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**vi)** Finally, Stark has a tin ear for Ezekiel's morbid sarcasm, which he employs for shock value. As one commentator observes:

*Ezekiel is being horrendously controversial in this whole chapter, creating a rhetorical parody of Israel's history in order to highlight its worst side. In a context of such sustained sarcasm and irony, we cannot suddenly take a verse like this as a face-value doctrinal or historical affirmation. C.*

**Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel* (IVP  
2001), 160.**

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## Garbled in transmission?

22 And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:22-24).

4 And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4).

10 While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" 12 When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:10-14).

This invites a variety of differing explanations. Let's run through the possibilities:

**1)** The Christian prophets sincerely imagined that the Spirit revealed this to them, but they were deluded.

Given the narrative viewpoint, I think that's unlikely:

**i)** Luke takes a favorable view of Christian prophecy. Throughout Acts, he gives us illustrations of how Joel's prophecy fulfilled.

**ii)** They receive the same ostensible revelation as Paul. The content is basically the same. It's corroborative. A confirmation of what Paul himself was told.

**iii)** This has multiple-attestation. Two different parties (Agabus and the "disciples") claim to receive the same revelation. They are independent of each other. Seems improbable that two different parties would mistakenly receive the same revelation.

**iv)** Also, the contention that Agabus bungled the details strikes me as wooden. Agabus is speaking in shorthand.

**2)** The Spirit did, indeed, reveal something to the Christian prophets, but they drew the wrong inference.

That's plausible.

**3)** The Spirit revealed something to them, and they drew the right inference. They were right and Paul was wrong.

**i)** Since Paul isn't sinless, it's possible that he pigheadedly flouted the warning, heedless of the consequences. However, I don't think that's the best overall interpretation.

**ii)** Paul is determined to pursue this course of action because he's convinced that the Holy Spirit has obliged him to do so (Acts 19:21; 20:22). Hence, Paul is obedient to God's directive, as he understands it.

**iii)** It's inconsistent with apostolic inspiration to suppose an apostle mistakenly thought God was speaking to him, or mistook what God was telling him to do.

**4)** God was giving Paul a choice.

**i)** This assumes the warning was a deterrent. That the Holy Spirit issued this warning to give Paul an out. Informed consent.

If so, that raises the question of whether the prophecy refers to the actual future or a hypothetical future. How Paul responds to the prophecy will, itself, factor into the future outcome. He might take it as a warning not to proceed any further. In which case an alternate future will eventuate.

From a Reformed standpoint, whichever fork in the road Paul took would be predestined.

**ii)** However, I doubt that explanation. I think the Holy Spirit is warning Paul, not to deter or dissuade him, or even to give him a choice, but to prepare him for the coming ordeal. To be forearmed. The prediction tells him what to expect, not what to do. He's foretold the consequences, not to duck the consequences, but to brace himself for the consequences.

**5)** Both sides were right. It was permissible for Paul to forge ahead, but it was equally permissible for him to change course. There can be more than one morally permissible course of action. Everything doesn't boil down to a choice between right and wrong.

I think that explanation is valid in the abstract, but in the concrete context I think the narrator has led us to believe,



by the programmatic statement in Acts 20:22-24 (cf. 19:21), that it was God's will for Paul pursue that path.