

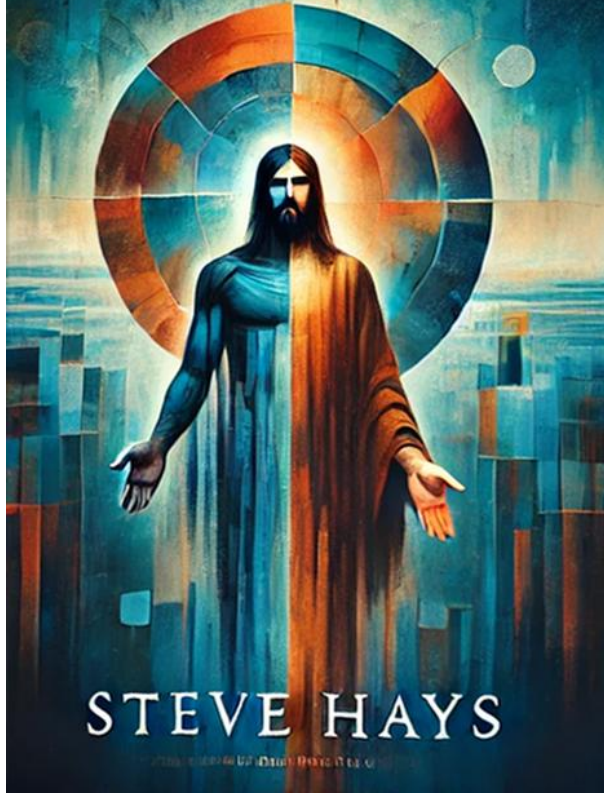
JESUS IN THE GOSPELS



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Jesus in the Gospels

Preface

In my experience, "the historical Jesus" often means one of two different things:

1. A naturalized Jesus after the NT Jesus is filtered through the strainer of methodological atheism to screen out the supernaturalism.

From a Christian standpoint, a naturalized Jesus is worthless.

2. An historically reconstructed Jesus, based on what passes the muster of historical criteria in the NT guild.

Sometimes (2) is one stage in a multistage apologetic strategy. But for many scholars of this ilk, it's not about apologetic strategy. That's the end-point of their investigations.

The fundamental problem with this is that the Jesus who commands our worship and obedience isn't the reconstructed Jesus of critical scholars but the full-orbed Jesus of the Gospels (and NT Christology in general). An historically reconstructed Jesus is just a human construct.

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I. General

How will Jesus return?

Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Mt 24:30).

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him (Rev 1:7).

i) How will Jesus return? Some people think the depiction of Jesus literally coming down from the sky reflects an antiquated mythological cosmography, where heaven is "up".

ii) In theory, this could be stock imagery without being mythological. We need to distinguish between mythology and dead metaphors.

iii) In addition, there's the question of how Christians should update futuristic descriptions. The Bible uses period imagery when depicting the future. Imagery that reflects the world familiar to the original audience. But if this is really about the distant future, then we need to make some mental adjustments.

iv) In theory, Jesus could return the way he suddenly appears to people after the Resurrection. There he appears out of nowhere. He appears and disappears out of thin air. That doesn't require Jesus to come down from the sky. And this also shows that Jesus reappearing isn't necessarily

wedded to an allegedly obsolete cosmography. Jesus needn't pass through space to appear to someone. At least not visibly.

v) That said, a basic problem with dismissing the depiction of Jesus coming down from the sky is the Ascension account.

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).

That's presented as an eyewitness account, in observational language. That's what you and I would see, had we been there.

And it describes the return of Christ as a reversal of the Ascension. If we take the Bible seriously, we can't just discount the depiction of Jesus coming down from the sky.

vi) A critic might object that passages like Mt 24:30 and Rev 1:7 presume a flat-earth perspective. If the world is a globe, how could Jesus be seen all at once by everybody on earth? But if the earth was flat, then everyone would enjoy the same vantage-point in relation to the sky. Everyone would see the entire sky, facing the earth.

Yet even if, for the sake of argument, we grant that this imagery reflects a flat-earth cosmography, that might be an accommodation to how ancient people thought about the universe.

Mind you, I doubt there was any one way that ancient people viewed the universe. Many people probably operated with naive realism, but some people were more reflective and attentive difficulties with that viewpoint.

vii) However, it doesn't take much imagination to see how these descriptions are consistent with modern astronomy. If the sign of the Son of Man appeared in the sky for as little as one rotation period, everyone would be in a position to see it over the course of 24 hours.

Suppose the sign was like an approaching comet. Everyone would see it weeks in advance.

In the age of telecommunications, moreover, everyone can see the same thing, even if that's out of range of where they live—or the skies are overcast where they live.

viii) This, in turn, suggest a practical function for Jesus coming down from the sky. Suppose Jesus simply appeared on earth. How would anyone know that's the Second Coming of Christ? Outwardly, he looks like an ordinary human being. Moreover, there's a sense in which he only be seen at one place at a time.

Suppose, however, the "sign" of the Son of Man approaches earth from outer space. It isn't just ancient people with an interest in astrology who were impressed by portents and prodigies. Modern people with an interest in astronomy are impressed by portends and prodigies. Take speculation

about an impact event that may extinguish life on earth, if a huge asteroid strikes the earth. Or take recently speculation about whether we're receiving radio signals from an alien civilization.

Suppose the Shekinah initially appeared in outer space, visible from earth. At a distance, it might seem like a natural phenomenon. Yet astronomers are baffled, because it doesn't fit the profile of a comet, asteroid, supernova, &c. As it comes closer, it doesn't resemble any natural astronomical phenomenon. And its trajectory is naturally inexplicable. Of course, many people might initially interpret this as a flying saucer or fleet of flying saucers.

ix) Another factor might be additional events or supernatural phenomena, as an unmistakable precursor to the Parousia. The fulfillment of ancient oracles regarding the Antichrist, or things like that.

Was Jesus a failed prophet?

Mt 24:34 ("**Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place**") is a familiar crux. Did Jesus mispredict the future?

There are different explanations. And I've discussed this on numerous occasions. But here's another angle. The question at issue is the relationship between his fall of Jerusalem prediction and his end-of-the world prediction. These are adjacent, but are they coreferential? Are they synchronized?

This verse is embedded in the Olivet Discourse. That's an extended block of text (Mt 24-25). But did Jesus deliver that entire address at one sitting, or is this a composite text?

Matthew and Luke both have a tendency to group related material together. For instance, the Sermon on the Mount is often thought to a composite text, where Matthew combined things Jesus said at different times and places.

If that's the case in regard to the Olivet Discourse, then we're dealing with two or more separate oracles of salvation and judgment. Each is prophetic, but may well have different referents. When combined, there are no editorial seams, so we're left with one continuous block of text—which fosters the superficial impression of one continuous chain of events. But the continuity is literary rather than chronological. Like other composite speeches in Matthew and Luke, there may be no explicit textual clues to distinguish the underlying sources, which were delivered at different times and places. It's just run-on. Yet the impression of continuity is an editorial artifact. There's the

original setting for each speech, but in writing a biography, the narrator must rearrange some material to produce a linear flow. Writing is a different medium from speaking. Writing about history is different from how history is experienced.

A case for Christ

What's the best evidence for Jesus? Many Christian apologists and Jesus scholars make a case for the historical Jesus. Having read so much material over the years, this is how I approach the issue. To a great extent I'm summarizing the best arguments, as I see them. But I also have some reservations about the stereotypical apologetic. Because apologist are influenced by other apologists, and scholars read other scholars, that has a conditioning effect, which produces a stereotypical apologetic. The standard apologetic has some good elements, but the conditioning effect fosters tunnel vision, so that other lines of evidence are neglected. In addition, there are bad elements in the standard apologetic.

I. PRELIMINARIES

1. THE HISTORICAL JESUS

The "historical Jesus" is often a downsized Jesus or even a naturalized Jesus. What's left over after the NT is filtered through the sieve of standard criteria. A historical reconstruction of the *real* Jesus, once we peel back the layers. However, the scope of my post isn't the "historical Jesus" in that residual sense, not about a reconstructed Jesus, hidden behind the NT record, but about the NT Jesus in toto.

Of course, there is a Jesus who stands behind the NT record, independent of the NT record. A Jesus who is, in a sense, bigger than the NT. But for me, the real Jesus corresponds to the NT Jesus. While Jesus is ontologically

prior to the record, yet our knowledge of Jesus is epistemologically dependent on the NT record.

2. "BIAS"

A stock objection to using the Gospels is the allegation that the Gospels are partisan sources since their writers are Christian. But that's a confused objection:

i) The fact that an author has a viewpoint doesn't mean he's biased. The real question is the source of his viewpoint. Suppose a kid who grew up in the tropics moves to Canada, and sees his first snowman. He excitedly tells his parents about the snowman sighting. Should his discount be reported because he's now a believer in snowmen? But his newfound belief in snowmen isn't a reflection of bias. Prior to his encounter with the snowman, he had no predisposition to believe in snowmen. Indeed, his default plausibility structure might be skeptical of reports about the existence of snowmen. His viewpoint is due to a formative experience rather than a prior belief.

ii) But even in the case of viewpoints that do reflect bias, that doesn't automatically discredit the report. I sometimes see moving objects in the sky. They may be too small or distant for me to clearly make them out. But if the motion is geometric, I assume that's an airplane, and if the motion is erratic, I assume that's a bird. My identification is "biased" because I know about planes and birds, so I use that background knowledge as an interpretive frame of reference. But my predilection doesn't discredit my observation.

iii) If traditional NT authorship is correct, then all the NT writers were converts to Christianity. Nearly all of them

were Jewish converts to Christianity, while one (Luke) was a gentile convert to Christianity, although he was probably an intellectual convert to Judaism (Godfearer) prior to his Christian conversion. So all of them came to believe in Jesus.

And, once again, if traditional NT authorship is correct, then all of them came to believe in Jesus by knowing Jesus or knowing people who knew Jesus. That's not bias any more than coming to believe in something generally based on eyewitness experience or eyewitness testimony is bias.

Of course, critics who complain about the Gospels as "biased" sources usually deny that they are based on firsthand knowledge of Jesus. But that needs to be separated from the allegation of bias. Those are distinct issues.

3. EYEWITNESS MEMORY

i) Another stock objection is the alleged unreliability of eyewitness memory. In particular, people remember events better than words. So how can the Gospels be an accurate record of what Jesus said?

ii) A similar objection is that the phenomenon of the omniscient narrator. Gospels writers sometimes relate incidents which they wouldn't ordinarily be privy to.

Many Christian apologists and evangelical scholars offer naturalistic explanations. And sometimes those make sense. However, treating the Gospels as naturalistic records of supernatural agents and events erects a false dichotomy. The Gospels aren't merely reports about a world containing miracles, revelations, angels and demons—detached from

the world they narrate, for the Gospels are products of the same kind of world. So it's artificial to bifurcate the nature of the Gospels from the nature of the world they recount, as if the writers had to be limited to natural means of knowledge. As if fallible, unaided memory, direct observation, or informants was necessarily all they had to go by. For instance, consider Elisha's clairvoyance (2 Kgs 6). It's a philosophical and theological mistake for apologists and evangelical scholars to eliminate inspiration from consideration. Inspiration and revelation are no more or less credible than what the Gospels report.

iii) A related objection is whether "peasants" and fishermen like James, John, and Jude could write good Greek. Now, there are plausible naturalistic explanations, but over and above that, xenoglossy is a gift of the Spirit (according to Acts). So if it came to that, it would be possible for James, John, and Jude to be supernaturally enabled. For that matter, verbal inspiration might do the trick.

But supernatural explanations aren't considered, even by scholars who believe in NT miracles. It illustrates the default secular paradigm that unconsciously conditions so much NT scholarship, even among evangelicals or apologists.

For more on memory, cf. C. Keener, **CHRISTOBIOGRAPHY (EERDMANS 2019), PART 5.**

4. TRADITION

"Traditions" about Jesus uses the word "tradition" loosely and misleadingly. For instance, Eusebius has a number of historically useful anecdotes about the apostles. By the time that gets down to him, those are traditions.

By contrast, it's misleading to classify 1 Cor 15:3-8 or Heb 2:4 as "traditions". Rather, those are examples of living memory. While tradition can preserve living memory, tradition is one or more steps removed from living memory.

5. As is often noted, the documentary evidence for Jesus satisfies standard criteria like multiple attestation and the criterion of embarrassment.

II. NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES

Christian apologists appeal to non-Christian sources as part of their cumulative case for the historical Jesus, viz. Tacitus, Josephus. You can find this reproduced in many print and online resources. One classic monograph is F. F. Bruce's **JESUS AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS OUTSIDE THE NEW TESTAMENT**. A more recent example is Peter Williams, **CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?, CHAP. 1**.

While this is useful corroborative material, that doesn't mean non-Christian sources are preferable to the NT. Apologists sometimes reach for non-Christian sources to deflect the claim that the NT is a biased source, but that's an ill-conceived objection (see above), and we shouldn't back away from using the NT as our major source.

1. HOSTILE SOURCES

A subset of non-Christian sources are hostile sources. These have particular apologetic value since a hostile witness is making concessions despite his bias to the contrary. Some pagan critics of Christianity unwittingly corroborate Christianity. Jason Engwer has done a number of posts on

that topic. For now I'd like to focus on two interesting examples:

i) The Talmud

Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve. Forty days previously the herald had cried, "He is being led out for stoning, because he has practiced sorcery and led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy. Whosoever has anything to say in his defense, let him come and declare it." As nothing was brought forward in his defense, he was hanged on Passover Eve. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 43a.

One day Yehoshua ben Peraḥya was reciting Shema and Jesus came before him with the same request. Yehoshua ben Peraḥya intended to accept his request, and signaled him with his hand to wait until he completed his prayer. Jesus did not understand the signal and thought: He is driving me away. He went

and stood a brick upright to serve as an idol and he bowed to it. Yehoshua ben Peraḥya then said to Jesus: Repent. Jesus said to him: This is the tradition that I received from you: Whoever sins and causes the masses to sin is not given the opportunity to repent. And the Master says: Jesus performed sorcery, incited Jews to engage in idolatry, and led Israel astray. Had Yehoshua ben Peraḥya not caused him to despair of atonement, he would not have taken the path of evil. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 107b.

Although the second anecdote is garbled and polemical, it's striking how these Talmudic anecdotes correspond to the allegations of Christ's enemies in the Gospels. Notice how they grant the supernatural abilities of Jesus, but chalks that up to witchcraft. For detailed analysis:

http://legacy.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/Tyndale/staff/Instone-Brewer/prepub/07_Instone_Brewer.pdf

ii) Pliny

In his letter to Emperor Trajan (c. 111 AD), Pliny recounts information from Christians he interrogated. It documents

Christian worship extending back to the 1C. Among other things, it mentions that Christians worshipped Jesus as God (or a god, the Latin is ambiguous). These were Christians who refuse to honor Roman civic religion, on pain of death and torture. So for them, the one God was inclusive of Jesus.

iii) Alexamenos graffito

A c. 200 AD graffito from the Roman Palatine depicting a worshiper standing before a crucified man with a donkey head, with the caption "Alexamenos worships his god":

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_Roman_a/gladiators/graffito.html

Cf. G. M. A. Hanfmann, "The Crucified Donkey Man: Achaïos and Jesus," Günter Kopke & Mary B. Moore, eds. **STUDIES IN CLASSICAL ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY: A TRIBUTE TO PETER HEINRICH VON BLANCKENHAGEN (LOCUST VALLEY, NY 1979), 206-7**; Felicity Harley-McGowan, 'The Alexamenos Graffito', in Chris Keith, Helen Bond & Jens Schröter (eds), **THE RECEPTION OF JESUS IN THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES (BLOOMSBURY T&T CLARK, EXPECTED 2019)**.

Although the Alexamenos graffito is fairly late, it predates the Council of Nicea by a wide margin, and so it's a useful witness to early Christian belief in the crucified God.

III. THE GOSPEL TITLES

1. It's often alleged that the Gospels are anonymous. Even if the Gospels were formally anonymous, each Gospel has internal evidence consistent with traditional attributions.

2. But to my knowledge, there are no anonymous Greek manuscripts of the Gospels. All our extant manuscripts of the Gospels have named authors. And there's uniformity to the titles. The same Gospels are always attributed to the same authors.

3. Some scholars think the titles are editorial additions. But that's a postulate that raises further questions:

i) Christians scribal activity wasn't centralized. There was no command-and-control to coordinate the activity of scribes. They acted independently of each other. So it's very hard to explain the uniformity of attribution if all four Gospels originally circulated anonymously.

As I understand the process, a scribe copies a preexisting copy. Either that's read aloud, and he copies what he hears, or else he has a copy in front of him which he transcribes. He copies what he sees or hears. If our extant manuscripts have titles, that's because because the copies they copied also had titles. So the process is regressive. Our extant copies bear witness to earlier copies that no longer exist. Earlier copies that also had titles. That process repeats until it terminates in the Ur-text or autograph. Either the Ur-text was anonymous or entitled. If it was anonymous, then the title had to be added by scribes later in the transmission process. But since we have multiple streams of transmission, and scribes worked independently of each other, it's hard to explain the uniformity if the titles are editorial additions. If the Gospels were originally anonymous, and titles were only introduced later into the process of transmission, surely there'd be considerable

diversity in the authorial attributions. Scribes wouldn't know what other scribes did. Scribes wouldn't be aware of most other copies in circulation. So they couldn't imitate each other even if they wanted to.

Theoretically, all our manuscripts could go back to four individual copies that had titles, even though the autographs were anonymous. But isn't that antecedently quite unlikely? What's the likelihood that all our surviving manuscripts of Matthew go back to a single copy, all our surviving manuscripts of Mark go back to a single copy, as well as Luke and John? So the simplest, most plausible explanation is that our extant manuscripts have uniform authorship because scribes copied earlier manuscripts with the same titles, in a repeated process that traces all the way back to the autographs.

ii) But let's assume for argument's sake that Mark originally circulated anonymously. Yet after Matthew, Luke, and John were written, it would be necessary for them to have names, to differentiate one Gospel from another. So even if (ex hypothesi) the autograph of Mark was originally anonymous, we'd expect the autographs of Matthew, Luke, and John to be entitled.

For more on (i-ii), cf. M. Hengel, **THE FOUR GOSPELS AND THE ONE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST (TRINITY 2000), 48-56.**

iii) It was, moreover, customary for ancient historians to entitle their writings. Cf. B. Pitre, **THE CASE FOR JESUS (IMAGE 2016), 207-8N10.** As one scholar notes:

The clearest case is Luke because of the dedication of the work to Theophilus (1:3), probably a patron. It is inconceivable that a work with a named dedicatee should have been anonymous. The author's name may have featured in an original title, but in any case would have been known to the dedicatee and other first readers because the author would have presented the book to the dedicatee. R. Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses (Eerdmans, rev. ed, 2017), 301.

iv) In addition to the titles, the authorship of the Gospels is multiply-attested in other Christian sources (e.g. church fathers, Muratorian canon).

Assuming that traditional authorship is correct, what does that tell us about Gospels individually?

IV. MARK

i) Mark's family hailed from the Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora (Acts 4:36), so he might well be a native Greek speaker. Probably bilingual.

ii) He lived in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), which was a very literate community. So he might well have been able to read

and write. And the Gospel of Mark is written in rustic Greek.

iii) According to Acts 12:12, his mother's home was in Jerusalem. Her home was one of the founding house-churches. That would give Mark access to many eyewitnesses to the ministry of Christ, including apostles residing in Jerusalem. So he had a wide range of informants at his disposal.

iv) Given that he was an early Christian disciple living in Jerusalem, I think it's quite likely that he himself was an eyewitness to the public ministry of Christ. This is a neglected argument in Christian apologetics.

v) Here's a defense of Mark's geography:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4THNI0CxbE>

V. MATTHEW

1. Assuming traditional authorship, this Gospel was written by one of the twelve disciples. He had extensive firsthand knowledge of Christ's public ministry, both in and outside Jerusalem. All the stuff about the Sadducees and halakhah make sense if Matthew was written in the 50s-60s, but little sense after the fall of Jerusalem, when the Sadducees lost their power base, when Judaism had to reinvent itself in the wake of the temple's destruction, making the priesthood irrelevant, when the headquarters of Christianity shifted from Jerusalem to gentile urban centers throughout the Roman Empire.

2. As a tax collector, he'd have to speak Greek with his Roman employers and be able to write tax receipts. As one scholar notes:

The Roman administrators of the province and their Roman and Jewish subordinates on the local level are likely to have made ample use of writing, both in the form of documents and letters...It almost goes without saying that the Jews who collaborated with the Romans in the administrative realm had to be loyal supporters of the foreign government and knowledgeable of Greek, that is, they must have belonged to the most assimilated circles of the Jewish population. C. Hezser, Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine (Mohr Siebeck 2001), 489-90.

In addition, what you do for a living may simply reflect the job market. It's not uncommon for people to be overqualified for the work they do. They take whatever is available.

3. A stock objection to traditional authorship is that Matthew appears to use Mark as a source. There are, however, some problems with that objection:

i) A person can be a source as well as a book. The Apostle Matthew would be one of Mark's sources while the Gospel of

Mark is one of Matthew's sources. If Mark quoted the Apostle Matthew, and the Gospel of Matthew quotes the Gospel of Mark, in a sense Matthew is quoting himself.

ii) In addition, Mark might have sources of information Matthew didn't have. As one scholar notes:

Even more important, history gives us other examples of eyewitnesses who relied on other people's testimony when composing biographies of their own teachers. For example, when writing his account of the death of Socrates, the ancient Greek writer Xenophon (who was a disciple of Socrates) used the "reports" (Greek exengeile) of another disciple named Hermogenes (see Xenophon, Apology; 1.2,10). The reason was that Xenophon was not present at the trial and death of Socrates, whereas Hermogenes was. In the same way, it is entirely possible that the apostle Matthew could have relied on the Gospel of Mark's record of Peter's testimony, especially for any events at which Matthew himself was not present—such as the early days of Jesus's ministry (see

Matthew 3-8), or the events of Jesus's passion and death, which Matthew did not witness because he had fled the scene (see Matthew 26-28). It is not as if all the apostles were witnesses to everything that happened in the life of Jesus. Brant Pitre, The Case for Jesus (Image 2016), 29.

iii) To take another comparison, Matthew wasn't an eyewitness to the events in Mt 1-2, so he had to rely on other sources of information—presumably, members of Christ's family, like Mary, James, and Jude.

VI. LUKE

1. The Gospel was written by a Gentile convert to Christianity. Probably a Godfearer.

2. Sources:

i) The Gospel of Mark is apparently one source. However, since Mark and Luke were both members of the Pauline circle, Luke was probably in a position to get information from Mark in person (cf. Col 4:10,14; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4:11).

ii) Luke had contact with Mnason (Acts 21:16), an early disciple.

iii) Luke had contact with James (brother of Jesus) and other Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 21:17-18).

iv) Many scholars have noted intriguing parallels between Luke's Gospel and John's Gospel, which would make sense if Luke knew the Apostle John.

v) In addition:

Luke apparently had up to two years for any interviews with Judeans in Judea (Acts 21:15; 24:27; 27:1), C. Keener, Acts (Baker 2012), 1:180.

That would give Luke access to potentially hundreds (or thousands) of eyewitnesses, including relatives of Jesus.

vi) Furthermore:

The genealogy Luke provides (Lk 3:23-38) has the marks of an authentic traditional genealogy that was probably preserved by Jesus's family. Matthew supplies a different genealogy (Mt 1:1-16) which may represent something more like an official list of the heads of the clan of David, the heirs apparent to David's throne. R. Bauckham, "The Family of

Jesus," C. Keith & L. Hurtato, eds. Jesus Among Friends and Enemies (Baker 2011), 104. Cf. R. Bauckham, Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church (T&T Clark, chap. 7).

vii) One commentator has argued that Luke had access to a Hebrew Gospel: J. Edwards, **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE (EERDMANS 2015), 14-18; THE HEBREW GOSPEL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SYNOPTIC TRADITION (EERDMANS 2009).**

viii) Finally:

These sources point to a cooperative relationship between Luke, the Jacobean mission based on Jerusalem; with the Petrine mission, which was active in Caesarea and with which Mark was associated, and with the Johannine mission, which before AD 66, was also active in Judea. E. E. Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Brill 1999), 401-2.

So Luke had a wide range of informants with firsthand knowledge of Jesus to draw upon in writing his Gospel.

VII. JOHN

1. Assuming traditional authorship, the Gospel of John and 1 John are a witness to the historical Jesus by the inmost member of his apostolic circle.

2. It's often alleged that an Aramaic-speaking fisherman couldn't write the Gospel of John (or 1 John). But there are several problems with that objection:

i) John's Gospel is probably a transcription of oral history. John dictated his Gospel to a scribe. If the scribe was bilingual, John could speak in Aramaic while the scribe translated his statements into Greek.

ii) John's Gospel is written in very simple Greek—simpler than Matthew and much simpler than Luke.

iii) Galilee was a bilingual region. Take a Roman colony like Tiberias, located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. So John might well know street Greek to conduct business with gentiles living around the Sea of Galilee. Likewise, the hellenized, cosmopolitan community of Sepphoris is about 10 miles north of Nazareth.

iv) However, there's some evidence that John had a priestly bloodline. Take the intriguing passage in Jn 18:15-17. If John was a relative of the high priest, that would explain his entree to the palace of the high priest, as well as his discriminating knowledge of the personnel:

It seems to me that the evangelist himself already wanted to give the impression—he is in fact sometimes fond of ambivalent statements—that this is the beloved disciple, but omitted the epithet because in this context the predicates "on friendly terms with the high priest" and "whom Jesus loved" did not go well together".

Finally, mention should be made here of the mysterious "other disciple" who gains direct access to the palace of Annas, at that time the most influential man in Jerusalem, because he was well acquainted with him or a friend of his (18:15f.). He can therefore introduce Peter into the palace. We should have no doubt that the beloved disciple is meant here.

We could also go on to ask—as was often done earlier—whether the report of Polycrates of Ephesus in his letter to Victor of Rome about John "who was a priest and wore the high-priestly plate on his forehead" is connected with Jn 18:16, "he was known (or related) to the high priest", indeed whether Polycrates, who was born about 125 AD and bound to earlier Asian Christianity by many ties of family relationships, and of course knew very much more than he writes in the letter, wanted in this way to indicate that the disciple "who reclined on the Lord's breast was, like John the Baptist, of priestly descent.

Even if we doubt John of Ephesus's direct authorship of the Apocalypse in the time of Domitian, the report of his stay on Patmos is to be

*taken seriously in historical terms. It is surely no legendary fiction. How otherwise would one arrive at this very small unknown island in the Aegean about forty miles west of Miletus? Insignificant provincials were not banished to islands; even among Roman citizens that was reserved for members of the upper class. For serious crimes—and banishment was a possibility only in such cases—ordinary people were either executed or deported to the mines as state slaves. Two high priests, Ishmael and Helkias, were kept in Rome as hostages in 61/62, and Ishmael was subsequently banished to Cyrene, where he was later beheaded. For John to be banished to Patmos indicates that he had high social status. M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (SCM/Trinity Press 1996), 79,125-126.*

John alone mentions the name of the high priest's servant, Malchus (18:10)...and later one of the high priest's servants (whom John alone among the evangelist clearly distinguishes from the temple constables (18:18) is known to be a relative of the one whose ear Peter cut off (18:26).

So if Mary and her sister came from such stock (and it is difficult to see what motive there would have

been for inventing this connection in such a defamatory context) it could help to explain the family's high-priestly contacts (Jn 18:15f.) and even the curious statement by Polycrates...

*There is little doubt that John is historically accurate in depicting Annas thus as very much the power behind the throne and one who still enjoyed the courtesy title of "high priest"...Only John informs us that Caiaphas was Annas' son-in-law... J. Robinson, **The Priority of John (Meyer-Stone 1987), 64,122,246.***

If some of John's relatives were priests, reaching, on occasion, even into the high priesthood, he might well have some formal education in literate, polyglot Jerusalem.

F. F. Bruce argues that the statement about the high-priestly vestments is probably figurative, "St. John at Ephesus," (**BULLETIN OF THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY, 1977-78**), 344. A figurative interpretation certainly makes the claim far more plausible. At the same time, that's entirely consistent with a figurative allusion to John's priestly lineage.

v) So why was he a fisherman? To my knowledge, because there was a glut of priests, they worked on a rotating basis (cf. Lk 1:8-9). So what did you do for a living when it wasn't your shift? What about helping out with the family fishing

business? And once he became a Christian, that ousted him from the Jewish establishment.

3. Even if the Fourth Gospel wasn't written by the Apostle John, so long as the narrator was an eyewitness, it's still historically valuable. In addition, I incline to the view of scholars like Robinson and Morris that the epilogue was occasioned by the death of Peter rather than John. So I date the Fourth Gospel to the 60s.

VIII. UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCES

Drs. Timothy and Lydia McGrew have rehabilitated, expanded, and refined a neglected argument for the historicity of the Gospels. For an overview:

http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/01/classifications_of_undesigned.html

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/august-web-only/defending-accuracy-of-scripture-one-coincidence-at-time.html>

<https://seanmcdowell.org/blog/unique-evidence-for-the-new-testament-interview-with-lydia-mcgrew-about-unintended-coincidences-1>

<https://apologetics315.com/2018/03/book-review-hidden-in-plain-view-undesigned-coincidences-in-the-gospels-acts-by-lydia-mcgrew/>

<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/10/how-the-bibles-obscure-coincidences-demonstrate-its-reliability-an-interview-with-lydia-mcgrew/>

For a detailed popular exposition:

Lydia McGrew, **HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW (2017)**

For a technical philosophical defense:

<https://philpapers.org/rec/MCGUCA>

IX. UNNECESSARY DETAILS

Lydia McGrew, **THE MIRROR OR THE MASK (DEWARD 2019), 306-16.**

_____, **THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER (FORTHCOMING)**

X. ARCHEOLOGY

1. In **CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?** (Crossway 2018), Peter Williams marshals a battery of evidence to demonstrate that the canonical Gospels reflect intimate knowledge of the time and place of Jesus, based on place names, proper names, bodies of water, roads, gardens, botanical terms, finance, local languages, Jewishness, and usual customs (chap. 3).

Williams also draws attention to differences which reflect the different backgrounds of the Gospel writers, given traditional authorship. For instance:

Otherwise, it is simply "the sea". This is what we would expect if Mark's Gospel really were written by the fisherman Peter, for whom this would have been

the sea par excellence. Luke is rather different. It uses the word sea only three times and never in reference to a particular body of water. If, as is traditionally thought, Luke came from Antioch on the Orontes, not far from the Mediterranean, he certainly would not have thought of the tiny Sea of Galilee as the sea. He just calls it "the lake" (58).

2. Unbelievers like Bart Ehrman and Richard Carrier allege that the Gospels were penned by authors far removed in time and place from Palestine. Yet that raises the question of how to account for their local knowledge (as documented by Williams). Carrier treats the Gospels as historical fiction, where the writers sprinkled the narratives with tidbits of authentic knowledge to create the illusion of verisimilitude. But did 1C writers have access to an atlas, almanac, or encyclopedia of Palestine?

3. I'd also note in passing that it's useful to distinguish between native knowledge and acquired knowledge. For instance, when I see a picture with a number of cars in the picture, I can roughly date the picture because I know the difference between cars from the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, &c. For cars before I was born, that's based on the fact that, like many boys, I read books with pictures of classic cars. By contrast, cars from the 50s and 60s were part of my childhood, so I automatically recognize cars from that period.

Likewise, suppose you're visiting from out of town, or supposed you just moved to a new town, and you need to get directions. Would it be better to ask a native or ask someone who moved there, say, 5 years ago? On the other hand, a native knows where everything is and how to get there. But there's a catch. Although a native knows where your destination is and how to get there, that doesn't mean he can explain it to a visitor. Because he grew up there, he knows all the routes without necessarily knowing the names of streets and distances. Although he knows how to get there, he may not be able to tell you how to get there because his knowledge is based on experience rather than description. He drives places without having to think about the route. Although he has a mental map, it's not like a street map with all the street names and mileage. Rather, it's based on landmarks. Or what are landmarks to the natives.

4. Here's a useful perspective on the NT text:

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2015/05/new-article-evans-on-books-autographs.html>

XI. PAUL

1. Apologists typically cite 1 Cor 15:3-8 as primitive "tradition" (oral history) about the Resurrection. Paul got that from Christians in the know. And that is, indeed, a significant data point.

2. Prior to his conversion, Paul interrogated many 1C Christians, so he heard many repeated anecdotes about the life and teaching of Jesus from eyewitnesses.

3. In addition, it's quite likely that Paul and Jesus were sometimes in Jerusalem at the same time. Their lives overlap in time and place. Paul was a younger contemporary of Jesus who lived in Jerusalem at the same time Jesus blew into town as part of his public ministry. So Paul had many occasions to see and hear Jesus. Jesus was a major attraction. So it's dubious to assume that Paul's knowledge of Jesus was confined to the Damascus road vision or testimonial evidence. There's every reason to suppose he had firsthand knowledge of Jesus prior to the Resurrection. Cf. Stanley Porter, **WHEN PAUL MET JESUS: HOW AN IDEA GOT LOST IN HISTORY (CAMBRIDGE 2015)**

XII. HEBREWS

By his own account, the author of Hebrews was a second-generation Christian who knew people who knew Jesus (Heb 2:3). In addition, he was a member of the Pauline circle (Heb 13:23). Ramsey Michaels identifies Timothy as the probable author:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/05/authorship-of-hebrews.html>

XIII. JAMES

1. According to traditional authorship, James was written by a brother of Jesus. As such, he'd know Jesus as well as anyone, and better than most.

I don't think there's a serious reason to doubt the attribution. Although it would be prestigious in the early to have dominical pedigree, James doesn't capitalize on that association in a way a forger would.

After mentioning the proximity of Nazareth to "the urban Hellenism of nearby Sepphoris," Bauckham goes on to say:

James lived for some thirty years in the cosmopolitan city of Jerusalem, where some 10-20% of the population were Jews whose vernacular or mother tongue was Greek. These were Jews from the Diaspora who settled permanently in Jerusalem. The so-called "Hellenists" in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1) were Christian converts from among these Greek-speaking Jews...Finally, in the composition of his letter he could easily have had the assistance of a more Hellenized Jew than himself, a native Greek speaker with a good Greek education, since there were certainly such people in the Jerusalem church. [Cf. Josephus (Contra Apionem 1.50)]. R. Bauckham, James (Routledge 1999), 24.

2. Although the letter doesn't contain much Christology, there's what it takes for granted. Would James even be in this position if his brother was dead? Died in ignominy?

3. In addition, there's the striking designation in Jas 2:1. Warfield takes this to mean James equates Jesus as Yahweh and the Shekinah. B. B. Warfield, **THE LORD OF GLORY (GUARDIAN PRESS REPRINT), 265**. Bauckham thinks the background derives from Christological exegesis of Ps 24:7-10. R. Bauckham, **JAMES (ROUTLEDGE 1999), 139; THE FATE OF THE DEAD (SBL 1998), 243-44**. That, too, equates Jesus with Yahweh. Cf. J. Goldingay, **PSALMS 1-41 (BAKER 2006), 361-64**; A. Ross, **A COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS: 1-41 (KREGEL 2011), 583-88**.

XIV. 1-2 PETER

1. If the apostolic pedigree of one or both letters is authentic, they constitute a witness to the historical Jesus by a member of his inner circle. The traditional authorship of 1 Peter is sometimes challenged on the grounds that the Greek is too refined. For a linguistic defense of apostolic authorship:

https://www.ibr-bbr.org/files/bbr/BBR_2003b_01_Jobes_Syntax1Peter.pdf

2. The traditional authorship of 2 Peter is the most widely disputed of any NT book. That's in part because the style is so different from 1 Peter, and in part because the style is said to be incongruous for a fisherman. From my reading, the best defense of Petrine authorship is by Ellis, who argues that 2 Pet incorporates preexisting source material. By his reckoning, 55% of 2 Peter is composed for "preformed traditions". Cf. E. E. Ellis, **THE MAKING OF THE**

NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS (BRILL 1999), 120-33. On that analysis, the style of 2 Peter reflects the style of whatever sources he edited into his letter. So we wouldn't expect a consistent style.

3. Moreover, is there such a thing as a Petrine style? He wasn't a rhetorician. He wasn't a professional essayist who carefully honed an unmistakable prose style.

4. Incidentally, we could say the same thing about Revelation. Although the style is different from John's Gospel and 1 John, Revelation quotes and paraphrases so many OT passages that the style mirrors the underlying source material.

XV. JUDE

1. If written by a brother of Jesus, this is an important witness to the historical Jesus. I see no reason why a forger would write under the name of Jude. Although Jude, as a brother of Jesus, might have some prestige in the early church, he was in the shadow of his older brother James. If a forger is going to ride on the coattails of the dominical family, why not *The Gospel According to Mary* or *The Acts of Mary*? Why settle for Jude?

2. There's some debate about whether the Greek is too good for a Jewish peasant. That invites the same explanations as Peter, James, and John (see above).

3. On the one hand, Jude reflects a 1C Palestinian Judeo-Christian provenance. Cf. R. Bauckham, **JUDE AND THE**

RELATIVES OF JESUS (T&T CLARK 1990), CHAP. 4. In addition, as another scholar notes:

While writing in Greek, Jude nevertheless used the Hebrew version of the Scriptures rather than one of the Greek translations. Furthermore, the quotation from 1 Enoch 9 shows the imprint of an Aramaic, not Greek source. K. Jobes, Letters to the Churches (Zondervan 2011), 241.

On the hand, if the recipients are Messianic Palestinian Jews, why was it written in Greek rather than Aramaic? Likewise, the opponents seem to have typical pagan vices rather than Jewish vices.

One explanation is that Jude is writing with a view to gentile mission in Roman Palestine. His writing naturally reflects the framework of his Palestinian Jewish background. But that's directed at gentiles in Palestine and thereabouts. However, that stream of Christianity dried up after the fall of Jerusalem. Cf. R. Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN ITS PALESTINIAN SETTING**, R. Bauckham, ed. (Eerdmans 1995), 426-7.

4. In v5, identifies the Yahweh of the Exodus and wilderness wandering as a Christophany:

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.

On both internal and external grounds, "Jesus" (rather than "Lord") is most likely the original reading. On the one hand, it is "the best attested reading among Greek and versional witnesses". On the other hand, it's represents the harder reading (*lectio difficilior*). Cf. B. Metzger, **A TEXTUAL COMMENTARY ON THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT (UBS, 2ND ED., 1994), 657-8.**

Some commentators balk at that identification. If, however, Jesus *is* God Incarnate, and if he said and did things to manifest his true identity to observers like his brother Jude, then it's not surprising that Jude says that.

XVI. REVELATION

See VII & XIII (above).

XVII. ARGUMENT FROM PROPHECY

The argument from prophecy is hard to summarize. There are roughly two kinds of argument from prophecy. One is focussed on a particular oracle. The other on tracing out an unfolding messianic motif across the OT. For an overview:

M. Rydelnik & E. Blum eds. **THE MOODY HANDBOOK OF MESSIANIC PROPHECY (MOODY 2019)**

XVIII. ARGUMENT FROM MIRACLES/RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Many Christian apologists overemphasize the documentary evidence for Christianity. But the evidence for Christianity isn't confined to ancient documentary evidence. Christianity is a living religion of a living Savior God.

Craig Keener, **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS, 2 VOLS. (BAKER, 2011)**

Craig Keener, "The Historicity of Nature Miracles", Graham H. Twelftree, ed. **THE NATURE MIRACLES OF JESUS (WIPF AND STOCK 2017), CHAP. 2**

Rex Gardner, **HEALING MIRACLES: A DOCTOR INVESTIGATES (DARTON, LONGMAN & TODD LTD, 1986)**

<http://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Derren-Brown-wants-to-see-objective-evidence-for-miracles-Challenge-accepted>

Robert Larmer, **THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE (LEXINGTON BOOKS, 2013), APPENDIX.**

Robert Larmer, **DIALOGUES ON MIRACLE (WIPF & STOCK, 2015), APPENDIX.**

<https://epistleofdude.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/visions-of-jesus/>

Tom Doyle, **DREAMS AND VISIONS: IS JESUS AWAKENING THE MUSLIM WORLD?** (THOMAS NELSON 2012)

David Garrison, **A WIND IN THE HOUSE OF ISLAM: HOW GOD IS DRAWING MUSLIMS AROUND THE WORLD TO FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST** (WIGTAKE RESOURCES LLC 2014)

Verisimilitude

I'd like to expand on something I said about the recent debate between Bart Ehrman and Peter Williams:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

- 1.** For many years, Ehrman's stock argument against the reliability of the Gospels has been his contention that they were authored by anonymous writers decades after the events who never lived in Palestine. But in the debate he suddenly shifted grounds. He said that even if they had accurate background knowledge of 1C Palestine, that creates no presumption that the accounts of Jesus are accurate.
- 2.** To begin with, I don't know what Ehrman is claiming. Is he claiming that the Gospels are intentionally historical, but the writers are simply clueless about the historical Jesus, despite their intentions to write an accurate biography? If so, why would their sources be accurate about little background details but wrong about the main events? Why would their sources preserve accurate background information but be unreliable about the main events?
- 3.** Apropos (3), it's unclear on Ehrman's reckoning how we could ever credit any ancient historical account. If incidental accuracy in details doesn't count as evidence for the general accuracy of the stories, then how, if at all, does Ehrman distinguish between legend and history? Doesn't his skepticism apply with equal force to Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Tacitus, and Josephus (to name a few)? Isn't the kind of corroborative evidence Williams marshals in **CAN WE**

TRUST THE GOSPELS the same kind of evidence historians use to verify ancient accounts generally?

4. For that matter, if he's that skeptical about ancient records, then he can't say the chronology in Lk 2 is mistaken, since he'd have to have confidence in other historical sources to use them as a standard of comparison.

5. Or is he claiming that the Gospels are intentionally fictional, but the Gospel writers sprinkled their stories with accurate background information to lend the stories verisimilitude? If that's what he's angling at, then one problem with his objection is that what he says about the authors is applicable to the audience. Verisimilitude is only effective if the reader is in a position to recognize the accuracy of the details. If, however, the Gospels were written decades after the fact by authors who never lived in Palestine, or knew people who did, then wouldn't the target audience for the Gospels be in the same boat? The audience would be just as uninformed as the authors. So how would they be in a position to appreciate verisimilitude? Wouldn't accurate background information be lost on them?

6. As I mentioned before, it would be dangerous to be a Christian back then. Why would the Gospel authors risk writing fiction that was so hazardous to their life and livelihood? If, on the other hand, they were writing historical biographies, then it would be worth the risk, given who Jesus is.

7. Ehrman kept defaulting to memory studies. But in his recent book, **CHRISTO BIOGRAPHY**, Craig Keener devotes a whole chapter to that issue (chap. 14). Likewise, Richard Bauckham's article: "The Psychology of Memory and the

Study of the Gospels. "JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE
HISTORICAL JESUS 16 (2018) 1-21.

Right setting, wrong story

I'd like to revisit one issue in the recent Ehrman/Williams debate:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

Ehrman dismissed the copious evidence provided by Williams on the grounds that even if the background information in the Gospels is accurate, that has no bearing on whether the accounts of Jesus are accurate. For instance, a columnist can get the background details right on a story but get the story wrong.

But there are some basic problems with that objection:

i) For many years, Ehrman's schtick has been to claim that the Gospels are unreliable because they were written by anonymous authors decades after the fact who never lived in Palestine, weren't eyewitnesses to the life of Christ, and knew no eyewitnesses to the life of Christ.

Now, however, Ehrman does an about-face. Williams marshals multiple lines of evidence to demonstrate that the Gospel authors either lived in Palestine or interviewed people who did.

So where does that leave Ehrman's original argument that the Gospel authors were out of touch with the facts on the ground? That they were too far-removed from the time and place to be in a position to accurately report what happened? Having lost the first football game, he moves the goalpost under cover of darkness to help his team for the rematch.

ii) Sure, it's possible for an eyewitness to willfully misrepresent what happened. But that's a drastic shift from the argument Ehrman has been hawking for years.

And there are problems with the new argument. If the Gospel authors were in a position to know what happened, why would they misrepresent events when they had so much on the line? It was very risky to be a Christian back then.

iii) In addition, Jesus has a polarizing effect on people. If, say, you witnessed him perform exorcisms or nature miracles, you're forced to draw some conclusions. You're forced to take sides. On the one hand, his enemies admitted that he did those things. They heard what he said and saw what he did, right before their eyes. So they couldn't remain neutral. They attributed his supernatural abilities to witchcraft.

But what would motivate the Gospel authors to misrepresent Jesus favorably if they knew what he did, even from their own firsthand observation or the eyewitness testimony of their informants?

iv) 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.

History is written by the winners

“The victors invariably write the history to their own advantage.”

–Jean-Luc Picard

Variations on this slogan are fashionable among leftwing college profs. It has also been applied to the Bible by conspiracy theorists like Dan Brown and Bart Ehrman.

What are we to make of this slogan?

Well, for one thing, the Bible is a poor candidate to apply this slogan to. In OT times, the winners were the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Egyptians, not the Israelites. In what sense are Jewish slaves and exiles the winners rather than the losers?

Likewise, the winners in NT times were the Romans, not the Christians.

So, if we did apply this slogan to the Bible, then conspiracy theorists like Ehrman and Brown ought to regard the Bible as a reliable source of history—since it was written by the losers, not the winners.

But let's also consider the slogan on its own terms. Is it true? Why don't we test this slogan against a contemporary example which we're all familiar with: how have the winners covered the war on terror?

To begin with, who are the winners and losers in the war on terror? Well, the winners would be the Americans, Brits, and

Aussies. And the losers would be the jihadis and counterinsurgents. The underdogs.

So how have the winners covered the war effort? Have the New York Times, BBC, and CNN covered the war effort in a way that portrayed the military and intelligence agencies of the US and the UK in the best possible light?

Or consider the spate of movies and TV shows which came out in the aftermath of 9/11—movies and TV shows which either directly or allegorically depicted the war effort, viz. Rendition, Redacted, Syriana, Jarhead, Traveler, Battlestar Galactica, Stop-Loss, The Kingdom, Fahrenheit 9/11, Lions for Lambs, Home of the Brave, In the Valley of Elah, &c.

The directors, producers, and screenwriters represent the winners, not the losers—right? Jihadis and counterinsurgents didn't make these movies and TV shows, did they?

Are these Hollywood productions distinguished by their chauvinistic, jingoistic support for the foreign policies of the US and the UK?

Legendary embellishment

Let's compare two different accounts of the same event:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." 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. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 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."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

What would be the standard liberal explanation for the differences between these two accounts? It would go something like this:

The first account represents a primitive Jesus tradition. The second account was written by a later author. He may have used the earlier account, but he heavily redacted the earlier account. He embellished the primitive Jesus tradition with a welter of fictitious details. Indeed, as we compare these two

accounts, we can see the myth of the Ascension evolving before our very eyes! Pious imagination run amok!

But there's just one little problem with that explanation. Both accounts were written by the same author. These are taken from Lk 24:50-53 and Acts 1:6-16, respectively.

Not only do they share common authorship, but they're really two parts or two installments of a unified work. Luke already had the Book of Acts in mind when he was writing the Gospel of Luke. But there was only so much you could put on one scroll.

In the account for the Ascension recorded in Lk 24:50-53, Luke said less than he knew. He had more information at his fingertips. More he intended to write about.

He included a very brief account of the Ascension, partly to give his gospel a logical conclusion, and partly to foreshadow his history of the early church. The tail-end of the Gospel of Luke is a way of introducing the Book of Acts.

So even though Acts 1:6-16 contains a fuller account of the Ascension, it in no way represents a legendary expansion.

And that, in turn, should forewarn us that just because a writer is selective in what he reports, leaving out various details, this isn't because he's reporting all he knew.

Hence, the fact that one account may be more detailed than another, or contain different details, isn't evidence of literary embellishment or discrepant reportage.

It just so happens that, in this case, we have two accounts by the same author, so we can compare them. In the case of Matthew, Mark, and John, we don't have that frame of

reference. So it's easy for liberals to postulate legendary embellishment. But, as I just documented, that inference is clearly fallacious.

Instant obituaries

Joan Sutherland died on Sunday. I read a couple of fairly detailed, overnight obituaries. And this is typical. When a celebrity dies, we are treated to instant obituaries which detail the childhood, career, and retirement years of the celebrity (unless they died young). Cradle to grave, along with the intervening high points and low points.

How do we account for such rapid turnaround time between the death of a celebrity and the publication of a detailed obituary?

Well, I don't write for a newspaper, so I can't say for sure, but I think the explanation is fairly obvious: these obituaries were written years before the celebrity died. They may have been updated from time to time, but they've been sitting on ice until the celebrity dies. At that point the only thing to add are the immediate circumstances surrounding the death of the celebrity.

And I say that to say this: liberals and outright unbelievers usually dismiss the reliability of the gospels on the grounds that these were allegedly written decades after the fact. Now, even if that were true, that wouldn't make them unreliable. Lots of us remember many things perfectly well that happened when we were young.

But I want to make a different point: when a biography was published doesn't really tell you much about when it was written.

Back to my illustration. A music critic may be assigned to write an obituary for a diva. He's given that task because he's been writing about her for years. He's written reviews

of her performances. Written about her childhood. Her rise to fame. Maybe he's interviewed her. He's also kept tabs on her retirement.

In writing her obituary, he doesn't start from scratch. Rather, he draws on many preexisting sources of information, including his own research.

And I expect he writes an obituary years before the diva dies. He keeps his draft obituary on file so that he can send it in as soon as she dies, at his editor's request. He may update it now and then. And when she dies, he will update one more time, by adding a little something about the circumstances of her death. That new material will be tacked on to older, preexisting material. Just a little ad-on to bring it up to the present. He doesn't revise the whole thing.

So even though the final edition of the obituary was written years after many of the events it relays, much of it was written long before she died. Or else it incorporates sources which were written long before she died.

And that's something to consider when we consider gospel criticism.

Historical writing

[I originally wrote this back in 2009. Rereading this in 2019, my recollections haven't changed in the succeeding 10 years.]

In this post I'm going to comment broadly on how liberals and other unbelievers freely impute historical errors to Scripture.

It's difficult to write accurately about the past. And one major reason is the phenomenon of historical change. Changes come in different shapes and sizes. Big and small. Abrupt and incremental. Big abrupt changes. Big incremental changes. Small incremental changes. And so on.

I'll begin with a personal example.

MODERN CHANGE

i) I was born in Seattle, but grew up on the Eastside. I was born in 1959, but moved out of state in 1999.

I've been back there are two occasions since I moved away. And, out of curiosity, I keep up with certain developments via the Internet.

When I was a kid, the Eastside was a bedroom community of Seattle. But it underwent a great deal of change in the 40 years I lived there.

When I was a kid, the Eastside consisted of small towns with a lot of "open space" in-between. Farms and

woodlands. Over time, the Eastside underwent a lot of gentrification, urbanization, and suburban sprawl. Towns like Redmond and Woodinville are practically unrecognizable.

When I was a kid, downtown Bellevue consisted mainly of one- and two-story buildings. Two lane roads. Few high-rises. No covered malls.

I spent my growing up years in Kirkland and Juanita.

When I was very young, we used to shop at Roy's, which was a little mom-and-pop store. After the PX moved in, we stopped shopping at Roy's because the PX was cheaper and offered a wider selection.

At some point, Roy's went out of business. Eventually the whole building was demolished and replaced with a gym.

At the corner of the same block there was, at one time, an Arctic Circle fast food joint. It went out of business. Was converted to a private post office.

Across the street was an autoshop that went out of business. It was torn down. A fast food restaurant took its place. Taco Bell? I don't remember. That went out of business. A Greek restaurant took over.

Behind it was another grocery store—which went out of business. It was taken over by an artsy-craftsy shop.

Downtown Juanita used to have three taverns. Two went out of business.

The PX changed hands many times. Eventually, that shopping center was demolished and replaced with a faux

European village.

Juanita used to have a golf course that went out of business. Kirkland purchased the property and turned it into a public park.

Juanita had its own park–Juanita Beach. At one time, Juanita Beach Park had a number of beach cabins–which were torn down.

There was a bridge connecting Kirkland to Juanita. The bridge was closed, and turned into a pedestrian thoroughfare. A new road was put in, rerouting traffic around the old bridge.

At the time I lived in Juanita, some of our neighbors died or moved away. Next door, when I was very young, the Rogers had a front lawn with grassy rolling terraces. When they moved out and the Gardeners moved in, the new owners put in rockeries and flowerbeds.

The house where I grew up was torn down. Across the pond, Sand Point Naval base closed. Became a public park.

In Kirkland, my parents ran a private school for the fine and performing arts. They bought the building from the Knights of Pythias. At one time the building was used as a livery stable.

Down the street was Central Elementary, where I attended kindergarten. It was later torn down to make way for the new city hall.

Across the street was Kirkland Junior High, where my father taught. Kirkland Junior High consisted of Terrace Hall, Waverly Hall, and some administration offices.

When Terrace Hall burned down, the school relocated to another school building. That, too, was recently torn down and replaced with a new school facility.

At a later date, Waverly Hall caught fire. Terrance Hall and Waverly Hall were bulldozed. The property was turned into a public park.

The elementary school (Thoreau) where I attended 1-3 grade was built in my lifetime and demolished in my lifetime. Another school facility took its place.

The elementary school (Juanita) where I attended 4th grade was demolished. Another school facility took its place.

My old junior high school (Finn Hill) is still there, although it's undergone some changes since I was a student. They turned the old library into a classroom, and built an extension to house the new library. They moved the portables. They removed some of the trees lining the baseball diamond.

My old high school (Juanita) is still there, but it underwent drastic remodeling after I left.

According to their websites, I notice that both Finn Hill Junior and Juanita High now have security guards on staff—which wasn't the case when I was a student.

There are other random changes that I recall. When I was a kid, there was a Time gas station in Kirkland. That's long gone. A convenience store became a Chinese restaurant.

When I was a kid, the residential part of Kirkland consisted of small, postwar, working-class bungalows or modest

apartments.

When I was a kid, Kirkland had a naval shipyard. That was eventually converted into an upscale joint with a marina, hotel, restaurants and trendy shops and boutiques.

ii) In addition to my own memories, there are historical photos of Kirkland. Some of these are available online. It can be interesting to compare my recollections with the historic photos.

There are some old photographs of Kirkland Junior High. There are also some old photographs taken from Kirkland Junior High.

I'd forgotten how big Terrace Hall was, and how, up on the rise, it dominated the landscape of downtown Kirkland. I'd forgotten what the waterfront looked like before they put in Marina Park. I'd forgotten those big ugly telephone poles.

I'd forgotten about the A&W, which was across the street from Kirkland Junior High.

From cars, haircuts, clothing styles, and eyeglasses, you can roughly date some of the photographs.

I can also tell where some of these shots were taken. There's a shot of residential Kirkland, which was taken from the slope of Terrace Hall. There's another shot taken from the tennis courts below Terrace Hall.

Some of the chronological cues can be misleading. In one shot, there's a car from the 1930s. However, in the same picture, there's a female pedestrian dressed in the fashion of the 1950s. So while the car gives you the terminus ad quo, it doesn't give you the terminus ad quem.

iii) For someone who didn't grow up on the Eastside, this must all seem pretty boring. Why do I mention all this ephemeral minutiae?

I do it to make a point. For the past is full of ephemeral minutiae. And to write accurately about the past requires a very exacting command of ephemeral minutiae.

Take the historic photographs. Some of these have captions or labels. But suppose all you had was the unadorned photograph.

Would you know where it was taken? Would you know when it was taken? It requires very specific knowledge to identify the location. A very specific knowledge of the time and place.

I can place the A&W in relation to other buildings. The Creative Arts League is right behind it. To the side is a church I used to see all the time coming and going.

I know that two of the shots were taken at Terrace Hall because I myself have seen the area from that location, as a kid.

Yet much of this is long gone. On the one hand, some of the photographs help to jog my memory. On the other hand, my memory enables me to identify these photographs. To place them in their historical setting.

To write an accurate history requires a very specific knowledge of the time and place. And oftentimes, there's not much margin for error. Things change. It's very hard to get it right, and very easy to get it wrong. A few years earlier, a few years later, and your description is out of date.

It's very challenging to write about a time and place distant from your own. So many different ways to slip up. So many little ways to slip up.

I can write a fairly accurate account of my own life because I lived it. I simply describe what I saw. Much the same thing if I rely on the eyewitness testimony of others.

But if I'm a complete outsider in time and place, and have no good insider contacts, it's almost impossible to pull that off.

iv) In addition, it's quite possible for an eyewitness account to contain some anachronisms. Due to change, it's easy to misremember later developments as though they were identical with earlier events. It's easy to unconsciously retroject the way things are into the way things were. I see things as they are today. Or the last time I saw them. My latest memory may unconsciously map back onto how I picture the way things used to be. I recall what is earlier through the lens of successive memories.

I'm not claiming that Scripture contains anachronisms. I subscribe to the plenary inspiration of Scripture. I am, however, commenting on a fallacious inference by many Bible critics.

Even if, for the sake of argument, the Gospels contained some anachronisms, that wouldn't mean the Gospels had to be written by authors who didn't live at that time and place.

For example, famous people often write autobiographies. And because they're famous, historians write biographies of famous people. Historians make use of autobiographies. The autobiographies contain information that isn't available in

any other source. At the same time, historians, in commenting on autobiographies, keep a running tally of a little mistakes. Where the autobiographer got the a name, place, or date wrong.

v) There's a flipside to what I've been saying. If it takes very specific knowledge of the past to write accurately about the past, then, by the same token, it takes equally specific knowledge of the past to detect historical inaccuracies in a historical account.

Now, I have many reasons for believing the Bible. And I have many reasons for rejecting facile attacks on the historicity of Scripture.

But one of my reasons is that, when I run across breezy attributions of historical error to Scripture by modern "scholars," I think of my own experience.

It would be very difficult to fake a history of what it was like to grow up on the Eastside in the 1960s or 1970s. So many time-sensitive changes to keep track of.

And, by the same token, it would be very difficult for a total stranger to detect these mistakes. Unless you were there, there's quite a lot that you're in no position to know.

And these are scholars writing 2000-3500 years after the fact, no less! Last year someone phoned me from the reunion committee (for my 30th high school reunion). We fell into a conversation about old times. There was the instant recognition that comes between two people who've been to the same place at the same time. A flurry of in-house allusions.

vi) This brings me to a related point. Given how easy it is to make a misstep when writing about the past, if a writer seems to get most things right, that tells you something. How could he get so many things right unless he was in a position to know just what he was talking about?

Unless he was alive at that time and place. Or unless he interviewed other men and women who were alive at that time and place.

Getting a lot of things right creates a presumption about the writer. He couldn't do that if he were out of touch. Either he's describing something he's seen, or he's describing it through the recollection of other eyewitnesses.

vii) Corroboration can be either specific or generic. Corroborative evidence can sometimes corroborate a specific detail (e.g. person, place, event), or it can corroborate the fact that things like that happened.

viii) Our surviving evidence for Bible times is quite random. It's quite surprising that we have as much corroborative evidence as we do, given the random state of the extant evidence.

ANCIENT CHANGE

Someone might object that my comparison with my own life is disanalogous. Rapid change is characteristic of modernity. By contrast, life in ancient times was far more stable.

To that objection I'd say two things:

i) There is a discontinuity in terms of the amount of information we have. But that discontinuity reinforces my

point rather than undercutting my point.

For example, an outsider could reconstruct life in Kirkland in the 1960s by combing through back-issues of the **EASTSIDE JOURNAL**, day-by-day and year-by-year.

But an ancient author wouldn't have a resource like that.

ii) Life in the ancient world was subject to many dislocations. In some respects more so than in modern times. Due to trade, migration, warfare, famine, slavery, natural disaster, pandemics, political upheavals, and cultural diffusion, &c., life in the ancient world was quite unstable.

For example, ancient cities didn't have fire codes, fire hydrants, fire engines, fire extinguishers, sprinklers, &c., to prevent or contain fires.

There were no vaccines to prevent pandemics. No weather forecasters. No airdrops of emergency food rations.

Armies used scorched earth tactics. Cities were razed. No smart bombs.

Remembering and misremembering

I've been reading Dale Allison's **CONSTRUCTING JESUS** (Baker 2010). He makes some statements about memory that strike me as plainly false. Gross overstatements. For instance:

"Remembering is not like reading a book but rather like writing a book. If there are blanks, we fill them in. If the plot is thin, we fill it out. As we constantly revise our memoirs..." (2).

That's catchy, but is it true? For instance, there are people I remember, whose names escape me. I remember the person, but not the name. I don't subconsciously assign a name to them.

Likewise, I frequently remember the day something happened even though I don't remember the year. My memory doesn't subconsciously assign a calendar date to the event.

Put another way, I can remember *where* something happened even if I don't remember *when* it happened. I remember where I was. Sometimes I could give you the time of day (morning, afternoon, evening). But I couldn't give you the month or the year.

I have lots of partial memories. Memories with gaps. And I'm aware of the gaps. My memory doesn't fill in the blanks. That's despite the fact that I'd like to fill in the blanks.

"Although time's passage may add perspective, memories are not evergreen; they become less and less distinct as the

past recedes" (5).

"As our recollections become increasingly tattered and faded..." (11).

i) But is that true? One of the things that young people find tiresome about old folks is that old folks like to repeat the same childhood vignettes. We say to ourselves, "Oh dear! Not *that* again! How many times have I heard that story before!"

These memories have a stereotypical quality to them. That's what makes it monotonous to hear them—time and again. Always the same story. The same dialogue. The same details.

ii) In addition, it's sometimes possible to check our memories. For instance, I recently ran across some "historic" photos of my hometown, taken around the time I was a kid.

Much of it was the way I remembered it. I'd forgotten a few things. But I misremembered very little.

Likewise, I recently got a copy of my junior high yearbook (1974-75) from a time I attended. It was all very familiar.

There were some students I remembered from high school, but I forgot that we also attended the same junior high. However, even that's a case of forgetting rather than misremembering. I didn't misremember a student from junior high.

"Groups do not rehearse competing memories that fail to shore up what they hold dear. Approved remembrance lives on; unapproved remembrance expires" (7).

i) That's largely true. However, that stands in contrast to the Bible. The Bible is notorious for recording embarrassing details that reflect badly on the community of faith.

ii) Finally, the Bible is quite aware of the fact that memory is a fragile thing. That's one reason we have a Bible. One reason prophets are commanded to record their revelations for posterity.

That's one reason the Holy Spirit inspired the disciples—to refresh their faded memory of what was said and done

The witness of Luke

Liberals typically deny that any of the four gospels preserve eyewitness testimony. They deny the apostolic authorship of Matthew and John. They date all four gospels as late as they can to put them as far as possible out of reach of living memory. And they also postulate a lengthy phase of fairly creative oral transmission before redactors even committed this tradition to writing.

They basically view the gospels as allegories for the circumstances of the church at the time the gospels were “really” written. According to them, redactors concoct speeches and incidents to furnish a backstory for church doctrine and practice.

Conversely, conservatives traditionally regard two of the four gospels as having been written by apostles. As such, they transcribe direct eyewitness testimony. Conservatives also think Mark contains eyewitness testimony, because Mark is channeling the witness of Peter. And they think Luke contains eyewitness testimony drawn from his oral and written sources.

Without denying that Mark is passing along eyewitness testimony which he heard from his circle of informants, I’ve also argued that since he was a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), Mark was probably an eyewitness in his own right whenever Jesus came to town.

It’s usually assumed that although Luke was an eyewitness to some events recorded in Acts, he was not an eyewitness to any events recorded in his gospel. However, the wording of his prologue doesn’t actually say that, and may even point in the opposite direction.

One ambiguity is the way he includes himself in the statement about “the things accomplished among us” (Lk 1:1). Since that statement introduces the gospel, you’d expect that statement to cover at least some events recorded in the Gospel account.

Some commentators think it anticipates the “we-sections” in Acts. But while the statement may well take a long-range view, it would be odd for Luke to introduce his Gospel with this self-inclusive reference, only to drop it for the entire gospel narrative, and then expect his audience to pick up on claim when they finally got around to Acts.

And that’s not the only potentially self-referential statement of its kind in the prologue. As one commentator notes,

“Eyewitnesses” (autoptes). The word, which is absent from the LXX, is comparatively rare in Greek writers, and tends to occur in a limited number of specialist contexts. The principal meaning of autopsia is...“seeing something for oneself.” It was thus used by geographers of the knowledge of foreign lands acquired by personally visiting them, or from those who had done so...In its rare occurrence in the papyri an autoptes is someone commissioned to investigate or inspect—an observer or overseer. In scientific, especially medical works it belongs closely with the author’s claim to experience, and with the necessity of basing the

science on the observation of empirical data rather than dogma...The idea was given a special slant by Thucydides (though not the word, which he never uses), when in his account of his sources and method in his preface (I, 22), he refers to his presence at some of the events he records, and to his ability to examine witnesses, which meant that his history had to be for the most part of contemporary events. This established a convention, and is repeated with or without the word *autoptes*, sometimes in prefaces and sometimes with the narrative itself, of a succession of historians...In which tradition Luke stands here is difficult to say, since *autoptai* has no object. If this is to be supplied for "the things which have been accomplished among us" from the previous verse, then the claim could be for eyewitnesses as the basis of the accounts both of the Gospel and of Acts, C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (Trinity Press 1990), 126-27.

"For some time past" (*anóthen*), characterizing Luke's activity of following, not that which he had followed. The word occurs again in Luke-Acts only at Acts 26:5, also in proximity to *ap'arches*="from

*the beginning.” The two could be synonymous...In that case Luke would be stressing that his personal activity and familiarity with the events went as far back, and was as original, as that of the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. But they could be distinguished, as, in the view of some, in Acts 26:4f...Luke’s claim would then be to accurate personal knowledge of the Christian movement from a long time back, *ibid.* 131. Richard Bauckham (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 116-24) and Craig Keener (*The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 91f.) also have some useful analysis of the prologue's terminology.*

So Luke may well be telling the reader that he was a sometime witness to events in the Gospel as well as his history of the church. In that case, his Gospel has a foundation in his firsthand observations, supplemented by written sources (e.g. Mark) as well as interviews he conducted with other eyewitnesses.

Of course, we don’t know the circumstances under which he might have had occasion to observe certain incidents in the Gospel, although it’s easy to speculate. Perhaps he made his living in Jerusalem as a physician who treated military detachments stationed there or thereabouts. That might also explain his friendship with Theophilus, assuming that Theophilus was a centurion or some other Roman official

(e.g. procurator) connected with the occupation of Palestine.

Although he wasn't commissioned in the sense that Jesus commissioned the apostles, and though he didn't have the daily contact with Jesus which the Twelve had, that doesn't mean he was in no position to see what he reports.

There were many eyewitnesses to what Jesus said and did besides the Twelve. Observers who were present at some event or another—depending on where they happened to live, or how much leisure time they had to follow Jesus around.

My point is not to prove anything—much less demarcate his sources. My point, rather, is that it's inaccurate to claim Luke could not have been on the scene at some the events he relays in the Gospel bearing his name. The prologue doesn't rule that out. If anything, he includes himself in the narrative—as a sometime spectator or participant.

Before I forget

Liberals typically date the canonical Gospels to sometime after 70 AD. They also contend that since the Gospels were written decades after the event, they are unreliable.

There are several objections to this position. Their late dating schemes are quite vulnerable to criticism. In addition, they simply deny the inspiration of the Gospels, but if the Gospels were divinely inspired, then, of course, they don't rely on the fallible recollections of the authors or their informants.

However, let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the Gospels were written sometime after 70 AD. And let's bracket inspiration.

By standard reckoning, Jesus' public ministry took place around 30-33 AD. So if a canonical gospel was written around 70+ AD, that's about 40 years or so after his public ministry.

One of the advantages of being middle aged (I'm now 60) is that I can evaluate these liberal claims from personal experience. Let's take one example.

When I was in grade school, my parents had a school for the fine and performing arts. It moved to different locations, but for now I'm going to reminisce about one location in particular. We were at that location from about the time I was in kindergarten until fifth grade, give or take. Based on other things I know or recollect, I can narrow it down to that general timeframe. The exact timeframe is not essential to my argument.

The basic point is that I haven't been inside that building since I was about 10 years old (give or take). I'm currently 51. So that's comparable to the interval between the death of Christ at the composition of the canonical Gospels if we date them to sometime after 70 AD.

Of course, that depends on how much later we date them. However, I don't see that's terribly pertinent to my argument, for I doubt my memory of the school will be significantly different at 65 than it was at 45. There are lots of things we forget right away. But if we remember them years later, then we continue to remember them unless we become senile.

So this is what I remember about the school—despite the fact that I haven't been back there since I was about 10. Indeed, the school was torn down after we left.

The school was set back from the sidewalk. You walked up to the porch. You went up a few steps to the front door. When you walked through the front door, this is what you saw:

On the first floor there was a reception room to the right. It had a sofa and chairs against the exterior wall. Back issues of **THE NEW YORKER MAGAZINE** were strewn about.

Across the room was a handsome wooden desk where my dad used to sit when he got off work.

Behind the desk was a partition. Behind the partition was the dance studio.

To the right was a side room with a wooden round table.

Let's go back to the front door. Straight ahead was a hallway. To the left was a staircase. And a bathroom underneath the stairwell.

At the end of the hall was a big farmhouse kitchen. At the left rear corner of the kitchen was a pantry, with a door to the alley.

To the right of the kitchen was the art studio, at the back of the building, behind the dance studio.

If you went upstairs, a piano studio lay directly ahead. To the right of the piano studio was the performance hall, which extended from the front to the back of the building. It had a wooden floor with a floor register for the furnace. I also remember the fire escape.

Facing the street, between the staircase and the performance hall, was a side room with a Victrola.

Outside, on one corner of the lot, was a tree with a fork in the bough. (The tree was later cut down.) Along one side of the lot were blackberry bushes. A Mustang often parked on the street, just below the school.

I remember the oboe teacher, one of our piano teachers (a jazz pianist), and one of our art teachers. The art teacher collected exotic cars as a hobby. He once took me for a ride in his three-wheeler.

I could mention some other details of the neighborhood, from when we were there. Over the years the neighborhood underwent drastic gentrification. (We didn't live there. We just commuted to the school and back.)

Tell me a story

This chapter is devoted to a critical analysis of certain lines of argument used by many New Testament scholars to support a negative conclusion on the historical value of reports of dominical sayings and of events in the Synoptic Gospels...I will be concentrating, though not exclusively, on reported utterances of Jesus rather than on his deeds and other happenings. I will also exclude the parables from discussion—not because I regard them as unimportant; quite the contrary. It is because the parables are, at least in what is regarded as their earliest form, more widely accepted as stemming from the historical Jesus than the sayings I will be discussing...The principle that short sayings are most likely to be remembered fits ill with the principle that parables are among the alleged sayings most likely to be remembered. For some of the parables

are considerably longer than many allege sayings rejected by the [Jesus Seminar].

W. Alston, "Historical Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels," C. Bartholomew et al. eds. **"BEHIND" THE TEXT: HISTORY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION (ZONDERVAN 2003), 151-52, 177.**

Although Alston doesn't develop the point, it draws attention to something elementary, yet fundamental. Even if, for the sake of argument, we bracket the inspiration of the Gospels, each canonical Gospel is a collection of stories, some of them embedding speeches.

Stories are memorable. Indeed, that's one reason the Bible contains so many stories. And speeches associated with stories are more memorable due to their narrative association. Remembering the story helps you remember who said what. Not only are the gospel stories historical records, but they also serve as a mnemonic device.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that these stories were transmitted by word-of-mouth before they were committed to writing, there would still be no reason for general scepticism regarding the reliability of the canonical account.

Memorable events give rise to memorable stories. Stories of what was said and done.

Scripture & truth

I'm posting something I wrote in an email.

i) Which is more likely—that Scripture is wrong, or that we misconstrue Scripture? Too often, people question Scripture rather than their interpretation of Scripture.

ii) Apropos (i), if I could step into the time machine and travel back to historical scenes described in, say, Gen 1-11 or the Exodus or the Gospel of John, what should I expect to see?

It wouldn't be surprising or disillusioning to me if there's somewhat less direct resemblance between the original event and the literary description. That would simply mean the literary description was more stylized.

If the event is not quite what I envision when I read the account, that means I had a mistaken expectation of how two were intended to match up. Because all we have is the account, since we lack direct access to the event, we can't compare the two. So it's actually quite easy for us to either overinterpret or underinterpret the account. That's all we have to go by. That's our only frame of reference.

It shouldn't shake our faith if we discovered that the literary description isn't just like what we'd see and hear if we went back in time to the original event. For the Bible writer may not have intended the correspondence to be that transparent.

For instance, Bible writers will often use stock imagery to describe an event. The purpose is to evoke associations

with earlier (or later), similar events in Scripture through the use of allusive, shared imagery and terminology.

In that respect, the description will be less exact, but that will be deliberate. For it's really describing two events rather than one. A montage. Historical narratives aren't purely descriptive.

I think some people lose their faith in Scripture because they bring unrealistic, unexamined assumptions to the text.

We might consider this from another angle. When, say, John wrote the Fourth Gospel, he was, to some degree, transcribing his memories. He saw in his mind's eye what he was writing. He had a mental image of being there. That's what he writes down.

(Of course, that oversimplifies. He's selective. He also chooses words and phrases with OT connotations.)

So the direction of the process is from mental pictures (and remembered speech) to a text.

The reader reverses the process. In reading the scene, he visualizes what he reads. He goes from the text to mental imagery.

However, there's an obvious difference between a mental picture which we *reconstruct* from a textual description, and the mental picture which the narrator had in mind when he committed that mental picture to writing. My mental image and John's mental image won't be the same. To that extent you can't retroengineer the process. John's pictorial recollection of what happened will be more exact, more detailed, than what I can infer from the text. Than what the text conjures up in my mind.

Suppose John was at the wedding in Cana. He can mentally see where the water pots were in relation to Jesus and Mary and so on. He can see the spatial relations. The physical proximity of one thing to another.

When I read the account, I may imagine the room, but clearly what I imagine isn't going to be identical at any point to what John visualizes.

Some people lose faith in Scripture when they expect a text to give them more than a text can deliver.

Interpreted events

Since the historical Jesus stands in varying degrees of contrast with the Jesus of the Gospels Jesus historians are left with a problem: what should one do with the Gospels and their Jesus?...Since the earliest sources for Jesus are (1) necessary and/or unavoidable but (2) already interpreted and serving an agenda, a primary concern in historical Jesus scholarship—if not the primary concern—has been establishing methodological means by which scholars can find the historical Jesus amid the interpreted Jesus of our earliest sources. They often do this by separating “authentic” Jesus tradition, thought to reflect the historical Jesus, from “inauthentic” tradition, thought to reflect the Christ of faith.

C. Keith & L. Hurtado, **JESUS AMONG FRIENDS AND ENEMIES: A HISTORICAL AND LITERARY INTRODUCTION TO JESUS IN THE**

GOSPELS (BAKER 2011), 272.

i) This type of analysis can be of some value in apologetics. Take the “minimal facts” strategy of William Lane Craig. It’s something we can do for the sake of argument.

ii) But from the vantage-point of Christian faith, this orientation is fundamentally misguided. The proper object of Christian faith is not the *bare* event, but the *recorded* event. The *interpreted* event. That’s what God has given us to live by.

iii) This type of analysis also suffers from positivistic reductionism. It acts as though interpretation is in tension with history: the more interpretation you have, the less history you have. So the objective is to strip away the extraneous layers of interpretation to uncover the buried kernel of truth. But that’s philosophically and theologically naïve.

The empirical aspect of an event doesn’t generally reveal the significance of the event. A physically accurate description of what the observer would have seen doesn’t give the reader an understanding of what it means.

For instance, three men were crucified on Good Friday. Even if you were an eyewitness, what you can see is fairly indiscriminating. One death by crucifixion is much like another. Had you been at Calvary, watching the situation unfold wouldn’t single out the death of Christ as more important than the death of the two thieves. Yet his death is uniquely significant.

Take two photographs of two different high schools. Both photographs are accurate. They depict the physical

appearance of each school. But there's a critical dimension they fail to capture.

Suppose you attended one of them, but not the other. If so, then looking at a picture of your alma mater is a very different experience than looking at a picture of someone else's high school. You could look at pictures of a thousand schools you didn't attend, yet it'd all be the same to you.

But if you look at a picture of *your* alma mater, that's different. That means something to *you*. That triggers a wealth of memories. A wealth of associations—good, bad, or both.

In one case, there's nothing more to the photograph than the image. In the other case, the photograph is emblematic. It conjures up something far beyond what can be seen in the photograph. For better or worse, *your* high school experience is highly significant to *you*.

You don't just see the image on the photograph. Rather, the image on the photograph reminds you of many inner representations you retain of your three years there. Rooms, words, names, games, faces, voices, emotions, and so forth. You see that picture through the prism of memory.

There's more to *remembered* events than *bare* events. For bare events are discrete, self-contained happenings, but remembered events have a larger context.

Take one of those excruciating formal dinners among foreign dignitaries. Everyone is dressed to the nines. Everyone is polite. Everyone smiles. No one says what he means. It's an elaborate exercise in concealing your true intentions. The diplomats are probing each other for weaknesses without tipping their hand.

Maybe the ambassador's wife is having an affair with the attaché to Hungary. But he's about to be reassigned. At this diplomatic function, the illicit lovers will feign emotional distance.

Suppose a director filmed that as is. In one sense it would be accurate, but in another sense it would be misleading. For there's so much just beneath the surface that isn't captured by merely depicting what was seen or said. The guests say the opposite of what they think. They speak of peace as they plan on war. The body language is false. So a purely descriptive portrayal would lack insight into what was really going on.

Instead, suppose the director put words in the mouths of the conniving characters, making them say what they actually thought, but avoided saying in real life. The director makes the Austrian ambassador whisper to his aid that he despises the Czech foreign minister. He has the illicit lovers go out onto a balcony, where they share a passionate kiss. Where they exchange a passionate embrace. Where they speak in desperate tones about no longer seeing each another.

Would that be less accurate—or more accurate? In a sense it's unhistorical. That's not what happened at the diplomatic function.

Yet, on another level, it's a truer account of what really happened. For it goes behind appearances to hidden motivations. The unseen psychology of the event.

If you stepped into a time machine and traveled back to the original event, the director's interpretation would stand in contrast to outward events. Physically inaccurate in various

respects. Yet in others ways the director's interpretation would be truer to the event. More faithful to what was driving the conversation. Instead of just showing us what happened, it would account for appearances.

Take another case. Suppose summer camp was the highpoint of a boy's life. Two back-to-back summers when he was coming of age.

Suppose a director is filming the man's life story. Suppose he combines two summers into one summer. Combines four months into two weeks. At one level that's unhistorical. Some boys were there one summer who weren't there the other summer. Different things were said and done each summer.

But at another level, he's not adding anything. Everything the characters say and do in the film corresponds to something they actually said or did at summer camp. Just not all in one summer. Just not all in two weeks.

It's simply a more efficient way of telling the story. Cut the dead wood. Eliminate extraneous details. Focus on the memorable, life-changing encounters.

The gospel writers have techniques to clue the reader into the significance of the events they relate. They may rearrange the chronology to put things in their teleological relationships. They may use language from the OT that implicitly compares an event in the life of Christ with an earlier event in the life of Israel.

This is interpretation, but their interpretation reveals the invisible purpose of outward actions. For the meaning of who did what when and where doesn't just lie on the sensible surface of events.

For instance, the order of intention reverses the order of execution. I have a goal. I then reason back from the goal to the things I must do to achieve my goal. I must do them in a certain order. But that's not the order in which I must think them. Suppose I go to the beach. To do that I must drive there. To drive there I must get in the car. To drive the car I must get the car keys.

There's a chronological order and a teleological order. There's a physical depiction and a psychological depiction. Both are equally true. There's more to history than what lies on the surface. In addition, there's whatever motivates the historical actor. The meaning that he assigns to his own actions. His plans and aspirations.

Or take possession. You can see the demoniac, but you can't see the demon. A sensory depiction would be quite truncated, for what lies behind the eyes is just as real, and more important, in that situation. How does a writer *show* possession? Possession has some empirical effects, but that's a shallow perception of the invisible, underlying cause.

This goes to the inerrancy of Scripture as well as the historicity of Scripture. Even if you stepped into the time machine, went back into the past, saw the event for yourself, and observed some notable differences between the reported event and the actual event, that of itself wouldn't mean the Biblical account is erroneous. For there's more to accurate reportage than a physically accurate depiction. And if you confine yourself to a physically accurate depiction, that may even be deceptive—inasmuch as that leaves out of account many real factors that escape a purely empirical account.

Is John's gospel historical?

One stock objection to the historicity of John's Gospel is the stylistic uniformity of John. Both direct and indirect discourse are rendered in the same idiom. Speakers don't have a distinctive voice. They all sound like the narrator. As such, we're not hearing the actual voice of Jesus in the narrative; rather, we're hearing the voice of the anonymous narrator, who uses the character of Jesus as a mouthpiece for his own theology.

Even if we identify the narrator with the beloved disciple, the beloved disciple is, himself, a fictitious character, a literary device. Or so goes the argument. On this view, the narrator composes monologues and dialogues which he puts on the lips of Jesus and other characters.

Other issues aside, let's see how well this stacks up to the actual phenomena of the Fourth Gospel. Take this lengthy dialogue:

JOHN 8

12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." 13 So the Pharisees said to him, "You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true." 14 Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not

know where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. 16 Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. 17 In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true. 18 I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.” 19 They said to him therefore, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” 20 These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

21 So he said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” 22 So the Jews said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?” 23 He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. 24 I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” 25 So they said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been telling you from the

beginning. 26 I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.”

27 They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. 28 So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. 29 And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” 30 As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” 33 They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

34 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. 37 I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my

word finds no place in you. 38 I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

39 They answered him, “Abraham is our father.”

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, 40 but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. 41 You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” 42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? 47 Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The

reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

48 The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” 49 Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. 50 Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” 52 The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” 54 Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ 55 But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” 57 So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” 58 Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham

was, I am.” 59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

In several respects, this doesn't read like a tightly-scripted dialogue.

i) If the narrator were composing serene, lofty platitudes for the spiritual edification of his audience, why would he write this acidic exchange? It doesn't make for pleasant reading.

ii) Apropos (i), it degenerates into a very personal and rather unseemly squabble between Jesus and his adversaries. And this is how real enemies talk. The sneering, spite, bluster, innuendo, gossip. The schoolyard taunts about Christ's paternity.

iii) And, in order to vindicate his mission and ministry, Jesus must, to some degree, come down to their level to set the record straight.

iv) Likewise, there's a ragged quality to the dialogue. The twists and turns. If the narrator were making this up as a set-piece, we'd expect a more shapely rounded form, with nice linear flow and smooth transitions. When we get instead is the digressive quality of a real debate.

So this is all very realistic.

Let's take another example:

JOHN 4

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John **2** (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), **3** he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. **4** And he had to pass through Samaria. **5** So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. **6** Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. **7** A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." **8** (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) **9** The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) **10** Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." **11** The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? **12** Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." **13** Jesus

said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” 17 The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is

seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” 27 Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” 28 So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 29 “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” 30 They went out of the town and were coming to him. 31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” 33 So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” 34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. 35 Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life,

so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

i) Unlike John 8, this isn’t petty or abrasive. Yet it reflects the free association of a real conversation, as the woman flits from one topic to another. Likewise, the abrupt break in their private exchange when the disciples show up.

ii) The conversation also takes its cue from incidental details supplied by the concrete setting—the time of day, Jesus’ fatigue, Jesus’ thirst, a well, a mountain, farmland.

We wouldn’t expect a canned dialogue to have this topical, stream-of-consciousness quality.

iii) Likewise, the woman deflects Jesus’ probing statements about her personal life. She’s clearly caught off-guard. Tries to parry the veiled accusation by changing the subject. This is how real people improvise in real conversations.

Or take this little snippet:

JOHN 7

1 After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. 2 Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand. 3 So his brothers said to him, “Leave

here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. 4 For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.” 5 For not even his brothers believed in him. 6 Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. 7 The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. 8 You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.” 9 After saying this, he remained in Galilee. 10 But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private.

Isn't this typical of families? Those who ought to know you best know you least? Never less helpful than when they try to be helpful. Dishing out unwanted, unsolicited advice.

Or Jesus' last-minute change of plans. If the narrator were inventing scenes and speeches to further his theological agenda, this would be a pretty clumsy way of doing it.

In the end, Jesus takes their advice—but with a twist. He does it his own way. He avoids them. He goes up to Jerusalem, but not with them. Not given their attitude.

You can almost sense how tiresome he must find it having to explain himself to his stepbrothers. How many times has he had to do this?

Liberals think John's Christology is too exalted to be authentic, yet this is all very human, don't you think?

Then there's the editorial aside in v5, where the narrator breaks in to clarify something for the benefit of the reader. But if the author was composing this from scratch, why is that literary expedient necessary? Why not write that into the story?

We could study other examples in the Fourth Gospel. Or examine these examples in more detail. I'm just illustrating a neglected feature of the Johannine narrative.

Did Ray Bradbury exist?

Bradbury died Tuesday night in Los Angeles, his agent Michael Congdon confirmed.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/obituaries/la-me-ray-bradbury-20120607,0,5622415.story>

Bradbury's daughter confirmed his death to the Associated Press on Wednesday morning. She said her father died Tuesday night in Southern California.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/chi-author-ray-bradbury-dead-20120606,0,3340056.story>

Legendary science-fiction author Ray Bradbury passed away Wednesday morning in Los Angeles.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/06/ray-bradbury-movies-dead-fahrenheit-451_n_1574138.html

How do we account for discrepant reports regarding the death of Ray Bradbury?

“This is evidence that the obituaries for Bradbury were written decades later,” said Bart Ehrman, professor of religious studies at Chapel Hill. “Bradbury really died on Wednesday morning. The report that he died Tuesday night, but his death was confirmed on Wednesday morning, is an orthodox scribal harmonization of two contradictory traditions.”

“It's a telltale clue that Bradbury never existed,” said Richard Carrier, renowned author of *Proving History*. “If Bradbury really was the world-famous figure that legend imputes to him, it's inconceivable that major news outlets would bungle the date of his death—especially in the information age.”

According to Robert Price, “The statement that ‘he died Tuesday night in Los Angeles, his agent Michael Congdon confirmed’ is a legendary embellishment, redacting the earlier tradition that he died Wednesday morning. The redactor is deifying Bradbury as an exalted, celestial figure. Notice that his agent is named after the Archangel Michael. Angels are “agents.” In the Bible, angels appear to people at night in dreams. And notice that the legendary place of his demise is the ‘City of Angels.’ So this represents the apotheosis of Bradbury, as a dying and rising god-like Hercules and Adonis.”

Reporting speeches

The task is made more difficult in that several disciples were involved. It is possible that when the disciples were in distress in the storm, only one spoke up; the others saw that they had no need to speak because their spokesman had already expressed their thoughts. But surely it is also possible that a number of them spoke with excited ejaculations and pleas of various kinds. In the excitement the various speeches may have overlapped. We cannot possibly reconstruct a chronological sequence of several such speeches. All three Gospels may be summarizing a rather complicated set of pleas. Each summary is trustworthy and gives us what we need to know about the situation. The Gospels do not overwhelm us with detail about each individual speech out of three or five or even more utterances by the disciples.

V. Poythress, "Part Six: Reporting Speeches," **Inerrancy and the Gospels (Crossway 2012), 185.**

Unbelievers would dismiss this harmonistic explanation as special pleading.

However, I'm reminded of an interview with Orson Welles I read years ago. One reason he became a film director is because he thought that he could do some things better. Improve the genre.

One thing that dissatisfied him with the status quo was the cinematic tradition in which characters in dialogue always spoke in complete sentences. A character would say something. The other character would politely wait until he finished, then respond.

I suppose that's a throwback to the way plays and novels used to be written. Early screenwriters reproduced that convention. Dialogue written as alternating, self-contained little monologues.

But he didn't like it because it was artificial. In real life conversations, speakers often interrupt each other. Talk over each other. Two or more people will speak at once. If they agree with what the speaker is saying, they may finish his sentence. Or if they disagree, they may cut him off in mid-sentence. They don't give him a chance to complete his train of thought before they butt in.

So Welles introduced overlapping dialogue to make it more realistic.

However, that raises another issue. I'm not a film director, but I doubt you can have scripted overlapping dialogue. In theory you could write a screenplay with sentence fragments. But I doubt you could film it. That would simply substitute one artificiality for another. It would lead to stilted timing. It would require one actor to jump in at the exact moment another actor broke off in mid-sentence. And that's equally unnatural.

So I'm guessing that when Welles wrote a screenplay, he wrote complete lines. And his actors had to memorize complete lines.

Then, when he was actually filming the script and directing the actors, he probably instructed each actor to try to recite his lines in full, then allow another actor interrupt before he finished. Offhand, I imagine that's the only workable way of doing it.

And I think that example illustrates the complexities of a historical narrator like Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John representing or retelling the spoken word. There's no one "right" way to do it.

Returning to the past

Liberals contend that the Gospels are historically unreliable because they were written so long after the events. Of course, that's a circular argument inasmuch as it presumes the liberal dating (and authorship) of the Gospels.

But it also overlooks the fact that older folks frequently remember earlier events more clearly and distinctly than later events. Here's an interesting anecdote from Warnie Lewis, fourteen months after the death of his famous brother:

Oddly enough as time goes on the vision of J as he was in his later years grows fainter, that of him in earlier days more and more vivid. It is the J of the attic and the little end room, the J of Daudelspiels and the walks and jaunts, the J of the early and middle years whom I miss so cruelly. An absurd feeling, for even had he lived that Jack had already died. Perhaps it has been sharpened by the fact that I am reliving something of the middle years by going through our old walking tours in my diaries, and I can see him almost as if he was visible, on a path

*in front of me, striding along with a stick
and a pack in his shapeless old
fisherman's hat...Not that I idealize those
days for they too had their hard times;
but then they were bad times shared
with J and that made all the difference.*

**BROTHERS AND FRIENDS: THE DIARIES OF MAJOR WARREN
HAMILTON LEWIS (HARPER & ROW 1982), 255.**

Matthew, Josephus, and the massacre of the innocents

Jason Engwer recently left an informative comment at Michael Brown's site on why Josephus fails to mention the massacre of the innocents (Mt 2:16-18). I'd like to add a few observations of my own:

i) Children are a common casualty of war, and the ancient world was no exception. The death of a few boys in a small town by Herod's henchmen would not be historically noteworthy.

ii) Josephus was born c. 37-38 AD. The Antiquities was published c. 93-94. So the event took place about 40 years before he was born—or about two generations before he was born. And his magnum opus was published about a century after the event.

iii) In the age of local and national newspapers, not to mention photojournalism, CNN, and so forth, it's easy to have an unrealistic expectation of the kinds of events that would be newsworthy in the ancient world. But I think it's safe to say that ancient people were remarkably ignorant of general history. They would have known about famous kings and conquerors, as well as having some knowledge of local lore (where they happened to live), but their knowledge of the past would be the exception rather than the rule.

iv) Matthew doesn't record the massacre of the innocents because that's a famous event; rather, that's a famous event because Matthew recorded it. He made it famous.

To ask why Josephus failed to record this famous event presumes a frame of reference that Josephus never had. This is only famous in Christian circles. Known to readers of Matthew's Gospel. From there it become more widely disseminated over the centuries by the church and Christmas celebrations.

Secondhand info

i) "Secondhand information" often has a pejorative connotation, by way of invidious contrast to firsthand information. It can be a synonym for rumor, scuttlebutt, or unconfirmed reportage. Something heard through the grapevine. "Hearsay" has the same pejorative connotations.

This is relevant to debates about the historical Jesus. For instance, since Luke's Gospel is secondhand information, does that make it inferior?

ii) To begin with, we need to distinguish between oral tradition and oral history. Oral tradition connotes a saying or story that was passed down by word of mouth from person to person until it was finally committed to writing. There are many links in the chain of transmission, with many opportunities for the original saying or story to be modified in the process of tradition.

By contrast, oral history has one source. Straight from the mouth of the eyewitness.

iii) Literally, secondhand information means information at one remove from the original source, but in popular usage it allows for however many intervening steps. Suppose, though, we use the word in the literal sense. Let's consider the potential reach of literal secondhand information. Consider the potential reach of living memory.

Many people have firsthand information about their grandparents. They personally know one or more of their four grandparents. By the same token, many of their grandparents had firsthand information about their own grandparents. Your grandparents can share what they

directly knew about their grandparents with you. That means you can have secondhand knowledge of your great-great grandparents. There's just one link between you and your great-great grandparents. Even though that's five generations deep, that's still just secondhand knowledge. It's not fourthhand or fifthhand knowledge. You can have direct knowledge of your grandparents. Skipping a generation (your parents) doesn't make that secondhand information. You don't have to get your information about your grandparents from your parents, if you personally know your grandparents. Even though we're adding generations, we're not adding intervening links between you and the original source. Although we've now gone back five generations (child>parent>grandparent>great-grandparent>great-great-grandparent), it isn't four or five steps removed from the original. It's still only one step removed from the original source of information.

In addition, many people personally know their great-grandparents. And some great-grandparents knew their own great-grandparents. That goes back seven generations. We've added your firsthand knowledge of your great-grandparents and their firsthand-knowledge of their great-grandparents. That means some people can have secondhand information about their great-great-great-great grandparents. But it's not sixthhand or seventhhand information. It's still just secondhand information. If you have direct knowledge of your great-grandparents, and they have direct knowledge of their great-grandparents, then your source of information about your great-great-great grandparent remains just one step removed from the original source. They know what their great-grandparents said and did direct from their own mouth, and you know what your great-grandparents said and did direct from their own mouth. They can share their firsthand knowledge of their great-grandparents with you, while you can have

firsthand knowledge of your own great-grandparents. You have firsthand knowledge four generations deep (about yourself, your parents, your grandparents, and your great-grandparents), and your grandparents have firsthand knowledge four generations deep.

Indeed, some people even know their great-great grandparents, and some of them knew their great-great grandparents. Yet that's still just secondhand knowledge, in the literal sense that there's only one link between your living memory and their living memory.

Although that's statically rare, given billions of people, there's still a large number of people for whom that's true.

iv) Now let's switch to another aspect of secondhand information. Here I'm using the term in a looser sense, but not a pejorative sense.

It's quite possible for secondhand information to be more reliable than firsthand information. Compare a biography to an autobiography. Oftentimes, one function (sometimes the primary purpose!) of autobiographies is to define their reputation for posterity. It's not just a record of what they remember, but how they wish to be remembered. The result may be misleading to one degree or another depending on how many liberties they take with the truth.

Firsthand accounts can be very partisan. Consider political memoirs.

By contrast, a biography may be more candid because it isn't the biographer's reputation that's on the line. So he doesn't have the same personal agenda. Same thing with a historian.

v) Likewise, some people have biased memories. Even though these are firsthand recollections, what they recollect may be less accurate than a secondhand source.

vi) On a related note, as a kid I saw lots of films and TV shows back in the 60s. I have partial memories of what I saw. Sometimes, out of curiosity, I will Google them to fill in the gaps in my memory. My firsthand knowledge is sufficiently accurate to pick the right search terms. But when I pull up secondhand information, it freshens my recollection of forgotten or occasionally misremembered details. In that respect, the secondhand information can be more accurate than my firsthand knowledge of movies or episodes I saw just once decades ago.

vii) In addition, an autobiography narrates events from one source and one perspective: only what the autobiographer saw, heard, and did. By contrast, a biographer or historian may have multiple sources of information. So his treatment may be more complete or evenhanded.

viii) Finally, an autobiographer will be emotionally invested in his own life-experience. By contrast, a biography or historian can bring more critical detachment to bear precisely because it didn't happen to him. He doesn't have those emotionally charged memories. He doesn't personally identify with events in the same way a participant does. So he can sift the evidence more dispassionately.

I'm not saying historians and biographers can't be biased. And I'm not saying autobiographers can't be self-critical. I'm just examining knee-jerk assumptions.

Suppose we bracket inspiration for the sake of argument. And suppose we grant the traditional authorship of Luke's Gospel and John's Gospel. In principle, Luke's "secondhand"

Gospel could be more reliable than John's "firsthand" Gospel.

Now, I don't think that's actually the case. But even when we factor in verbal, plenary, organic inspiration, a firsthand account and a secondhand account can still complement each other.

Nabeel Qureshi and the Gospels

Unbelievers as well as liberals cite differences between the Gospels to disprove the inerrancy and historicity of the Gospels. They account for these differences on the grounds that, at best, the writers rely on hearsay information. Conflicting traditions. Because the Gospel writers were not eyewitnesses, and because they had no contact with eyewitnesses, we end up with discrepant accounts of what was said and done. They never knew Jesus. They never knew anyone who knew Jesus. They weren't where it happened or when it happened. They write at a time and place that's too far removed from events to be in touch with the facts. So goes the argument.

Let's consider a frame of reference. Nabeel Qureshi is the kind of guy whose career depends on his conversion testimony. That's how he introduces himself. That's the launchpad for his career. As a result, he often talks his background and conversion experience. Here are four examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3IHueRXvh0>

<http://rzm.org/just-thinking/seeking-allah-finding-jesus>

<http://www.answering-islam.org/Authors/Qureshi/testimony.htm>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february/christ-called-me-off-minaret.html>

Now when you compare these four testimonies, there are differences. They are most dissimilar in terms of wording.

Even when they describe the same events, they rarely use the same phrasing.

In addition, the details vary. One account will mention something that's omitted in another account, and vice versa.

Yet all four accounts are firsthand accounts. What is more, all four accounts are from the same source. The same witness.

Compare that to a political candidate's stump speech. Because he gives the same speech so often, even if he's not using a teleprompter, he will often use the same phrases and sentences. Likewise with prepared answers. Because it begins with a text rather than experience, there's great verbal similarity from one presentation to another.

By contrast, when you are recounting an incident from your own life, the wording may vary greatly because each time you are verbalizing what you remember. It doesn't begin with a script, but a memory. The wording won't be stereotyped. There are lots of different ways you can express what you remember. Different synonyms and sentences. Different words in different combinations. So long as you remember what happened, so long as you are fairly articulate, you don't need to consult a script or outline or cue cards to talk about your past. Your benchmark is not a text, but a memory. Not remembering what you said, but saying what you remember.

2011 Japan tsunami

i) It's sometimes said that in the age of photography, we're no longer dependent on testimonial evidence the way our forebears were. But that's deceptive. Take the 2011 Japan tsunami. That was a televised event. You can see it for yourself, with your very own eyes, right?

Well, it's not that simple. You can see footage of a natural disaster. Yet you can't tell, just by seeing the pictures, when it happened or where it happened. And you don't know what caused it.

You're still dependent on news reports and eyewitnesses for many key contextual details. If you didn't have that to frame the event and fill in the details with respect to time, place, and cause, you'd be at a loss to know what you were looking at.

ii) Moreover, technology cuts both ways. In the age of CGI, photographic evidence of an event can be faked. So you still depend on testimonial evidence to vouch for the authenticity of the photographic record.

Is the argument from miracles circular?

Attempting to use the evidence of miracles in this way presents two serious problems. One problem is the need to avoid circularity in argument. By the "Christian Revelation" Clarke presumably means the Bible or at least central parts of the Bible. But the evidence for the authenticity of the Christian Revelation cannot be drawn from the pages of that revelation itself without circularity. For one would be appealing to the authenticity of the revelation, the accurate account it proves of miracles, to authenticate it as a revelation, actually and immediately sent to us from God.

*But perhaps a distinction could be made between the revelation as immediately sent from God, and the revelation as historically trustworthy. If the Bible could be established as historically trustworthy, and if its historical trustworthiness could be initially granted then, it might be argued, its account of miracles can be taken as giving additional authentication of itself as a divine revelation. Paul Helm, "The Miraculous," *Science & Christian Belief*, 3/1 (1991), 82.*

There are various problems with the charge of circularity:

1. As a rule, narrated miracles aren't cited to attest the narrator. If the narrator cited his own miracles to validate his claims, that would be circular. Mind you, even in that case, there's a distinction between vicious and virtuous circularity.

Typically, narrated miracles attest a character within the narrative, not the narrator himself. At that level there's not even *prima facie* circularity.

2. It isn't viciously circular to judge a witness by his own testimony. Take a witness whose testimony is so dubious that we conclude that he can't be trusted. Before he opened his mouth, we had no opinion regarding his character. If self-testimony can undermine a witness's credibility, it can enhance his credibility.

3. Moreover, the evidence for miracles isn't confined to testimonial evidence. There are men, women, and children who claim to have personal experience with the miraculous. Even if their claim is secondhand for *us*, it is firsthand for *them*—assuming it really happened to them. They don't believe it because they heard someone *else* say it.

4. Apropos (3), this isn't something all of us just encounter in *literature*. Some of us have friends or family members who recount miraculous incidents in their lives.

5. By the same token, if there's credible evidence for miracles throughout church history, then there's nothing presumptively fictitious or suspect about Gospel miracles, NT miracles, or OT miracles.

6. The canonical Gospels are quite restrained in the miracles they relate. Mark's Gospel, which is usually thought to be the first one written, has the highest proportion of miracles. By contrast, Matthew and Luke deemphasize miracles in relation to Mark by the amount of additional teaching material they include. And John has fewer miracles than the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, it's not as if John's miracles are more spectacular. So there's no pattern of legendary embellishment.

7. In addition, some Biblical miracles have inherent credibility. For instance, some Biblical miracles pass the criterion of embarrassment:

i) Take the scene of Jesus walking on water, which turns into a scene of Peter walking on water (Mt 14:28-31). Only Peter humiliates himself. Why would Matthew invent that story?

ii) Likewise, a story recounting the failure of the disciples to exorcise a hard case (Mt 17:14-20; Mk 9:14-29; Lk 9:37-43). Why would the Synoptic narrators invent a story or preserve a fabulous tradition which makes the disciples look impotent? Why would Christian writers fabricate stories which portray leaders of the Christian movement in such an unflattering light?

iii) Or take the unintentionally comical scene of Christians praying for Peter's deliverance. When, however, their prayers are answered, they are incredulous (Acts 12:12-16).

iv) Even more dramatic is the episode where Jesus is rejected by those who know him best. As a result, he "cannot" (or "will not") perform many miracles there, due to their unbelief (Mt 13:58; Mk 6:5). Why would the narrators

fabricate a story which, at least superficially, makes Jesus seem limited in his power to work miracles?

v) In addition, you have reported miracles which bring Jesus into physical contact with ritually impure patients—like lepers (Mt 8:1-4; Mk 1:40-45; Lk 5:12-16), or the women who suffered from menorrhagia (Mt 9:20-22; Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-48). That would grate against Jewish sensibilities. Why invent stories in which Jesus is defiled by contact with those he heals?

vi) On a related note is the use of spittle in some healings (Mk 7:33; 8:23; Jn 9:6). Why does Jesus use spittle in a few healings, but heal directly in most other cases? Why concoct that anomalous detail?

Although there's evidence that spittle was sometimes used in Hellenistic folk medicine, that's the sort of invidious comparison we'd expect Jewish writers to studiously avoid—unless it really happened. They tell it that way because they are constrained by the facts on the ground.

Moreover, spittle has ambivalent connotations in Jewish usage, a la ritual defilement (Lev 15:8). Although Jesus wasn't in that condition, why write something that invites unwanted associations?—unless the narrator had no choice because that's how it happened.

vii) You also have stories that just don't seem to be the kind of thing a narrator would make up, like healing the Canaanite's daughter (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). A desperate mother who seeks him out. Realistic dialogue.

Likewise, transferring evil spirits from a demoniac to pigs, who proceed to drown themselves after they were maddened by possession (Mt 8:28-34; Mk 5:1-20; Lk 8:26-

39). Why would anyone start from scratch with a fictional story like that? It's one of those angular encounters that happens in real life. Not something you make up if you're inventing inspirational literature. Real life is quirky. Unexpected. Incongruous.

To be sure, I'm only discussing some Gospel miracles. But they lend independent credibility to the Gospels in which they occur, and to other miracles by association.

viii) Then there are Biblical miracles which unbelievers love to mock, like the fate of Lot's wife (Gen 19:26), or Balaam's donkey (Num 22:28-30). But if these are so ridiculous, why would the narrator concoct anything that ridiculous?

ix) Or take the exploits of Samson. A critic might dismiss this as something out of a comic book about superheroes. Yet it occurs in a book that's notorious for its grim, horrific realism. And Samson himself is a tragic figure. An abject moral failure. In an honor/shame culture, we wouldn't expect the narrator to invent a national hero who's an embarrassment to his own people.

Synoptic sources

An oft-made claim is that Matthew and Luke got much of their information from Mark. And it's certainly possible that Luke got some of his information from Mark.

But I'd simply point out that the inference is fallacious. The fact that Matthew and Luke copy (and edit) Mark doesn't imply that Mark was their source of information.

A historian may copy a source, not because that's where he got his information, but because that's a respected source.

Likewise, if Mark already covered many key events in the life and ministry of Christ, if Matthew and Luke agree with his reportage, then it's convenient to pick up where he left off rather than starting from scratch. If, in the nature of the case, they'd be recounting many of the same events, why not incorporate this preexisting material into their own biographies, which they proceed to supplement with additional, distinctive material?

If Mark was well-received by the NT church, why not build on that foundation? This doesn't imply that they got their information from Mark.

For instance, a Civil War historian may have multiple sources of information for the same event, yet he may only quote from one primary source to make his point. He might quote an eyewitness like Lee, Sherman, or Grant, because that's a credible source. That doesn't mean the Civil War historian is dependent on that particular source—as if that's his only source of information concerning that particular incident.

Whatever you ask in my name

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours (Mk 11:24).

The Gospels contain several sweeping promises like this. Liberals don't think Jesus spoke most of the words attributed to him in the Gospels. Rather, they think anonymous authors, writing about two generations later, who had no personal or reliable knowledge of the historical Jesus, inventing sayings which they put on Jesus' lips. They think the Gospels reflect the viewpoint of the church, not the viewpoint of Jesus. Reflect the outlook of the time when they were written rather than the outlook of Jesus' time. Essentially, the Gospels are a vehicle to backdate later developments.

Let's play along with that contention for the sake of argument. Why would a writer invent these sweeping promises? In his own experience, and the experience of his fellow Christians, God didn't always grant their prayer requests. Indeed, one must ask if God usually grants prayer requests. So promises like this don't reflect the experience of "the church." Indeed, they generate a tension between the prima facie scope of the promise and the disappointing reality, which falls far short.

So why would Gospel narrators put these words in Jesus' mouth? It doesn't fit the theory of their late composition.

Demon-haunted world

One curious question is why the Synoptic Gospels have so much to say about demons, in contrast to the paucity of references in the OT, or the rest of the NT.

The short answer is that we don't know the answer. We can only speculate.

i) I suppose the liberal explanation would be evolving belief in demons. However, that's implausible—even on liberal assumptions. Belief in evil spirits is very common in primitive societies.

At best, what would evolve is an explanation for their existence. A backstory. An organizational chart.

Moreover, the evolutionary explanation fails to explain the paucity of references outside the Synoptic Gospels. Take John's Gospel—or Acts.

ii) There's a pattern. Demons are typically mentioned in reference to exorcism. Absent the context of possession and exorcism, there's little occasion, from the viewpoint of Bible writers, to mention demons. That's their basic selection-criterion. The existence and presence of demons is a topic that normally crops up in that particular context.

iii) That's true in extrabiblical Jewish literature, viz. Tobit, Josephus (i.e. Eleazar), the Genesis Apocryphon, Qumran lit. (hymn 11Q5/11QPs-a).

We also have the Jewish exorcists in Acts 19:13-19). That's an incidental witness to the practice. Luke happens to mention that only in connection with Paul's ministry.

So belief in demonic activity was more widespread than the relative silence of Scripture would indicate. The fact that references concentrate in the Synoptic Gospels doesn't mean this is novel or exceptional in the general culture.

iv) I doubt it's incidental that in all three Synoptic Gospels, Christ's encounter with Satan precedes accounts of exorcism. That's the first skirmish in an ongoing series of spiritual battles. Having lost the first round, Satan delegates subsequent engagements to his lieutenants, although he makes a strategic reappearance to recruit Judas.

v) The fallen angels were expelled from God's abode. Now God enters their abode. His presence behind enemy lines, in the person of the Incarnate Son, naturally draws them out of the shadows. He invades their sphere of influence.

This, in turn, generates situations of mutual recognition. Both Jesus and demons are outwardly human. Both Jesus and demons can discern what lies within. Hidden divinity and hidden possession.

vi) Jesus had inherent authority to expel demons. And he authorized his disciples to expel demons. Due to his reputation as a powerful, successful exorcist, many people brought possessed friends or relatives to him (or people they deemed to be possessed), to be delivered.

The reason the OT has so little to say about this may be because, as a rule, OT Jews had no special ability to recognize possession or expel demons. Possession isn't evident unless the demon chooses to manifest itself.

Moreover, there's no presumption that Jews or Christians have specific authority to command demons. That doesn't

mean Christians can't perform exorcisms. But there's no guarantee that their efforts will be successful. So we wouldn't expect the same emphasis outside the Gospels.

vii) Likewise, the Gospel has a preemptive effect, by suppressing the occurrence of possession. By driving the dark side back into the shadows.

Josephus on portents and prodigies

We have comparable examples even within the very same century that saw the development of the Gospels. Josephus wrote the Jewish War between 75 and 79 CE, in which he relates the following obvious legends, which "occurred" only ten to fifteen years previous (in or around 66 CE): it was a bright as midday for half an hour around the Altar and Sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple—at three in the morning!; during the usual sacrifices a cow gave birth to a lamb "in the middle of the Temple courts"; a bronze gate, requiring twenty men to move, unbolted, unlocked, and opened itself at midnight—right in front of the temple guards!" and last but not least, chariots and armies were seen marching through the skies and encircling all the towns of Judaea. Josephus finally remarks, "I would have dismissed it as an invention, had it not be

vouched for by eyewitnesses, and followed by disasters that bore out the signs." R. Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," R. Price & J. Lowder, eds. The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave (Prometheus 2005), 173-174.

For Carrier, this is proof positive that Josephus was a credulous and superstitious man. And since he moved in the same thought-world as the Gospel writers, we should lend their accounts no greater credence. There are, however, some basic problems with Carrier's comparison:

i) To begin with, the logic is circular. He presumes that since the miraculous portents in Josephus are incredible, then by parity of argument, so are the Gospels.

However, I, for one, don't automatically discount miracle reports outside the Bible. The fall of Jerusalem was a turning point in Jewish history. It wouldn't surprise me if there were some authentic marvels that portended that fateful event.

That doesn't mean I give equal weight to every item on his list. Assuming this is actually based on independent information, there's no reason to think that if one report is true, all are true; if one report is false, all are false. These come from different sources. Different reporters.

ii) But I'd also like to consider a different approach. Ironically, it may not be Josephus, but Carrier's who's

gullible. Carrier takes it for granted that Josephus believes what he's saying in this regard. But surely that's naive.

To begin with, accounts of portents and prodigies were a stock feature of Roman historiography. This was typically associated with major events and major political figures in Roman history. So Josephus, in writing to and for a Roman audience, may be adapting himself to that contrivance.

That consideration is reinforced by the fact that Josephus is writing as a Jewish apologist to his Roman overlords. As such, he's motivated to wow them with his own account of portents and prodigies. In other words, it's highly possible that he's regaling them with tall tales to impress his pagan Roman patrons regarding the reality of Yahweh—the one true God.

Indeed, his ingenuous profession that "I would have dismissed it as an invention, had it not be vouched for by eyewitnesses, and followed by disasters that bore out the signs," is the kind of calculated protestation that you'd expect from an author who's endeavoring to pull the wool over the eyes of the reader. "I'd scarcely believe it myself, were it not for the fact that..."

That's a familiar rhetorical gambit to win the confidence of the audience. "See, I'm just as skeptical as you are! I believe this against my will!"

I'm not saying that interpretation is necessarily correct. But I think it's quite plausible that Josephus is pandering to Roman sensibilities at this juncture. And he may well have hoodwinked an unsuspecting atheist in the process!

The parables of Jesus

i) One of the generally neglected lines of evidence for the historical Jesus are the parables of Jesus. A partial exception is Keener's treatment in *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. These are mostly clustered in the Synoptic Gospels, although you have two parables (the true vine, the good shepherd), as well as many implicit parabolic metaphors, in the Fourth Gospel.

The parables are a central and distinctive feature of Jesus' teaching. Not only do they figure in his teaching, but many of his actions have a parabolic significance. Sometimes the two are tied together. He will tell a parable to illustrate an action. Or his action will be symbolic. It would be very difficult to extract the parables from the historical Jesus generally.

If, however, you deny the historicity of Jesus, then you have to account for the parables. Who wrote them? If Matthew and Luke simply got their parabolic material from Mark, it would be easier to attribute them to a single source. But Matthew and Mark have unique parables.

So an unbeliever must hypothesize an anonymous literary genius or geniuses who composed these parables, and somehow got the entire Christian community to incorporate them into the Gospels.

ii) I'd like to make one additional point: some parables indicate that Jesus could return at any moment, while other parables indicate signs which will precede his return. That's a tension that commentators struggle with. And it's cited as evidence that the Gospels are fallible.

Problem is, the prima facie tension is so obvious that it could hardly be unwitting. That tension would be discernible from the get-go.

To say that reflects a contradiction is naive, for the contrast is clearly intentional. It's something that Jesus puts out there and leaves unresolved—to keep listeners off balance. Be watchful, but not presumptuous! It strikes a balance between complacency and anxiety. A little uncertainty is a good thing; too much uncertainty is a bad thing.

This, in turn, figures in what we should make of Christ's apparent prediction that the world would end soon. That's just one side of his eschatological teaching. That needs to be counterbalanced by the other side.

If you take his teaching as a whole into account, we are kept in suspense precisely because we don't know how or when this tension will resolve itself. Kinda like a Whodunit. The novelist (or screenwriter) includes clues, not only to help the reader (or viewer) isolate the culprit, but to throw him off the scent. Early in the story, the novelist will feed the reader clues that lead the read to suspect the wrong character. To prematurely solve the mystery.

Then, as the plot progresses, that character is rules out, and attention turns to another person of interest. By process of elimination, the mystery is finally solved. And it may be a plot twist. A surprise ending. To some extent, Jesus employs the technique of a mystery fiction writer.

When was Hebrews written?

The book of Hebrews is, among other things, a witness to the historical Jesus. As such, dating the book early can suggest it has more value as a historical witness than dating it later.

Mind you, I don't think that's intrinsically significant. A second generation Christian could live well past 70 AD. And, in any event, Hebrews is inspired.

Nevertheless, in terms of Christian apologetics, it's worth considering the date—since we're not necessarily dealing with believers.

Some scholars think the reference to Timothy in 13:23 means Paul was still alive, although their inference is unclear to me.

The best argument for a pre-70 date is the author's silence on the destruction of the temple. If the book was written after 70 AD, surely he'd use the destruction of the temple to illustrate his point.

In objection it is said that his argument is structured around the tabernacle rather than the temple. However, that objection is circular:

i) His argument may be structured around the tabernacle in large part because the temple was still standing, so he couldn't use that to make his point. Had it been destroyed by then, it would make sense to use it.

ii) In addition, the tabernacle was inherently temporary, so that was a natural illustration.

There is, however, a neglected argument for the pre-70 date. Scholars typically think what occasioned the book was a church in crisis. Some think it was addressed to a house-church in Rome.

More generally, they think it was addressed to a Messianic congregation, or at least a church with significant Jewish-Christian representation. Members were tempted to commit apostasy by reverting to Judaism because Christians were facing persecution from the Roman authorities, and Judaism was a *religio licita*. They figured they could enjoy the political and religious advantages of Judaism without the disadvantages of Christianity.

If, however, Hebrews was written after 70 AD, it's hard to see how that would remain an attractive option. Some Roman authorities always viewed Jews as troublemakers. And surely the Jewish revolt hardened Roman attitudes towards the Jews. So it's unclear how reverting to Judaism would afford them special protection, considering the official and unofficial hostility that would be directed at Jews on the heels of the Jewish revolt. And that consideration is intensified in this congregation was located in the capital city of the Roman Empire.

If, however, the temple had been destroyed, then there's a sense in which they *couldn't* go back. To be sure, the Babylonian exile might furnish a precedent, but that's an inauspicious precedent.

"I shall be like that tree, I shall die at the top"

NT scholars typically think "Jesus traditions" were initially transmitted orally. More liberal scholars think this was creative oral tradition; more conservative scholars think this was oral history, based on retentive living memory. Oral cultures foster a retentive memory.

Occasionally, you have a maverick scholar like Alan Millard who thinks writing in the time of Jesus has been neglected. Millard has done original research on the subject, sifting primary sources regarding 1C literacy—especially in Jewish circles. And I think that's a very good angle to take.

I myself espouse the plenary verbal inspiration of Scripture. In addition, I think God enhanced the memories of the disciples (cf. Jn 14:26).

However, let's consider oral history. It's a truism that we remember events better than words. But how accurately do we remember words? Let's take a comparison:

By 1732 he [Jonathan Swift] was noticing a serious deficit in short-term memory: "I often forget what I did yesterday, or what passed half an hour ago." It was a condition he had long foreseen. As early as 1720, when he was walking with Edward Young, secretary to the lord lieutenant at the time, he made a remark that Young put in print much later: "As I and others were talking with him an evening's

walk, about a mile out of Dublin, he stopped short; we passed on; but perceiving that he did not follow us, I went back, and found him fixed as a statue, and earnestly gazing upward at a noble elm, which in its uppermost branches was much withered and decayed. Pointing at it, he said, 'I shall be like that tree, I shall die at the top.'"

No reason has ever been given to doubt Young's anecdote; he was a highly principled clergyman as well as a moralizing poet.

...there is corroboration in an independent anecdote from Swift's friend Faulkner: "One time, in a journey from Drogheda to Navan, he rode before his company, made a sudden stop, dismounted his horse, fell on his knees, lifted up his hands, and prayed in the most devout manner. When his friends came up, he desired and insisted on their alighting, which they did, and asked him the meaning. 'Gentlemen,' said he, 'pray join your hearts in fervent prayers with mine, that I may never be like this oak tree, which is decayed and withered at the top, whilst all the other parts are sound.'" **Leo Damrosch, Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World (Yale University Press 2013), 460.**

Gospel harmonists are sometimes unsure whether similar passages in the Gospels are variations on the same event or similar events. Here we have the same imagery and sentiment, but the setting is different. The wording is quite similar in each case: the difference is that, in the first case, the "withered and decayed" phrase is used by the narrator, while in the second case, it is attributed to Swift. Is that just coincidental? Or did Young misremember that Swift used that phrase? Or did Young remember, but put those words in the mouth of the narrator to introduce the scene?

In any case, we have two independent accounts that convey the same idea, using the same imagery and many of the same words. It's not just the "gist" of what he said. Both accounts preserve some of the very same wording. It's just that in Young's account, some of what is a direct quote in Faulkner (attributed to Swift) is reassigned to the narrator. Young may well be exercising a bit of editorial license, by describing the scene in Swift's words—or perhaps Swift's statement influenced how Young himself remembered the scene.

Whatever the explanation, we're dealing with uninspired recollection of a one-time event, yet in comparing the two accounts, the recollection is both substantively and verbally accurate.

Unknown Jesus

Moderate to conservative scholars have penned many excellent defenses of the historicity of the Gospels. Even more liberal scholars like Dale Allison often make useful point in their defense.

There is, however, a neglected line of evidence for the historicity of the Gospels—and that's what they *don't* say. Mark says nothing about the childhood of Jesus. John relates in passing a scurrilous rumor about his illegitimacy. Both Matthew and Luke contain infancy narratives. Luke records one incident from his boyhood. And that's it!

Yet many readers would naturally be curious to know more about his childhood. If the Gospels were fictional biographies, we'd expect them to satisfy their pious curiosity.

To take a comparison, stories about superheroes like Batman, Spiderman, and Superman contain detailed backstories regarding their childhood. And that's because fictional writers aren't constrained by factual knowledge or hard reality.

The obvious reason the Gospel writers say so little about the childhood of Jesus is because they only write about what they know, and they don't know much about his childhood. And when you ponder that, it's very realistic.

Most famous people, unless they are born into a famous family, aren't born famous. Nothing is written about them before they become famous. Very few people ever heard of them before they become famous.

And oftentimes, what's written about them has reference to the things they did after they become famous. To the things that made them famous. What they did before they became public figures may get far less attention. And depending on the time and place, far less material may be available.

If you knew ahead of time that they were going to become famous, you could interview neighbors, older relatives, &c. But by the time they become famous, the pool of information about their childhood is already beginning to dry up. By the time biographers or historians write about them, living witnesses from their youth may be few.

To take another comparison, although the resurrection of Christ is a central event, both in the Gospels and the NT generally, nowhere is the actual event described. No NT writer describes the scene of Jesus coming back to life in the tomb.

Instead, they describe his death. His entombment. And the *effect* of his resurrection: his post-Resurrection appearances.

Why don't they record the event itself? For the simple reason that they only report what they know. No one else was in the tomb with Jesus when he came back to life. And even if someone had been there, there's a sense in which there was nothing to see, because it was dark inside the tomb.

Now, if the Gospels were fictional biographies, we'd expect them to *show* the Resurrection. Give a visual description. They don't do that because the Gospel writers are constrained by the factual information at their disposal. By personal observation or testimony from eyewitnesses. But Jesus was alone in the tomb.

In the Gospels, what you get is what was seen. There's a lot you don't get because there's a lot that no one saw by the time of Christ's public ministry.

Turning back the clock

One of the peculiarities of the Resurrection is that some acquaintances didn't immediately recognize Jesus (e.g. Jn 20:14-15; cf. Lk 24:16ff.).

The Emmaus road incident is easier to explain due to God temporarily inhibiting their perception. But what about a case like Mary Magdalene?

One explanation may be the nature of the Resurrection itself. Glorification has the capacity to repair and rejuvenate. It depends on the condition of the individual when they died.

If a Christian dies of brain cancer, God won't resurrect him with brain cancer. If a Christian dies at 90, God won't resurrect him at 90.

The glorified body is youthful and ageless. In the world to come, the saints will no longer experience illness and senescence.

Jesus was in his early 30s when he died. He spent lots of time out of doors in direct sunlight. When he was on the road, he probably slept out of doors. In addition to hot summers, Israel can have freezing winters.

So his complexion was weatherbeaten. And by that time he may have had thinning hair or graying hair. In any event, he probably looked older than he would with less exposure to the harsh elements.

But one effect of the Resurrection was to rejuvenate him. His acquaintances wouldn't expect Jesus to appear

significantly younger.

When did Paul first see Jesus?

It's common for scholars to deny that Paul knew the historical Jesus. But is that correct?

Paul witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen:

12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council (Acts 6:12).

58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul (7:58).

8 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison (Acts 8:1-3).

Stephen was martyred about a year after Christ was crucified. Cf. Eckhard Schnabel, **ACTS, 43**. As another scholar notes:

The fact that witnesses laid their clothes at Saul's feet suggest that he was already the acknowledged leader in the opposition to the earthly church (cf. 8:1,3). David Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles, 268.

In 4:35,37; 5:2, lying something at someone's feet implies a recognition of that person's authority. Ibid., 268n89.

So Paul was in Jerusalem a year after the Crucifixion. And he was a seminal figure in the persecution of the early church.

What was Paul doing in Jerusalem at that time? He was a rabbinical student.

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day (Acts 22:3).

This statement indicates that although Tarsus was his hometown, he was already living in Jerusalem well before he began his rabbinical studies. As one scholar notes:

Paul mentions his place of origin only briefly and moves on to his early life in Jerusalem. There are three participles in the Greek, highlighting successive stages in Paul's experience: he was "born" in tarsus, "brought up" in Jerusalem, and "educated" at the feet of Gamaliel. So Paul's theological roots were essentially Palestinian rather than Diaspora Judaism...This phase of Paul's education probably began some time after he turned thirteen, when he was instructed by Gamaliel "according to the strictness of our ancestral law," ibid. 597.

One possibility is that Paul's father moved the family to Jerusalem to give his son proper socialization in traditional Judaism. This preceded his formal rabbinical education. Or perhaps there was an aunt and uncle in Jerusalem who hosted Paul. That's reinforced by another statement:

16 Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul (Acts 23:16).

As one scholar notes,

Paul and his sister were apparently brought up in Jerusalem, and his sister remained there to marry and have children. Ibid. 621.

The upshot is that Paul was in town at the time Jesus made trips to Jerusalem during his public ministry. That's reinforced by the fact that Jesus went to Jerusalem during major festivals.

This would also help to explain why Paul was on the groundfloor of opposition to the Christian movement. He was a protege of Gamaliel, who was, in turn, a member of the Sanhedrin. Gamaliel was directly involved in formulating a policy to counter the nascent Christian movement in Jerusalem.

26 Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people...34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while (Acts 5:25,34).

This gave Paul access to official proceedings via his mentor. That explains his presence at the martyrdom of Stephen. By riding on the coattails of his mentor, Paul had entree to the high priestly entourage. But Paul took a harder line than Gamaliel.

Considering all these connections, it seems quite likely that Paul saw Jesus preach. He certainly had occasion to see Jesus preach. And Jesus drew big crowds. Surely Paul would be curious.

That would explain why Paul took such an early and avid—albeit hostile—interest in the Christian movement. It didn't happen overnight, right after the apostles began preaching the Resurrection.

That, of course, wouldn't make him a believer. For one thing, that doesn't mean he saw Jesus perform miracles.

And even if he did, the Jewish leaders had an apologetic to explain away the miracles of Jesus: they called him a sorcerer. We find that allegation in the Gospels and Talmud alike. Assuming he saw Jesus preach, he probably viewed Jesus as a false prophet or Messianic pretender.

But the radiant postmortem appearance of Jesus to Paul on the Damascus road was too much for Paul to deny. Rumors about the Resurrection turned out to be true after all!

Eyewitness to history

A cliché of critical Bible scholarship is to treat history and theology as antithetical categories. For instance, they may regard John as the least historical of the Gospels because it contains the most theological interpretation.

Conservative scholars have, of course, made the banal observation that critical scholars are guilty of erecting a false dichotomy. But I'd like to put a sharper point on that observation.

It's true that the Gospels are more than a record of events. They are *interpreted* events. But not only is that consistent with their historicity, but that's to be expected if they are based on eyewitness testimony.

Most everyone is a historian. I'm a historian with respect to my own time and place. What I myself have seen. People I personally knew.

When historians and biographers write about public figures or events in the recent past, they try to interview close acquaintances. That's because a close acquaintance can be an invaluable source of information. Parents know a lot about their kids, and vice versa. Siblings know a lot about each other. Childhood friends know a lot about each other. And this involves two types of information:

i) *What* the subject thought, said, did.

A close acquaintance may have a detailed knowledge of part, most, or even all of the subject's life. In many cases he has firsthand knowledge of what the subject said and did. He was there when it happened. He saw it or heard it.

Likewise, that subject may have told him about things he did in the past. So the close acquaintance is getting that straight from the horse's mouth.

ii) *Why* the subject thought, said, did what he did.

In addition to knowing what he thought, said, and did, a close acquaintance may know why that's the case. And these typically go together. There are several factors that may motivate people to think, say, and believe in certain ways:

a) If you know a person well enough to know their character traits. Their temperament. Their values. Their likes and dislikes. If you've been around them often enough and long enough to observe a pattern. That makes them predictable. You usually know what to expect. We are creatures of habit. We have formative influences. We rarely act out of character.

b) They may tell a close acquaintance why they did something, why they like or dislike something. They will explain their actions.

c) If you know the events leading up to a particular decision in his life. Circumstances constrain our field of action. We choose from the available options.

One thing leads to another. What we think, said, or did is in response to prior events. It has a context in a larger chain of events.

As a result, a close acquaintance is in privileged position to *interpret* the subject's action. Give a reason for why the subject thought what he thought, said what he said, and did

what he did. This isn't the fictional omniscient narrator; rather, this is realistic.

This is why a good historian or biographer will seek out people who knew the subject well, and question them, not only on the facts, but on the motivations. A close acquaintance has that interpretive frame of reference.

The Gospels and ancient literacy

One of the staple—or should I say, stale?—arguments for the historical unreliability of the Gospels is the claim that Jesus traditions underwent extensive creative oral transmission before they were finally written down.

Now, this argument never made any sense even on its own terms. Since the Gospels are documents, there was clearly a constituency for written Gospels. Even if you date them late, was literacy notably higher c. 70-110 than 40-70?

Even liberals think the NT contains a number of authentic Pauline letters. If those could be written c- 50-60, why not the Gospels?

The Roman Empire wasn't a preliterate civilization during the first half of the 1C, that suddenly become literate during the second half.

But in addition, there's increasing evidence for higher literacy at this time and place that many scholars previously made allowance for. And that makes the contention of lengthy oral tradition even less plausible:

Early Christianity is often regarded as an entirely lower-class phenomenon, and thus characterised by a low educational and cultural level. This view is false for several reasons. (1) When dealing with

the ancient world, inferences cannot be made from the social class to which one belongs to one's educational and cultural level. (2) We may confidently state that in the early Christian urban congregations more than 50 per cent of the members could read and write at an acceptable level. (3) Socialisation within the early congregations occurred mainly through education and literature. No religious figure before (or after) Jesus Christ became so quickly and comprehensively the subject of written texts! (4) The early Christians emerged as a creative and thoughtful literary movement. They read the Old Testament in a new context, they created new literary genres (gospels) and reformed existing genres (the Pauline letters, miracle stories, parables). (5) From the very beginning, the amazing literary production of early Christianity was based on a historic strategy that both made history and wrote history. (6) Moreover, early Christians were largely

bilingual, and able to accept sophisticated texts, read them with understanding, and pass them along to others. (7) Even in its early stages, those who joined the new Christian movement entered an educated world of language and thought. (8) We should thus presuppose a relatively high intellectual level in the early Christian congregations, for a comparison with Greco-Roman religion, local cults, the mystery religions, and the Caesar cult indicates that early Christianity was a religion with a very high literary production that included critical reflection and refraction.

Jonathan C. Borland 3/06/2015 4:37 pm

The basis of Schnelle's "confident statement" is basically the 30 pages of his well-documented article, but he briefly states his argument on pp. 118-120.

After briefly reviewing the innumerable archaeological finds regarding education levels in

the ancient world and citing valuable recent research, Schnelle cites p. 94 of R. Baumgarten's article "Elementar- und Grammatikunterricht: Griechenland," pp. 89-100 in *Handbuch der Bildung und Erziehung in der Antike* (ed. Christes, Klein, Lüth; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), which apparently states that in ancient cities probably most of the children went to elementary school, and when the very different grades of reading and writing abilities are included in the estimate, it may be assumed that around 30-50 percent of the population of middle and larger sized cities had an elementary knowledge of reading and writing. Then Schnelle lists his seven reasons in favor of relatively higher literacy in the early churches (anyways more than 50%) in comparison to the general population.

1. In the beginning period it is a matter mainly of urban churches, and the extent of literacy in the cities was notably higher than in the countryside.

2. A considerable part of the church members came from the sphere of influence of Judaism, which exhibited a higher literacy rate than the average in the Roman empire. Also the household slaves (cf.

Phlm) who are linked to early churches must have been equipped with a higher-than-average grade of education.

3. A lively literary and intellectual life prevailed in the early churches. The Septuagint was studied, i.e. read aloud, read, and discussed. Paul made use of a secretary (cf. Rom 16:22), the Pauline Epistles were not merely read aloud (cf. 1 Thess 5:27), but the Apostle also took for granted that people took up his epistles with their own eyes to understand, thus that they read (cf. Gal 6:11: "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand" ; further 1 Cor 16:21; Phlm 19).

4. The texts show that in the churches - as usual in the ancient world - reading loudly or reading aloud was predominant, which gave a special status to the oral tradition, so that also church members with lower writing and reading abilities could actively participate in church life. Furthermore, education was (and is) not identical with reading and writing competence, since one who could not (or could only in a limited way) read and write was not automatically uneducated.

5. Moreover, education was not tied to affiliation with social classes in the 1st century C.E.

6. From the beginning teachers were active in the churches (1 Cor 12:28; Gal 6:6; Rom 12:7b; Acts 13:1). Their duties were concentrated on the interpretation of the (oral or written) kerygma as well as the exegesis of written texts.

7. Above all, the multilingualism (Greek/Latin/Hebrew/Aramaic/local languages) of many church members, the creation of new literary genres (Gospels), and the superior themes handled in the Epistles (foremost in the Pauline Epistles) clearly demonstrate that a great linguistic and intellectual creativity prevailed in the new movement.

Schnelle closes this section by stating, “These central aspects shall now be pursued.” And pursue he does!

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2015/02/new-article-in-nts-on-early.html>

Cleansing the temple

1. A basic issue in Gospel harmonization is whether Jesus "cleansed" the temple once or twice.

(Some contemporary scholars call it the "clearing" of the temple, which might be more accurate, but for convenience I'll stick with the traditional designation.)

2. Let's block out the theoretical options, then assess them.

A. Some scholars think it never happened at all. They think the account is legendary or fictional. They take that position because they think it would be impossible for Jesus to singlehandedly empty the courtyard. That's not a one-man job. If, moreover, he did so, that would figure in the charges at his trial.

B. Some scholars simply combine John and the Synoptics. This is called additive harmonization. They think Jesus cleansed the temple twice: first at the beginning of his public ministry (John), second at the end of his public ministry (Synoptics).

C. Some scholars think this was a one-time event. There are variations on that position:

i) Jesus cleansed the temple at the end of his public ministry. The Synoptic chronology is accurate. John relocates the incident at the beginning of Christ's public ministry.

ii) Jesus cleansed the temple at the beginning of his public ministry. The Johannine chronology is accurate. The Synoptics relocate the incident at the end of his ministry.

3. Regarding A, I will say three things: two now and one later (under #4).

i) A number of scholars argue that the incident is on a smaller scale. It probably took place in the South portico. Given the vast size of the courtyard, most folks present wouldn't even notice what Jesus did. This was an emblematic action.

ii) Disrupting the market place wouldn't be a capital offense. So even if the incident had many witnesses, that's irrelevant to the trial.

4. Regarding B, it's certainly possible that Jesus did it twice. That can't be ruled out. However:

i) John records one cleansing and the Synoptics record one cleansing. There's no reason to automatically assume these must refer to separate events. You only get that by comparing John with the Synoptics. Nothing wrong with that. But it's not as if John says there were two, or the Synoptics say there were two.

ii) There are conflicting intuitions on which is more implausible. Some scholars think it's more implausible to suppose Jesus "repeated precisely the same action at the same location with the same attendant question concerning his authority" (Ridderbos). Others think it's more implausible that John would relocate the incident.

An argument against two cleansings is that the authorities wouldn't let Jesus get away with pulling the same stunt twice. However, I think that's a fairly weak objection:

i) The authorities couldn't anticipate that Jesus was going to stage a repeat performance. That was unexpected.

ii) Unless they had minders following him around, they couldn't prevent it in time.

iii) As the Son of God, nobody can stop Jesus from doing whatever he sets his mind to. I'm sure Jesus could be very intimidating or even terrifying if it served his purpose. He's quite capable of staring down opponents.

One argument for B is that an earlier cleansing synchronizes Jn 2:20 with what Josephus says about the terminus ad quo for the rebuilding of the temple.

However, that appeal suffers from complications. Josephus gives conflicting chronological indicators. So there's the question of how reliable Josephus is in that regard.

And there's the additional question of what his terminology denotes. Is he using hieron and naos synonymously, or do they have different referents?

John's own usage is inconclusive inasmuch as we need to distinguish between the narrator's voice and the speakers he quotes.

There's the further question of what the aorist passive verb (oikodomethē) means in 2:20.

There's an undesigned coincidence between the trial of Christ and the cleansing in John. In the Synoptics, his accusers allege that he threatened to tear down the temple. But the Synoptics don't report Jesus ever saying that. Yet Jesus says something like that in Jn 2, although his accusers twist his words.

However, that's consistent with a single cleansing if the Johannine account reflects narrative sequence rather than chronological sequence.

5. Regarding C-i, there's not just a question of synchronizing John with the Synoptics but synchronizing the Synoptics with each other. Mark explicitly says the cleansing took place a day after Jesus first arrived in Jerusalem. Because it was late afternoon, Jesus decided to retire to a suburb (Bethany) for the night, then returned to Jerusalem a day later to cleanse the temple.

By contrast, Matthew and Luke simplify Mark's chronology. To a casual reader, the cleansing happens on the same day Jesus arrives in Jerusalem.

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.

Since Mark is the only one of the four whose explicit about the chronology, while Matthew, Luke, and John are all ambiguous on the chronological connections, consistency demands that we have the same standard for all concerned.

6. Regarding C-ii:

i) In general, John has a more precise and detailed chronology than the Synoptics. So there's no presumption that in case of real or apparent conflict, we give the Synoptics the nod.

ii) Apropos (i), Synoptic chronology is generally simpler. They only record Jesus making one trip to Jerusalem, so that's the only place they could put the incident. By contrast, John has Jesus making three trips to Jerusalem.

iii) However, it's logical that this takes place at the end of his ministry, as the culmination of his challenge to the religious status quo. And the authorities would regard this as the last straw, the final affront.

7. I incline to the view that there was a single temple cleansing, although I don't have a firm position on that.

That doesn't necessarily mean, that John relocated the incident to advance his theological agenda. That interpretation may well be too literary. Rather, he may put it there simply because that's what he was thinking about on the day he dictated that section of his Gospel.

Or, assuming that this is more deliberate, it could be a flashforward, like we have in movies.

Miracles and memories

Unbelievers think an account that includes a miracle greatly lowers the credibility of the account. Is that true?

What makes an event memorable? Off the top of my head, I'd say several things can make an event memorable: is it unusual, interesting, significant, or emotionally resonant? How much attention did you pay to it?

Any one factor can make an event memorable, and combining two or more factors can make it all the more memorable. In addition, the factors can interact in constructive ways.

For instance, the death of parents is extremely common. However, that's statistical. It's hardly a common experience for *you* when *your* mother or father dies. For you, that's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Moreover, that's a very emotional experience. You only have one mother and father.

Likewise, the death of parents in *general* is not significant to strangers. If *your* parent dies, that's not normally significant to *me*. But if *my* parent dies, that's highly significant to *me*. Some events are intrinsically significant, or personally significant, or both.

By the same token, people typically pay great attention to the death of their parents. That's not something they only notice in passing.

On a related note, whether or not we find something interesting is often subjective. What one person finds fascinating may be boring to another person.

Now, consider the miracles of Christ. Take the raising of Lazarus. That would be an *extremely* memorable event. Memorable on multiple grounds, and each factor would magnify its unforgettable character.

To say it's unusual or out-of-the-ordinary would be an understatement. And by definition, it's an attention-grabbing event.

Mortality is emotionally resonant. The fear of death. Separation from loved ones. A reversal of death would be at least as emotional—if not more so, because it's unexpected.

The possibility of restoration to life is universally interesting. We all have a stake in that.

It is both intrinsically and personally significant. Directly significant to his sisters. But significant to onlookers. After all, if Jesus can do that for their brother, he can do that for me and my loved ones.

A miracle like that is unforgettable. A life-changing experience.

Not all of Christ's miracles have that direct, intrinsic importance. But they all point to the power of Christ. How he can provide for his people.

Take the multiplication of food. If he can do *that*, is there anything he *cannot* do? More to the point, what he is able to do for me or my loved ones.

The upshot is that the most memorable events in the Christ would not be what he said, or even what he generally did, but his miracles in particular. The supernatural aspect of his ministry.

The Ehrman follies

I'll comment on some statements that Bart Ehrman made in a recent interview:

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

In some cases I will rearrange his statements to collate statements on the same topic. That will make the review more logical and less repetitive.

I never argue that the empty tomb and the appearances somehow are incompatible and cancel each other out, or that they are in any way incompatible. My view instead is simply that they are two different traditions and it's important to recognize their differences. It has long been noted that the apostle Paul speaks of Jesus's appearances, but never mentions the story about the women going to the tomb and finding it empty. Strikingly, the Gospel of Mark tells the story about the women going to the tomb to find it empty, but never mentions any stories about Jesus's post-resurrection appearances.

In the Gospels (and Acts), the empty tomb functions to show that Jesus really was physically raised from

the dead. But, strikingly, it never leads anyone to believe. (And why would it? If a body was buried in a tomb and later it was not there, would someone immediately say: "He has been raised from the dead?" Of course not. They would say: "Grave robbers!" Or, "Hey, I'm at the wrong tomb!")

On the other hand, the resurrection appearances function to show that Jesus really did come back to life. And it is these appearances, and only these appearances, that cause people to believe.

i) If Jesus *did* rise from the dead, then you'd expect two outcomes: an empty tomb and post-Resurrection appearances of the risen Christ. These aren't two different traditions. Rather, these are two logical consequences of the same underlying event. Of course, Ehrman denies the event, but the point is that you don't need to appeal to two different traditions to account for this twofold phenomenon. Rather, if Jesus rose from the dead, that would have both results. His death would empty the tomb and he'd appear to acquaintances to attest his resurrection.

ii) In addition, the Gospels record that Jesus predicted his resurrection. So it's not just empty tomb accounts. That must be complemented by predictions which explain why the tomb will be empty.

iii) The fact that Paul doesn't mention the women finding the tomb empty is such an old chestnut:

- a)** Paul is writing a letter, not a biography.
- b)** Paul is writing to Christians who already knew about the life of Christ.
- c)** It's a mark of Paul's integrity that he doesn't say more than he knows. He doesn't make up a story.

The book is about how we go about the incredibly difficult process of knowing what the authors of the NT wrote, given the circumstance that we don't have their original writings, or copies of those originals, or copies of the copies of those originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of those originals.

That book was less about how specialists reconstruct the NT text (the theme of the Metzger book) than it was about the enormity of the textual problem (as presupposed in the Metzger book). Yes, we have abundant evidence for the text of the NT. But very little of that evidence is early, and much of it is highly problematic.

I find that very deceptive:

- i)** This isn't like anecdotes that are passed down by word-of-mouth. Rather, when a scribe copies a text, the text

furnishes an objective standard of comparison. It's not like relying on memory. Or secondhand memories.

ii) If a scribe introduces the wrong word into the text, that will usually be detectable, because using the wrong verb or noun will generally make the sentence nonsense. The next scribe will be able to see that there's something wrong with the sentence. And he will be able to see where the problem lies. The wrong word will stick out. A detectable error is generally a correctible error. You can usually figure out what the original word was.

We do this all the time when we run across typos. We can spot the mistake and fix the mistake.

iii) Even if we're unsure what the original word was, yet because communication tends to be redundant, you usually get the gist of what the sentence meant even if one word is wrong.

iv) In addition, we have thousands of manuscripts. There are usually many manuscripts that contain the right word for every manuscript that contains the wrong word.

I have long been struck by the fact (which historians generally take to be a fact) that Jesus died around the year 30 CE, but the first surviving account of his life was not written until around 70 CE (the Gospel of Mark; Matthew and Luke were maybe 10–15 years later than that, and John may another 10–15 years after even that).

So, where did the Gospel writers get their stories of Jesus from? There are compelling reasons for thinking that the authors of our Gospels were not eyewitnesses to Jesus's life (none of them claims to be). They were living in different countries, in different communities, speaking different languages, decades later. And so how did they get their stories?

For nearly a century now, scholars have argued that they got their stories from the "oral tradition." That is, people told and retold the stories, until the Gospel writers heard them and wrote them down.

The reason there are so many differences (and similarities!) in the Gospels is that the stories they narrate were being told by word of mouth, year after year, decade after decade, after the disciples had come to believe that Jesus had been raised. What happens to stories that get circulated this way? They change. People forget things. They misremember things. They invent things. Happens all the time. It happened to the stories of Jesus.

It is true to say that many parts of the New Testament show knowledge of first-century

geography, religion, and culture. But how could it not show this knowledge? It was written by first-century authors! Presumably, they knew about the geography, religion, and culture of the first century! But that doesn't mean that what they say is historically accurate or not. Suppose I were to write a novel, or even a biography, about someone who lived in my home town of Lawrence, Kansas. Presumably, I would know about the main street (Massachusetts), the location of the university (on the hill), the basic size of the place (middlin'), the industries in the area (e.g., the Lawrence Paper Company), and so on. Would that make the stories I told about my protagonist true? Of course not. I could simply be making stuff up. If in 2,000 years an archaeologist digs up Lawrence in order to see if my novel is "true," well, the location of the university on a hill would have no bearing on whether my stories about a professor who taught at the university are true or not.

The problem with his illustration is that his fictional story about Lawrence, Kansas is based on his firsthand knowledge of the town. That's his hometown, where he grew up. That's why, even if the story is fictional, it will contain many historically accurate details.

But that's precisely where the comparison falls apart when he says the Gospels were written decades after the fact by authors who weren't eyewitnesses, or had access to firsthand informants. Under that scenario, it's puzzling that the Gospels would contain so much accurate information about a time and place decades earlier. Information that archeology can corroborate. All the more remarkable when you consider the random preservation and discovery of corroborating evidence.

So, about five years ago it occurred to me that scholars of the Gospels would be well served to learn more about what we know about oral cultures, and about story-telling practices, and more broadly about memory. How do we learn things? And remember them? And reimagine them? And forget them? And invent them? And retell them? And then the person we tell a story to: how do they learn, remember, reimagine, forget, invent, and retell them? And the person they tell a story to: how do they...? And so on.

He acts as though he's breaking new ground on a neglected topic. Evidently, Erhman doesn't bother to read standard

monographs of the historical Jesus that discuss memory studies, viz. Dale Allison, **RECONSTRUCTING JESUS**, Richard Bauckham, **JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES**, Craig Keener, **THE HISTORICAL JESUS OF THE GOSPELS**.

The view is that even if miracles did happen in the past — let's simply grant that they happened — there is no way to establish that they happened using the historical disciplines (i.e., to show they are, using your term from earlier, "objective historical truth"). Again, that's not a result of atheist, anti-supernaturalist presuppositions. It is the result of historical method. Historians simply have no access to supernatural activities involving the actions of God. Only theologians (among the scholars) have access to God. Theologians can certainly affirm that God has done miracles, but they are affirming this on theological grounds, not historical grounds.

The past is everything that happened before now. History is what we can establish as having happened before now. Miracles may be in the past. But they cannot be established as having happened. Big difference.

Historians, by the nature of their craft, have no access to any activities of God. That is the purview of theologians. Historians do not have tools to access the supernatural. That's no one's fault. It's just the way it is. Historians also have no way of establishing if a poem is beautiful, if I love my wife, if there is dark matter, if the Pythagorean theorem is true, or anything else outside the realm of "history" (please remember, "the past" is not synonymous with history). To believe in the resurrection of Jesus is a religious commitment. It is a belief. It is no more susceptible of historical "proof" than is the claim that there is only one God (or that there are two; or 24).

i) A miraculous past event would be a certain kind of historical event. If history can establish the occurrence of past events, why can't history establish the occurrence of miraculous past events? If they happened, they are past events. In that respect, they are just like other past events: something that happened in the past.

ii) Likewise, the type of evidence would be the same: testimonial evidence.

iii) Suppose Ehrman lived in the time of Christ. Suppose he witnessed Jesus walk on water, change water into wine, multiply the loaves and fish, or raise Lazarus from the dead. Is he saying an observer would have no access to the event

itself? He could see it happen right before his eyes. He could see what things were like right before the event, and what things were like right after the event.

He could see and feel that Jesus was really dead. He could see and feel that Jesus was really alive. Presumably, that would suffice to establish this as having happened.

iv) Perhaps he'd say that's different because we're dealing with reported miracles rather than miracles we can see for ourselves. And there's a degree of uncertainty with respect to secondhand information. But even if we grant that distinction for the sake of argument, that's not a categorical difference between historical events in general and miraculous events in particular. In both cases, a historian is dealing with reported past events. Yet Ehrman wants to say there's something qualitatively different about miracles that render them inaccessible.

v) Or does Ehrman intend to distinguish between the occurrence of an event and the interpretation of an event? A historian could establish the occurrence of a miraculous event qua event but not the occurrence of a miraculous event qua miraculous? A historian is disqualified from classifying the event as miraculous. He can't access supernatural agency in the sense that a historian can't establish that God caused it. Is that what Ehrman is groping at?

If so, why can't a historian "access divine activities" from the effects of divine activities? If there's historical evidence for the effects, why can't a historian infer the cause? For instance, historians routinely attribute certain effects to personal agency. They go behind the event to the source.

vi) Apropos (v), consider a definition of the miraculous. Here's how J. L. Mackie unpacks the concept of the miraculous:

What we want to do is to contrast the order of nature with a possible divine or supernatural intervention. The laws of nature, we must say, describe the ways in which the world—including, of course, human beings—works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it.

Even in the natural world we have a clear understanding of how there can be for a time a closed system, in which everything that happens results from factors within that system in accordance with its laws of working, but how then something may intrude from outside it, bringing about changes that the system would not have produced of its own accord, so that things go on after this intrusion differently from how they would have gone on if the system had remained closed. All we need do, then, is to regard the whole natural world as a being, for most of the time, such a closed

system; we can then think of a supernatural intervention as something that intrudes into that system from outside the natural world as a whole.

*However, the full concept of a miracle requires that the intrusion should be purposive, that it should fulfill the intention of a god or other supernatural being...It presupposes a power to fulfill intentions directly without physical means. **The Miracle of Theism (Oxford 1982), 19-22.***

Suppose we grant that definition for the sake of argument. Since Mackie was a prominent atheist philosopher, I'm not tilting the scales in favor of Christianity by using his definition. (I disagree with his notion that a miracle must bypass physical means.)

In that case, a historian can classify a past event as a miracle if it meets the definition: an event that happened, but would not have happened if the natural world was left to itself, as opposed to outside agency (i.e. supernatural intervention).

Let's consider how Erhman tried to justify his position ten years ago:

I'm just going to say that miracles are so highly improbable that they're the least possible occurrence in any given instance. They violate the

way nature naturally works. They are so highly improbable, their probability is infinitesimally remote, that we call them miracles. No one on the face of this Earth can walk on lukewarm water. What are the chances that one of us could do it? Well, none of us can, so let's say the chances are one in ten billion. Well, suppose somebody can. Well, given the chances are one in ten billion, but, in fact, none of us can.

What about the resurrection of Jesus? I'm not saying it didn't happen; but if it did happen, it would be a miracle. The resurrection claims are claims that not only that Jesus' body came back alive; it came back alive never to die again. That's a violation of what naturally happens, every day, time after time, millions of times a year. What are the chances of that happening? Well, it'd be a miracle. In other words, it'd be so highly improbable that we can't account for it by natural means. A theologian may claim that it's true, and to argue with the theologian we'd have to argue on theological grounds because there are no historical grounds to argue on. Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by

definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did.

I wish we could establish miracles, but we can't. It's no one's fault. It's simply that the canons of historical research do not allow for the possibility of establishing as probable the least probable of all occurrences. For that reason, Bill's four pieces of evidence are completely irrelevant. There cannot be historical probability for an event that defies probability, even if the event did happen. The resurrection has to be taken on faith, not on the basis of proof.

Read more: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman#ixzz42WR9XuNR>

But that's confused in multiple respects:

i) Using Mackie's definition, a miracle is improbable with respect to what could happen when nature is operating as an isolated system, absent outside "interference".

ii) That, however, doesn't mean a miracle is improbable *given* divine intervention.

iii) Why does Ehrman assume it's unlikely that God will interfere with natural order? What's his justification for that supposition?

iv) I'd add that even if we frame the issue in terms of natural laws, unless we define a law of nature in contrast to divine agency, there's no reason to say divine agency "violates" a law of nature. Why can't divine agency sometimes be in accordance with the laws of nature?

The Ehrman follies, part 2

I'm going to comment on the next installment of Ehrman's debate:

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-major-statement/>

Ehrman is very repetitious in his debates and books, so I won't repeat objections I've addressed before in responding to his material.

Ehrman cites stock "contradictions" like raising the daughter of Jairus and the cleansing of the temple. Having recently discussed these myself, I won't repeat myself here.

I should stress that the views I lay out here are not unique to me, as if I'm the one who thought all this up. On the contrary, the views I will be laying out here are those held by virtually every professor of biblical studies who teaches at every major liberal arts college or research university in North America. Take your pick: Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, University of Chicago, University of Kansas, University of Nebraska, University of Minnesota,

University of Florida, Amherst, Middlebury, Oberlin — literally, pick any top liberal arts college or state university in North America, and the views that I will be sketching here are pretty much the sorts of things you will find taught there.

Ah, yes, the power of secular groupthink.

The Gospels are obviously full of supernatural stories. And for scholars prior to the Enlightenment, these stories were actual events of history. They really happened. If you had been there, you would have been able to record them with your video camera...

Somewhat misleading. Yes, a video camera would be able to record the supernatural events. That, though, doesn't mean the Gospels narrate them from the perspective of a cameraman. Writing is a different medium than photography. You can see several things happen simultaneously (e.g. watching football), but writing is sequential. Even if you can watch several things happening at once, you can't write about them all at once (or read about them all at once), but only one at a time.

Moreover, the field of vision contains lots of background detail that's extraneous to the main event. A narrative will omit most of that.

The sciences were on the rise, and scholars began to realize that one does not need to appeal to the activities of God to explain the events of the world. Lightning strikes, floods, and droughts were no longer thought of as direct interventions of God into the world; they were seen as naturally occurring climactic conditions.

i) Since when did pre-Enlightenment believers think natural evils has to be direct divine interventions? To the contrary, didn't they pray that God intervene to prevent or end a natural evil? In other words, they might just as well view a natural evil as something that happens on its own unless God steps in to stop it.

Unless they thought lightning, flooding, and drought were divine judgments, there'd be no reason to presume these were direct divine interventions. Take the annual flooding of the Nile. Did they think that was a direct divine intervention, or the ordinary course of nature?

The emphasis during the Enlightenment was on the possibility of human reason to understand our world and the

nature of life in it.

ii) Is Ehrman ignorant of the fact that Scripture and historical theology have a concept of ordinary providence?

iii) Ehrman posits a false dichotomy. To deny that lightning, flooding, and drought represent "divine interventions" doesn't preclude "activities of God to explain events of the world". A washing machine relieves humans of having to launder clothes by hand. But that doesn't eliminate the need for someone to invent the washing machine. Ehrman is such a simpleton.

Medicine was developed, and proved to be much more efficient in solving human illness than prayer and hope.

Medicine antedates the Enlightenment by centuries and millennia. It's just that we've gotten better at it.

Astronomy developed and people came to realize that the earth was not the center of the universe.

Viewing the sky through a telescope doesn't tell you whether or not earth is the center of the universe. After all, the universe surrounds the earth. Everywhere you look, in every direction, is outer space. So how could you tell from a terrestrial frame of reference whether the earth was or wasn't at the center of the universe?

That's based more on a theory of cosmic origins—like a ripple effect, where our solar system is an outer wave in relation to the point of origin.

Eventually, scientists realized that the world was not created in six days and that humans were not simply created out of the dust, but evolved from lower forms of primates, which were themselves evolved from yet other forms of life.

Which disregards evidence to the contrary.

If we no longer needed to appeal to “miracle” to explain why we got over the flu, or why it finally rained last week, or why the solar system was formed, do we need to appeal to miracle to understand the Gospels?

- i)** In Scripture, rain comes from clouds. Observers could actually see that happen.
- ii)** People routinely recover from the flu. That's not inherently life-threatening. Why would pre-Enlightenment

believers assume that's a miracle?

iii) In addition, there's a need to distinguish between folklore and what theologians believed.

Even though we continue to call the Gospels “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,” we do not know who the authors actually were. Each of the Gospels is completely anonymous: their authors never announce their names. The titles we read in the Gospels (e.g., “The Gospel according to Matthew”) were not put there by their authors, but by later scribes who wanted to tell you who, in their opinion, wrote these books.

How does he know that? Was it customary for 1C books to circulate anonymously?

They were not eyewitnesses to the events they describe, and do not ever claim to be.

The narrator of John's Gospel claims to be an eyewitness. Moreover, you don't need to be an eyewitness to have access to firsthand informants.

For nearly 100 years scholars have realized that the Gospel writers acquired their stories about Jesus from the “oral tradition,” that is, from the stories about Jesus’s life, words, deeds, death, and resurrection that had been in circulation by word of mouth, in all the years from the time of his death. The Gospels were written between 70–95 CE — that is 40 to 65 years after the events they narrate. This means that the Gospel writers are recording stories that had been told and retold month after month, year after year, decade after decade, among Christians living throughout the Roman empire, in differing places, in different times, even in different languages.

i) He states that as if it's a demonstrable fact, but he doesn't explain how he knows that to be the case. For instance, people typically write autobiographies at the end of their public life. Yet that's a firsthand account. No intervening links. No word of mouth.

ii) Moreover, his dating scheme is hardly a given. Consider John Wenham's **REDATING MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE**.

There are lots and lots of detailed differences like this that you will find once you start reading the Bible horizontally. Just take another seemingly small instance. In Mark's Gospel, at his Last Supper, Jesus informs Peter that he, Peter, will deny Jesus that evening three times "before the cock crows twice" (Mark 14:30). In Matthew we have the same scene, but here Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times "before the cock crows" (Matthew 26:34). Well, which is it? Is it before the cock crows or before it crows the second time?

That just means Mark is more specific than Matthew. A general statement doesn't contradict a specific statement. For instance: "the parking lot had a 100 cars"; "the parking lot had 10 red cars". The second statement doesn't contradict the first.

To say "before the cock crows" is not to assert it won't happen before the cock crows *twice*, as if "before the cock crows" is meant to deny or negate before the cock crows twice. That would only follow if you assume Matthew

intends to contrast his statement with Mark's, or correct Mark's statement. But Matthew has a habit of simplifying Mark. He routinely abbreviates Mark—probably to free up space for his additional material. There's only so much you can fit onto a single scroll.

Again, it seems like a picayune detail: but why the difference? What is more interesting (and possibly important), is that in the different Gospels Peter actually denies Jesus to different people on different occasions. So, what is going on?

Why does Ehrman imagine that's a problem? If more than one person questioned Peter, he'd deny Jesus to more than one interrogator.

Indeed, it's easy to see how that could happen. Peter is standing around the fire with some other folks. Most of them don't pay any attention to him until one of them questions him. But now that he's been singled out, that exchange prompts others to take notice and question him. That's a perfectly natural dynamic.

So, first of all, probably most Jews today are descended from King David, given how genealogies work. Did half the

Jewish population of the world descend on Bethlehem?

What's his basis for that claim? 1C Jews belonged to twelve different tribes. Even within David's tribe, to say someone descended from the tribe of Judah hardly means he descended from David. Although that's possible, that's not necessary or even probable. There's no presumption to that effect.

Finally, if Luke's account is right about the birth of Jesus, then the one other account that discusses it in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, cannot also be right. Read Matthew's account: what happens after Jesus is born? In Matthew, Herod decides to kill all the children in Bethlehem because he doesn't want any competitors for his throne as "King of the Jews." But Joseph is warned in a dream and he escapes with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they stay until Herod dies. But if that's right, how can Luke also be right that they stayed in Bethlehem just 41 days (eight days till the circumcision; 33 days

before the rites of purification) and then returned to Nazareth? If Luke's right, then Matthew can't be, and vice versa.

This is just bizarre. In Matthew, Herod's order occurs over a year later. There's plenty of lead time for Jesus to be circumcised, and Mary to be purified, before the Holy Family skips town. It's as if Ehrman is so sure the Gospels must contradict that he can't even think straight.

Who goes to the tomb? Is it Mary by herself, or with other women? If with other women, how many women? And what are their names? (As is true for this and all the other points I made, the answer in each case will appear to be: "It depends which Gospel you read!") Do they find that the stone is already rolled away from the tomb (before they arrive) or does it roll away after they get there? Whom do they see there? A man? An angel? Two men? Two angels? Do they ever see Jesus himself there? What are they told there - that they are to go tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee? Or that they are to remind the

disciples what Jesus told them when he was in Galilee? That is, are the disciples to go to Galilee (about a four-day walk north) to see Jesus, or are they to stay in Jerusalem to see him? Do the women tell anyone? (Take special note of Mark 16:8. The original Gospel ended with that verse – as will probably be indicated in your Bible. It says, “And the women said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And that’s where it ends. If the author doesn’t really mean that they never told anyone, why does he say that they didn’t tell anyone? And if he thinks they did tell someone, why doesn’t he say so?) Do the disciples ever learn that Jesus has been raised (take note of Mark’s account)? Do the disciples go to Galilee? Or do they stay in Jerusalem? Does Jesus appear to them just on the day of his resurrection, and then ascend to heaven? Or does he make appearances for a period of time? Does he ascend on the day of the resurrection or 40 days later (see Acts 1)?

You know, I've never been impressed by the alleged discrepancies regarding what happened on the first Easter (or thereafter). I've never felt it was a realistic expectation that we should be able to harmonize their accounts, even if all four accounts are completely accurate.

Take a comparison: suppose three or four people attend their high school reunion. After they return home that evening, they jot down a diary entry about what happened.

Unless you already knew that these were accounts of the same reunion, you might be unable to tell that from their respective entries. It's highly possible, even probable, that there'd be no overlap at all insofar as each diarist might mention having seen or spoken to different classmates than the other diarists. No two entries might even mention a single classmate in common. And even if they did, there's no expectation that they'd all mention the same set of classmates.

Each of them attends the reunion hoping to see certain classmates. They don't care about all the others. While they are there, they bump into other classmates. But they only have time to talk to a sample. There are many classmates at the event whom they never notice. They can honestly say they didn't see them, even though everyone was at the same event.

Likewise, people arrive at different times and leave at different times. There's no way we could reconstruct the actual sequence from the diaries, not because they are contradictory, but because there are too many different possibilities to determine which represents the order things actually happened.

By the same token, it's not as though the women and the disciples had an appointment to reconnoiter at the tomb at say, 7AM on the first day of the week. Indeed, none of them was even expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. People arrived individually, or in small groups, at different times. It wouldn't be surprising if some people came back more than once to see it again. And the accounts are admittedly selective.

Here, it is very important to pay attention to Luke's explicit chronological statements. On the day of the event, the women tell the 11 disciples what they heard from the two men at the tomb (24:8). "That very same day" Jesus appears to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus (24:13-32). "At that same hour" they went and told the disciples in Jerusalem what they had seen (24:33-35). "As they were saying this" (24:36), Jesus then appears to the disciples, shows them he has been raised from the dead, and gives them their instructions, which include the injunction that they are to "stay in the city" until they receive the promised Spirit from on high (24:49). He then takes them to a suburb, Bethany,

and ascends to heaven. The disciples then return to Jerusalem itself and worship in the temple (24:50–53). And that’s where the Gospel ends, on the day of the resurrection, in Jerusalem.

i) Lk 24 reflects narrative compression. It's a summary of events that Luke will flesh out in Acts 1. By this point, Luke is probably running short of space on his scroll. And this is a teaser for the more detailed account in Acts 1—like movie trailers.

ii) As one commentator notes, "although the events of vv1-35 are set on resurrection Sunday (see vv1,13,33), vv36-53 are absent time references. J. Edwards, **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE (EERDMANS, 2015), 738.**

As you probably know, the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke also wrote the book of Acts. It is interesting, and puzzling, to read the first chapter of Acts immediately after reading the Gospel of Luke. Even though Jesus ascends to heaven on the day of his resurrection in Luke, we are told explicitly in Acts that in fact he stayed on earth for another 40 days...

Acts *doesn't* "explicitly" (or even implicitly) say that he stayed on earth for another 40 days. It says nothing about his whereabouts in-between appearances to the disciples.

According to Matthew, at the moment when Jesus died there were a number of enormous, cataclysmic, mind-boggling events that took place: the curtain in the temple was ripped in half (we have no record of this occurring, by the way, even though Jewish authors talk extensively about the temple at the time and would have been very interested indeed, if part of it had been destroyed!);

i) There's nothing "enormous, cataclysmic, mind-boggling," about a torn curtain.

ii) The temple had two curtains. One screened the sanctuary from the outer court. Tearing that curtain would be more public. The other screened the sanctuary from the inner sanctum. Only priests would be privy to that.

iii) Since this is a sign of divine judgment (and portent of future judgment) on the religious establishment, it's not something the establishment would broadcast, although rumors would leak out.

iv) A torn curtain is hardly equivalent to "destroying" part of the temple. It's not like structural damage.

v) Ehrman is disingenuous. For instance, Josephus narrates ominous portents on the eve of the temple's destruction, but Ehrman surely dismisses that as superstitious legend. So why would he take corroboration of this event any more seriously?

there was a massive earthquake; “the rocks were split” (it’s hard to know what that means exactly);

How is a local earthquake "enormous, cataclysmic, and mind-boggling"? I've lived through two dramatic earthquakes, but they weren't "enormous, cataclysmic, or mind-boggling."

and, most breathtaking of all, “the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many” (Matthew 27:52–53).

No doubt that's mind-boggling. It was meant to be. But it's not "enormous" or "cataclysmic". Ehrman indulges in

hyperbole.

Really? Are we supposed to think that masses of people came back to life and started walking around Jerusalem on the day that Jesus was raised? And no one else — whether Jews at the time, or Romans, or Christians, or even the other Gospel writers — thinks this is important enough to say something about? What is going on here?

i) Matthew doesn't say "masses of people" came back to life. Notice how Ehrman deliberately exaggerates Mt 27:51-53 to make it less believable.

ii) They'd be unrecognizable to strangers. Imagine if your grandfather rose from the grave. How many people would have any idea who he was? How many people would even know that he rose from the grave? Only surviving friends, neighbors, or relatives would realize what had happened. And it would depend on who they appeared to.

Ehrman down for the count

I'm going to make some comments on the debate between Bart Ehrman and Tim McGrew:

<https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Bart-Ehrman-vs-Tim-McGrew-Round-1-Can-we-trust-the-Gospels>

<https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Ehrman-vs-McGrew-Round-2-Do-undesigned-coincidences-confirm-the-Gospels>

I don't normally comment on live debates because it's a nuisance to locate and manually transcribe the relevant statements. I may summarize or paraphrase what they said, although that will incorporate their own phrases. Anyone can listen to the debate for himself to get the verbatim account. It's well worth hearing the entire debate for McGrew's side of the exchange. I don't have much to add to part 1, so much of my comments will be about part 2. I'll begin by summarizing their exchange:

I. RECAP

Ehrman asked McGrew if he was an inerrantist, thereby attempting to change the topic of the debate—which was about the reliability of the Gospels, not the inerrancy of the Gospels. McGrew refused to be pinned down. Later, McGrew said he rejects a "tape recorder" view of inerrancy.

Ehrman raised the issue of inerrancy because that's a presupposition which skews how we assess the historicity of the Gospels.

Ehrman says that when Pilate interrogates Jesus in Jn 18, no one else is in the room. Just Jesus and Pilate. So how did John know what was said? (Implication: he didn't know. He just made it up.)

Ehrman compares that to Charles Dickens reporting conversations that never happened. That hardly means he had special access to some sort of historical information about what David Copperfield actually said. Likewise, ancient historians (e.g. Herodotus) made up speeches. They do it because it helps the story along.

McGrew counters that Ehrman is overgeneralizing about ancient historians. McGrew points out that Ehrman is making unjustified assumptions about Jn 18. Undoubtedly guards were present. Likewise, since John had connections with the high priest, he might have been allowed in.

McGrew says nobody picks up David Copperfield looking for answers to those unresolved questions you had about Moby-Dick. These are not anchored in the same independent reality. Therefore, you can't compare undesigned coincidences to fiction or oral traditions in general circulation.

Ehrman says John mitigates or exculpates Pilate because, with the passage of time, Christians were in heightened situations of antagonism with Jews, so they increasingly pinned the blame on Jews rather than Romans. That's why, in later sources, Pilate has to have his arm twisted. There's a trajectory from Mark through Matthew, Luke, and John, into the 2C, viz. Justin Martyr and the Gospel of Peter. By the mid-2C, Christians call Jews Christ-killers; by the end of the 2C, they accuse them of Deicide.

McGrew counters that Ehrman is cherry-picking the evidence to fabricate a trajectory. Ehrman is in the grip of a literary theory of development, a type of literary criticism that gives certain branches of NT scholarship a bad name.

Ehrman replies by asking who actually says that?

McGrew responds by quoting two Classicists: E. M. Blaiklock and John M. Rist.

Ehrman complains that you can quote people who are opposed to anything. Take Christ mythicism. So you must consider the source. Is the opinion justified?

Ehrman says we shouldn't use one author to explain what another author is trying to say.

McGrew says that's not a general rule of historical inquiry. He gives an example from the Battle of Midway.

Ehrman says it's not that historians must assume miracles never happen. Rather, they must bracket the question. Historians can't operate on the basis of supernatural assumptions. Doesn't necessarily mean Resurrection didn't happen, but as a historian you can't *show* it happened on historical grounds. Outside of people writing about the Bible, every other modern historian takes that approach. Would McGrew credit miracles in other sources of that sort?

McGrew says it depends on the quality of the evidence. Is it the same kind of evidence?

Ehrman mentions reported miracles associated with the founder of Hassidism.

McGrew counters that you need to distinguish stories that circulated within a sympathetic community from stories in the face of hostile authorities. Whether or not they were subjected to searching scrutiny from outsiders affects their credibility.

Ehrman denies that most early Christians were persecuted for sharing their faith. They weren't preaching that on street corners.

McGrew counters that, in fact, that's precisely the scenario we have in Acts: open-air preaching and official persecution.

Ehrman says only two Christian leaders were arrested (Peter, John) out of 8,000 converts. Early Christians in general weren't threatened with persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom.

McGrew counters by citing the Neronian persecution, recounted by Tacitus.

Ehrman accuses McGrew of creating undesigned coincidences by picking a detail here and a detail there.

McGrew counters that Ehrman creates contradictions by picking a detail here and a detail there. Moreover, Ehrman disregards the larger pattern of undesigned coincidences.

Ehrman accuses McGrew of repristinating 19C apologetics.

McGrew counters by citing 20C exemplars like F. F. Bruce and modern commentaries.

II. ANALYSIS

1. McGrew doesn't frame the issue in terms of inerrancy, both because that wasn't the actual topic of the debate, and because he approaches the Bible as a philosopher and historian rather than a theologian; because he approaches the Bible as an evidentialist rather than a presuppositionalist.

A document can be reliable without being inerrant. Indeed, we rely on secondhand information for most of what we believe, and our secondhand information is rarely inerrant. That's a deceptive diversionary tactic on Ehrman's part.

Of course, inerrancy is worth discussing and defending in its own right. But it's a different issue.

2. Ehrman acts as though his approach is neutral and objective, following the evidence wherever it leads—in contrast to McGrew's position, which is a foregone conclusion due to hidden presuppositions. But that just means Ehrman is oblivious to his own presuppositions. Take two examples:

i) Ehrman has a prior commitment to methodological naturalism. But that's a powerful presupposition which filters out a supernatural explanation in advance of the facts even if a supernatural cause happens to be the right explanation.

ii) Ehrman denied the possibility that Jesus could get away with cleansing the temple twice since he'd be arrested and executed the first time. But that treats Jesus as an ordinary human being. If, however, he's the omnipotent Son of God, then Roman soldiers would be impotent to intervene, unless Jesus allowed them to take him into custody. So Ehrman's

position in that regard depends on his unstated presupposition regarding the person of Christ.

3. Ehrman frequently said he agreed with McGrew's caveats. But that's misleading, because Ehrman acts as if that's a concession to Ehrman's position. But rejecting a "tape recorder" model of inerrancy is not a denial of inerrancy. Sophisticated proponents of inerrancy like John Frame, Paul Helm, Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, Robert Stein, and Vern Poythress don't operate with a tape-recorder model of inerrancy. Neither does the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy or the Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics. Likewise, to say that Gospel writers sometimes rearrange the order of events is consistent with how inerrancy is defined by conservative evangelicals.

4. Ehrman's theory about John wishing to exonerate Pilate because, by that time, Christians were shifting blame for the crucifixion from Roman authorities to Jewish authorities—or Jews in general—is odd.

i) To begin with, he downplays Jewish persecution of Christians when McGrew responded to Baal Shem Tov's reputation as a miracle-worker. It's hard to see how Ehrman can have it both ways.

ii) The problem with Ehrman's trajectory is that while Jewish persecution of Christians intensified for a time, Roman persecution of Christians intensified over time. That was already in case in NT times. You have the persecutions of Nero and Domitian. The book of Revelation bears witness to Roman persecution. And this escalates until Constantine decriminalized the Christian faith. For instance:

<http://www.denverseminary.edu/resources/news-and-articles/early-christian-martyr-stories-an-evangelical->

introduction-with-new-translations/

Therefore, by Ehrman's own logic, there's no reason NT writers would minimize or deemphasize Pilate's guilt or complicity in the death of Christ. Rather, there's evidence to the contrary. Moreover, official Roman persecution was clearly more threatening and more sustained than Jewish persecution.

5. Regarding the nature of "critical" NT scholarship, Ehrman said you need to consider the source. But McGrew didn't cite crackpots. Rather, he cited two respected Classicists. Let's give some additional examples:

From the early patristic period you learn a lot about the continuities and discontinuities of the Christian faith as it developed, and a lot about how the first readers of the NT books understood those books. This often creates important pathways back to the text. Seeing the early impact that Jesus and his message made in the Greco-Roman world can help correct the sometimes anachronistic suppositions we bring to the text. I think there is always a tendency for NT scholarship to get cooped up and even ingrown in its own debates.

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2016/03/etc-interview-with-chuck-hill-part-1.html>

Third, a really substantial proportion of the arguments the skeptics employ are very bad arguments. (For example: if one of the Gospels says that Jesus said thus-and-so, and if his having said thus-and-so was useful to the early church, then he probably didn't say thus-and-so.)

Fourth, the arguments of many of the skeptics have premises that are philosophical rather than historical--that miracles are impossible, for example, or that it is methodologically essential to objective historical writing that it regard any miraculous narrative as unhistorical. These philosophical premises may be defensible, but they are rarely defended. And when they are--well, as a philosopher, I can testify that I have never seen a defense of them by a historical scholar that I would regard as philosophically competent.

Finally, the community of skeptical critics is entirely naive and unself-critical as regards its own claims to objectivity. Its members regard the New Testament authors and the students of the Bible

who lived before the advent of modern scholarship as simply creatures of their time and culture; the idea that skeptical twentieth-century scholars might be creatures of their time and culture is an idea that they seem not to have considered.

<http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Skeptical.pdf>

I have few of the skills and little of the knowledge New Testament criticism requires...But I do know something about reasoning, and I have been simply amazed by some of the arguments employed by redaction critics. My first reaction to these arguments, written up a bit, could be put in these words: "I'm missing something here. These appear to be glaringly invalid arguments, employing methods transparently engineered to produce negative judgments of authenticity. But no one, however badly he might want to produce a given set of conclusions, would "cook" his methods to produce the desired results quite so transparently. These

arguments must depend on tacit premises, premises the reaction critics regard as so obvious that they don't bother to mention them." Peter van Inwagen, "Do You Want us to Listen to You?" C. Bartholomew et al. eds. "Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation (Zondervan, 2003), 127.

6. Regarding Ehrman's claim that we shouldn't use one author to explain another, that depends. Where possible, we should normally avoid using one author to determine what another author intended or had in mind.

However, in historical reconstructions, it is both legitimate and necessary to use one source to supplement another to help determine what the source is referring to. The historical, extratextual referent.

Ehrman himself attempted to do that when he tried to explain John's treatment of Pilate by placing that within an alleged trajectory of anti-Semitism in the early church.

7. Ehrman says historians must bracket the question of whether miracles happen.

i) But an obvious problem with that a priori stricture is that historians wish to determine what happened and why it happened. Historical causation.

If the Resurrection caused the empty tomb and subsequent appearances of Christ, if that event underlies the accounts in Mt 28, Lk 24, Jn 20-21, Acts 9, Rev 1, &c., then Ehrman is saying a historian should discount the very event that explains the historical outcome. He is saying historians should suppress probative evidence that doesn't fit with their naturalistic rules of evidence. But if the rules of evidence screen out true causes of historical effects, then the rules impede historical investigation. The rules misdirect the historian. The rules become false leads.

ii) As one philosopher observes:

Atheism which is held for some reason or reasons may, however, also be vulnerable to reports of putative miracles. A person who denies that a miracle-working god exists might find that well-attested, weighty reports of violations of natural law properly require him to review the force of his reasons for his atheism, or his belief that there is no miracle-working God, and to consider revising his worldview accordingly, especially where some point which those miracles would have in the purpose of the divine worker of the miracles can reasonably be suggested. His denial that there is a god who works miracles, is, presumably, either an empirically defeasible hypothesis or is proposed as a necessary truth for which supporting reasoning may be

mistaken. (It is unlikely to be thought simply self-evident.) Either way, the emergence of putative-miracle reports which cannot satisfactorily be accounted for as a species of error puts a strain on this worldview. J. Houston, Reported Miracles (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 163.

Only what one might call a fideistic atheism which refuses to consider its rational credentials will refuse to countenance the possibility that a theistic explanation may account better for the range of phenomena, including some putatively miraculous phenomena, than atheism. Ibid. 166.

8. Ehrman accuses McGrew (and other Christian Bible scholars) of a double standard. But there are problems with that allegation:

i) Surely that's not confined to Christians. Would it not include some Orthodox Jewish historians or Muslim historians?

Ehrman's contention boils down to the tautology that supernaturalists allow for supernatural explanations while naturalists only allow for naturalistic explanations. But that, alone, is hardly a rational basis to disallow supernatural explanations unless methodological naturalism is underwritten by metaphysical naturalism. Otherwise, methodological naturalism is unjustified.

ii) In addition, there are cognate disciplines like anthropology that are open to paranormal explanations. Take academic anthropologists like Clyde Kluckhohn, Felicitas Goodman, Sidney M. Greenfield, and Edith Turner, or David J. Hufford (an academic folklorist), or M. Scott Peck (a prominent psychiatrist).

Based on their fieldwork, they seriously entertain the reality of paranormal events. At the very least, that's analogous to miracles and historiography.

9. Ehrman tried to put McGrew in a bind by citing Baal Shem Tov as a counterexample. For a refutation:

10. <http://christthetao.blogspot.com/2015/07/bart-erhman-finds-jesus-in-poland-baal.html>

11. Ehrman's treatment of persecution in Acts is decidedly odd.

i) For two reasons, it was logical for the authorities to initially round up Christian leaders:

a) That's a decapitation strike. The hope is that by eliminating the upper echelon, a budding movement will fall apart from lack of leadership in key positions.

b) It sends a message to followers. Making an example of the leaders serves as a warning to followers. An implicit threat that they will suffer the same fate unless they desist and disband.

ii) Of course, that tactic sometimes fails, in which case persecution expands and escalates. In fact, that's exactly what happens in the Book of Acts (e.g. Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2).

We have the same pattern in the Book of Revelation. And that continues until Constantine and Theodosius.

iii) Furthermore, the leadership is most salient to McGrew's argument since the disciples were eyewitnesses to the Resurrection. They had direct knowledge of the event, which they proclaimed in the teeth of persecution and martyrdom.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Plutarch

In general, here's a pretty strong response to Ehrman:

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/licona-major-statement/>

However, I have two caveats:

i) Licona elsewhere says:

Because the main characters in these nine biographies often knew one another, a significant overlap of material is present. When material overlaps in two or more of these nine biographies, we can examine that material very carefully for differences. Differences can occur for numerous reasons, such as lapse of memory or sloppiness or Plutarch used better information he had obtained after writing an earlier biography or he employed a compositional device that required him to alter certain details.

<https://chab123.wordpress.com/2014/02/03/why-do-the-gospels-contain-differences-interview-with-dr-mike-licona/>

But how does Licona distinguish differences owing to ignorance, carelessness, and memory lapses from differences due to "compositional devices"?

Likewise, Licona admits that Plutarch wrote "biographies" about Theseus and Romulus. How much stock can you put in an author who writes "biographies" about mythological characters alongside accounts of historical figures like Caesar and Cicero?

Does Plutarch not know the difference? Or does he know the difference, but he pretends that Theseus and Romulus were real people? And isn't that a case of Plutarch pandering to readers to sell books? He knows there's a market niche for this stuff, so he has no scruples about churning out fictional "biographies" of Theseus and Romulus as if that's nonfiction. But surely that makes him a poor standard of comparison for the Gospels.

ii) Licona says:

The type of person most likely to experience a hallucination is a senior adult who is grieving over the loss of a loved one. Multiple studies have revealed that approximately 50 percent of people in that class will experience a hallucination of their loved one. By far, the largest percentage of those

hallucinations will be a sense that their loved one is in the room, although they do not sense them in any other manner, such as seeing or hearing them. Only approximately seven percent of people in this class experience a hallucination in which they see their loved one.

Why does he take for granted that these must be hallucinations? Why would the default assumption be that if 50% of widows/widowers have a sense of their late spouse's presence, or see them, that's a hallucination? Why wouldn't that be prima facie evidence of postmortem survival? It's not an isolated incident.

Modern and ancient historiography

A problem I've noticed is that some Christians defend the Bible by emphasizing the difference between ancient historiography and modern historiography. We mustn't hold the Bible to modern standards of historical accuracy.

Now, I think that's half right. When we read ancient historians, we need to adjust to the conventions and expectations of the time. But my problem is with the invidious contrast. With the assumption that modern historiography has higher standards. But what, exactly, is the standard of comparison?

Take a critical biography by an academic historian. That will have copious footnotes, verbatim quotes, quotation marks or indented block quotes, dates, places, a rigorous chronology, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

But compare that to an encyclopedia article on the same figure. That, too, will reflect modern academic standards. The editor will pick a scholar who's an acknowledged expert on that figure. Nevertheless, the encyclopedia entry will be far simpler than a critical, book-length biography.

Some historians are popularizers, viz. Stephen Ambrose, Barbara Tuchman, Doris Kerns Goodwin.

What about TV news reports. These will be a brief summaries of the event in question.

These are all examples of modern historiography, yet they are hardly equivalent. They don't necessarily set a higher

standard of historical accuracy. For instance, news reports can be notoriously biased.

Conversely, take historical accounts of the WWII by Churchill and Eisenhower. Are they inferior to the work of academic historians? Their value lies, not in the accoutrements of an academic historian, but in their high-level, insider perspective of the topic. Indeed, academic historians mine these accounts as primary source material for their own writings.

The upshot is that we should resist overgeneralizing about modern standards of historical accuracy in contrast to ancient historiography.

Bart Ehrman v. Craig Evans

I was watching this debate between Bart Ehrman and Craig Evans:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueRIIdrlZsvs>

If you go to cross-examination section (1:18-1:42), there's an interesting, extended exchange. I disagree with Craig's overall position. I certainly disagree with his position on John. However, Craig also scores a number of valid points against Bart.

But what's most striking is how presuppositional the debate ultimately is. Craig has Bart completely rattled. His approach throws Bart off balance, and Bart never regains his balance. It's a classic illustration of Kuhn's thesis of incommensurable paradigms. Craig is more sophisticated than Bart. His position is far more qualified. Craig's position just isn't vulnerable to the kinds of objections that Bart is used to raising. It doesn't give Bart any openings.

Bart finds Craig confusing and frustrating because Craig seems to simultaneously agree and disagree with Bart . What Bart fails to grasp is that Craig can agree with some of Bart's characterizations of the phenomena, but disagree with the implications of the characterization. He doesn't think they have the skeptical consequences that Bart imputes to them.

What's ironic is that both men view themselves as historians. Both men think they are approaching the text as historians. But Craig thinks Bart has hopelessly idealistic and artificial standards for ancient historical sources.

Bart thinks that to be accurate accounts, the Gospels ought to be like tape recorders and video recorders. Craig rejects that paradigm.

Moreover, as he points out, even if the Gospels were akin to tape recorders and video recorders, that record would still be inscrutable in some respects without a larger context. You need supplementary information.

Another difference is they disagree on how much historical information you can extract from the Gospels.

One ambiguity is that Craig says he's opposed to inerrancy (in his opening statement), yet when he distinguishes his position from inerrantists, he does so by denying that historical reliability requires verbatim quotation and strict chronology. Yet inerrantists like Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg, Robert Stein, and Vern Poythress agree with him in that regard.

Ehrman's apostasy was nearly inevitable given his preconception of historical accuracy. His "horizontal" reading of the Gospels was always on a collision course with his preconceived notion of historical accuracy. Something had to give. He never questions his paradigm of historical accuracy, so what had to give was his faith in the Gospels.

In a sense he's right. If the Gospels are true, then we should be able to receive them *as is*, rather than filtering them through a sieve to see what remains.

Mind you, Ehrman doesn't approach the Gospels *as is*. He has his own filter in place—methodological atheism.

It may sometimes be impossible to harmonize the Gospels *as is*. But, then, harmonization typically tries to go behind

the text to the underlying event. A presupposition of harmonization is that two (or more) accounts don't already mesh as they stand.

That, however, is only a damaging admission if you have an unrealistic preconception of what historical writing is supposed to do. To begin with, Ehrman fails to make allowance for the difference between one medium and another; the difference between *seeing* an event and *verbalizing* an event. What we *see*, and how we *talk* about what we saw, are necessarily different. Any verbal description is likely to omit many background details. Many extraneous details. Words aren't images, or vice versa.

Conversely, the significance of an event may not be self-explanatory. For instance, the crucifixion of Jesus looks pretty much like any other crucifixion. You couldn't tell just by seeing the crucifixion of Jesus that there's anything special about this particular example. A theological interpretation is essential to supply the critical context.

Ehrman says we need to assess the Gospels, not by the conventions and standards of ancient historiography, but our own. What ultimately matters is what really happened.

Yet that's simplistic. Sure, what ultimately matters is what really happened. But for one thing, he collapses the distinction between interpretation and truth. You can't even get to the truth if you refuse to interpret historical narratives on their own terms. For you need to ascertain what the narrator meant. And in that respect, you need to identify his operating standards and assumptions.

Furthermore, you need to make allowance for his aims. When, for example, John says the disciples rowed about 25-30 stadia (Jn 6:19), that's a round number—an

approximation. It would be ridiculous to say that's wrong because John didn't use a laser distance measure.

Truly this was God's son

Bart Ehrman constantly plays up alleged discrepancies in the Gospels to disprove their historical reliability. This involves a "horizontal" reading of the Gospels. In honor of Holy Week, I will cite a striking example to illustrate how I approach the same issue:

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's son" (Mk 15:39).

When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was God's son!" (Mt 27:54).

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Surely this man was innocent!" (Lk 23:47).

i) In Matthew and Mark, the centurion calls Jesus "God's son". But in Luke, the centurion says Jesus was "innocent". How do we account for the difference? There are different possibilities. You could propose additive harmonization. Maybe the centurion made both statements. I think additive harmonization is sometimes the correct explanation, but I think that's clunky in this particular context.

Or you might say Luke relies on a different tradition of the crucifixion at this point. That's somewhat problematic for

the detailed accuracy of the accounts.

Finally, you might say Luke's version reflects an editorial change. He redacted Mark at this juncture. I'm going to pursue that explanation.

ii) One objection some people might raise to that harmonization is that it makes Luke put words in the mouth of the centurion that he never said. But doesn't that involve taking unacceptable liberties with historical events?

Sometimes that's a valid criticism. If a writer puts a statement on the lips of a character who didn't actually say it, we usually think that detracts from the accuracy of the account. However, it depends.

Suppose a guy says he was "shooting the bull" with some friends. Suppose I repeat that conversation to an immigrant who lacks a command of idiomatic English. "Shooting the bull" would conjure up a completely misleading image in his mind. Does that mean the guy was on a hunting range? In that context, it would be perfectly appropriate for me, in recounting that conversation, to reword it. To use a different phrase. Although I'm quoting someone, yet in that situation I substitute a different phrase because the original idiom would be misleading to the foreign listener. It wouldn't mean to him what it meant to the original speaker.

iii) What does "son of God" mean in the Gospels? Occasionally it's used as a Davidic title (e.g. 2 Sam 7:14). But that's contextual. And you have many passages where it functions as a divine title rather than a Davidic title.

iv) A striking example is where demons recognize Christ's true identity (Mk 3:11, 5:7; Mt 8:29 & Lk 8:28). This is a bit hair-raising because human observers are overhearing a

conversation between two inhuman agents. The demon is inhuman. And it senses something inhuman about Jesus.

That's not to deny the humanity of Christ. But what the demons detect has nothing to do with his human aspect or Davidic sonship. They discern something that's not empirical. That Jesus is, in a sense, God in disguise. The demons are naturally privy to something about Jesus that's inevident to human observers. Something that transcends the five senses. Demons were in a unique position to immediately apprehend his underlying identity.

v) Then we need to consider the connotation of that designation for a pagan. If Ares is the son of Zeus and Hera, that means he is the same kind of being as Zeus and Hera. If Zeus is a god, Hera is a goddess, and Ares is their son, then Ares is a god.

vi) Now, the Gospel writers don't think Jesus is "God's son" in a pagan sense. However, the Gospels were written in the lingua franca (Greek) of the Roman Empire. The Gentile mission was a major focus of evangelization in the NT church. Therefore, I think they trade on an overlapping sense. By that I mean, they are using "son of God" in an ontological sense. They use it to indicate that Jesus is the same kind of being as the Father. The phrase intentionally plays on that like father/like son implicature.

The main difference is a different conceptualization of God. Yahweh is a very different kind of divinity than Zeus. Hence, his son has no point of origin.

Unless the Gospel writers are using "God's son" ontologically, it would be extraordinarily misleading to make this a standard designation for Jesus, given so many Gentile readers—considering the default connotations of that title for

Gentiles/pagans. Put another way, the Synoptics would need to take great precautions to guard against otherwise inevitable misunderstanding, given the associations that title would automatically have for non-Jewish readers. Yet they don't generally do that.

vii) There are, however, some further gradations. I think Mark's audience is fairly indiscriminate. Notable scholars (e.g. R. T. France, Martin Hengel, Robert Stein) think his immediate audience was the church of Rome. And that, of itself, was a federation of Gentile and Messianic Jewish house-churches.

By contrast, Matthew targets Jewish readers. That's a control on how the implied reader would assess the centurion's statement. A Jewish read would make allowance for the centurion's heathen background. And he'd distinguish that from Jewish theism.

However, Luke has a Gentile target audience. On the lips of a Roman soldier, that would have a pagan connotation, and Luke can't assume that his audience has the same standard of comparison as Matthew's. There is, moreover, evidence that Matthew and Luke occasionally redact Mark to forestall misimpressions.

So I suspect that Luke substituted a dynamic equivalent. Although "innocent" is not synonymous with "God's son," the centurion was vindicating Jesus by his exclamation ("Surely, this is God's son!"), so Luke's alternative faithfully conveys the speaker's intent.

The historicity of John

NT scholar Craig Evans thinks that John's Gospel belongs to the genre of wisdom literature. It depicts Jesus as wisdom personified. Hence, Jesus didn't actually express the "I am" sayings attributed to him in that Gospel. That would make the same mistake as taking the narrative in Prov 8 literally.

This revisits issues regarding the historicity of John, so I'll venture a few observations:

i) The idea that John contains a wisdom Christology is not unusual in Johannine scholarship. Ben Witherington is a prominent example. I myself think that's forcing John's Gospel into a paradigm with precious little supporting evidence. And Evans seems to be taking that approach to a logical extreme. Of course, we could say that discredits the whole approach.

ii) In fairness, Evans also notes that John is loaded with historical details.

iii) A common question is why John has a more explicitly high Christology than the Synoptics. Liberals say that's because it's unmoored from reality. It represents a more developed Christology. An evolving Christology—at the expense of the historical Jesus.

I'd propose a different explanation. Because the Synoptics have a more Jewish milieu, a Jewish reader would pick up on the high Christology of the Synoptic Jesus. In the Synoptics, Jesus is presented against the backdrop of OT monotheism. The Synoptics are chockfull of clues to Christ's identity, given the parallels between Jesus and Yahweh.

Given how Jesus says and does things that would be blasphemous if he was merely human.

In fact, we might turn this around. If, say, Matthew was as explicit as John, he'd never get a hearing from Jewish readers.

Because John arguably has a more gentile audience in mind, he must accentuate the more explicit statements of Jesus, or make more explicit statements about Jesus inasmuch as Gentile readers aren't tuned into the Jewish code language.

I'd hasten to add that this is a matter of emphasis. John is a Jewish writer, and his Gospel reflects a Jewish outlook. But it is, in a way, a Jewish missionary to Gentiles. He was probably ministering in Asia Minor at the time.

It might be objected that we'd expect the same explanation to apply to Luke. But Luke amplifies Mark. Because Luke operates within the narrative contours of Mark, that constrains his ambit, whereas John strikes out on his own with an independent plot line. As for Mark, I think he probably has a mixed audience. If it was penned with the church of Rome in mind, I believe that was, at the time of writing, a collection of Gentile and Messianic Jewish house-churches.

iv) The lengthy speeches in John, such as the farewell discourse and prayer (Jn 13:31-17:26) seem artificial. Is that how people normally talk?

But there's a reason it's called the "farewell" discourse. Jesus is wrapping things up. It has a testamentary character to it.

In addition, although it's one-sided, this is not an uninterrupted monologue, but interspersed with questions that, in turn, give rise to answers.

Finally, this wasn't just for a handful of people in the Upper Room, but with an eye to posterity. Jesus is like a broadcaster whose statements aren't merely directed to a studio audience, but primarily to the unseen audience behind the camera. He's speaking for the benefit of Christian readers, when the record of this discourse is published.

v) A problem with treating the "I am" sayings as fictional is that these are tightly woven into the setting. For instance, "I am the resurrection and the life" is entirely appropriate as a prelude to raising Lazarus from the dead. Why wouldn't Jesus say that on this occasion? By the same token, "I am the light of the world" piggybacks on Hanukkah, on the one hand, and healing the blind man, on the other hand.

Likewise, "I am the bread of life" and "Before Abraham was, I am" are responsive to the immediate context. Embedded in rambling, sometimes acrimonious exchanges with his enemies. They have the meandering quality of real conversations. The give and take of real conversations. Indeed, the cut and thrust of live, impromptu, public debate with hostile opponents.

Furthermore, we'd expect an extraordinary person to make extraordinary claims about himself. It's only unrealistic if you presume Jesus wasn't God Incarnate.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life" is responsive to Philip's question. Moreover, it makes sense in the context of a farewell discourse. And it combines a number of scattered motifs in the Fourth Gospel.

"I am the gate," "I am the good shepherd," and "I am the true vine" occur in parables. Surely Jesus taught in parables.

Translation Greek

I'd like to revisit one of Bart Ehrman's objections to the historicity of the NT. He says the disciples were illiterate, Aramaic-speaking peasants. He says 1 Peter and the four Gospels were written in literary Greek. Hence, that disqualifies the disciples as their authors.

1. To begin with, it's a straw man argument. Of the four Gospels, only Luke has any literary panache. And that's traditionally attributed to a well-educated, Greek-speaking Gentile author, not an illiterate, Aramaic speaking peasant.

Only one of the four Gospels is even directly attributed to one of the Galilean disciples. And John's Gospel is written in simple Greek.

Moreover, Galilee wasn't the backwoods place that Ehrman depicts. It had urban centers like Sepphoris, within easy walking distance of Nazareth, and Tiberias, a coastal town on the shore of Lake Kinneret, a few miles from Capernaum. Moreover, Galilee had a road system. And the region is still dotted with Greek inscriptions. And these are just the inscriptions that happen to survive. Cf. C. Evans, **FABRICATING JESUS** (IVP, 2006 133ff; "Galilee" 391-98; "Tiberias" 1235-1238, Dictionary of New Testament Background (IVP 2000).

Mark was an urbanite in highly literate, multi-lingual Jerusalem. As a tax-collector, Matthew hardly matches the profile of an illiterate, Aramaic speaking peasant. We'd expect him to be able to read commercial and administrative documents. We'd expect him to be a polyglot to some degree.

Of course, there's a lot we don't know about the authors, but that cuts both ways. That means Ehrman's dogmatism is unjustified.

2. But I'd also like to discuss the issue of translation Greek. Take the cryptic statement of Papias that "Matthew set in order the logia in a Hebrew dialect" (i.e. Aramaic). A stock objection is that Matthew's Gospel doesn't read like translation Greek. The same objection might be raised to the possibility that Peter dictated his letter Aramaic, which his bilingual scribe rendered into literary Greek. I'm not saying I agree with that. I think it highly likely that Peter knew conversational Greek. I'm just responding to Ehrman on his own terms.

3. I find the common claim that something couldn't originally be in a different language because our text doesn't read like a translation is grossly simplistic.

i) To begin with, that's an issue of translation philosophy. Translators are typically confronted with a choice: should they produce a more literal translation, or a more literary translation? A word-for-word translation, that preserves the original sentence structure (as much as possible), or a smooth idiomatic translation?

It depends, in part, on the nature of the document. Is this a literary document? A legal document? Is accuracy more important than elegance, or vice versa? We don't want a translator to indulge in literary license with a legal contract.

ii) It can also depend on whether the receptor language is cognate with the donor language. Suppose a translator renders a German author into English. English is a mongrel language. Because it has many words and forms of

Germanic derivation, a translator could preserve more of the Germanic flavor of the original by using Germanic English words and forms where possible. But if he were to use more words and forms of Romance derivation, that would obscure the Germanic original.

Or suppose he's translating a German author into Italian. The diction and syntax will be so different that the original language might be undetectable. Not to mention rendering a Chinese or Japanese text into a European language. Take the difference between fusional languages and agglutinative languages.

iii) Or take the KJV. That's a pretty literal translation of the Greek and Hebrew. By that token, you might say it's translation Greek or translation Hebrew. Typically, literal translations are stilted.

Yet the KJV is extolled as a model of English style. That's in part because it benefits from the luxuriant wealth of Germanic and Latinate vocabulary available to the translators. It was a vibrant period for the English language. And the range of synonyms gives the translators an opportunity to render the Greek and Hebrew into euphonious sentences that read aloud so well.

iv) In many cases, the primary qualification for a good translator is to be proficient in the donor language and receptor language. However, some translators are notable stylists in their own right. Take Alexander Pope's celebrated translation of the Iliad, or Dryden's classic translations of Virgil. That transmutes the style of Homer into the style of Pope, or the style of Virgil into the style of Dryden.

That raises an issue: when rendering a stylish work of literature, a translator may consciously adopt a more

neutral translation to avoid imposing his own style on the original. Dryden and Pope were open to criticism for effacing the style of the original by substituting their own. Do you read Homer for Homer, or Homer for Pope? Do you read Virgil for Virgil, or Vigil for Dryden?

But in their defense, they might say it's preferable to render the best Greek and Latin into the best English. To render the best Greek and Latin into inferior English is a demotion, misrepresenting the quality of the original. They should be at the same level. Moreover, they might say that they are cross-contextualizing the original. Making it accessible to readers in their own time and place.

My immediate point isn't to debate the merits of competing translation philosophies, but to demonstrate how simplistic and unreliable it is to claim that something can't be a translation because it doesn't read like a translation. But there are many factors that feed into that assessment. The translator's skill. The translator's aim. How much the two languages have in common. The range of available synonyms.

Bart Blunderbuss

I've been on a Bart Ehrman kick lately. I didn't plan it that way. It began when I reviewed his debate with Tim McGrew. Then, about the same time, he and Mike Licona began a serial debate. So I decided, for the sake of completeness, to view and review some of his other debates. I'm going to comment on this one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7gmgdk9qG8>

Having now listened to several of his debate, I notice that Ehrman has a stump speech. He uses the same examples. He always raises the same objections. It's a cumulative case against the Christian faith.

In their three debates, Bart Ehrman and Craig Evans speak past each other. That's because, as Evans explains at one point, even when he agrees with Ehrman on the phenomena of Scripture, he disagrees with Ehrman's inferences and conclusions.

1. DIFFERENCES

Throughout the debate, the plausibility of Ehrman's argument hinges on how he frames the issue. That tilts the scales.

i) One of Ehrman's fallacies is to posit that differences between two or more Gospels amount to discrepancies. If you listen closely, you will notice that he never gets around to demonstrating that these differences must be, or even probably are, contradictory. He simply ticks off a list of differences, then proclaims a contradiction. But in order to

prove his point, he needs to show how they cannot be reconciled. Mere addition or omission of details is not an indication that these are incompatible details.

ii) In addition, it's unreasonable to suppose that at this distance from events, we can always harmonize different accounts of the same incident. We weren't there. We didn't see or hear what happened. So we lack the overarching perspective to know how to piece together selective accounts. We don't know the original order. We don't know where the gaps are.

iii) Of course, it's easy to show that the Gospels contain discrepancies if you define a contradiction to mean two accounts can only agree if they are formally identical. Verbatim quotes. Strict chronology. No additions or omissions. But if that's his standard, then he needs to defend his standard. It's not something he's entitled to take for granted.

iv) He acts as though it's inherently suspect that one Gospel contains information, or more information, than another. But that's irrational. To begin with, it would be pointless to have several Gospels if each one covered the very same ground.

In addition, let's take a comparison. It's not unusual for histories and biographies written soon after events to be briefer than histories and biographies written a generation or so later.

Critical histories and critical biographies are often much longer, more detailed, than accounts written shortly after the events. Sometimes they run into multiple volumes. But that's not legendary embellishment. That's not a phone game. The fact that an academic historian adds so much

new information doesn't mean he's making stuff up that never happened, but supplementing previous accounts, based on additional evidence.

iv) Suppose some members of my high school graduating class start a Facebook group. Suppose one of them asks us what we remember about a particular teacher or student. You will get a series of anecdotes from former classmates about the student or teacher in question. However, their stories may have little in common with each other. For instance, they remember the teacher said something striking in class one day, but other students may not remember because they didn't have the same teacher. Or they had her a different year. So they weren't in class that day. Or maybe they were in class that day, but they don't remember because they weren't paying attention. They were daydreaming, or gazing at a pretty girl.

Likewise, a student might remember something a classmate said or did one day when they were hanging out on the football field. But other students may not remember that because they weren't at that particular spot at that particular moment. If they were in the cafeteria or the gym, they weren't on the football field. If they arrived at the football field a minute later, they'd miss what was said or done.

You could have a collection of anecdotes about a particular student or teacher, which might never overlap. No two stories the same. But that's to be expected.

Or if two or more students did remember, they wouldn't quote the teacher verbatim. They'd quote the gist of what was said.

Likewise, this string of anecdotes wouldn't be in any particular order. These wouldn't be dated events. Although students might remember what happened that day, that doesn't mean they remember what day it was. You can easily recall something occurring on a particular day without recalling the date. Without recalling if that was a little earlier or later than another incident you recall.

Suppose you ask each student what they remember about high school. Suppose they attended the same school during the same years. I think it would be striking how little their accounts have in common. Each student would have very compartmentalized knowledge. Depending on the size of the school, they might be superficially acquainted with all the teachers and students. Know them by name. Know them by sight. But different students would have different teachers.

Moreover, students would naturally break down into smaller groups. They'd only socialize with a handful of classmates.

Suppose you had a schoolyard fight. Suppose students gave accounts of the fight. Some students might be present when the fight broke out. Other students would arrive after it began, drawn by the commotion. A crowd attracts a crowd. Some students would have a better view than others. So you'd have different descriptions of what went down.

v) For instance, Ehrman posts a discrepancy in the number of donkeys Jesus used during the triumphal entry. Was it one (Mark, Luke, John) or two (Matthew)? Well, the answer is that he only rode one (the colt), while the mare accompanied the colt. Yet that's only a discrepancy if Mark, Luke, and John intended to say there was only one donkey, in contrast to two. But Bart does nothing to demonstrate

that Mark, Luke, and John intend to say one to the exclusion of two. In this and other examples, he needs to show how one description was meant to be in opposition to another description.

2. HISTORICAL SOURCES

Here's another example of how Ehrman tilts the scales by the way he frames the issue.

Ehrman said (in reference to the Gospels): if it's inaccurate in some things, how do we know it's not inaccurate in lots of things. If not 100% accurate, how do we know they are at all accurate. Why trust them as historical sources?

For someone who casts himself in the role of a historian, that's a wildly skeptical way of treating historical sources. Does he hold Tacitus or Josephus to that standard?

And not just ancient history. Take war memoirs by Sherman, Grant, Churchill, or Eisenhower. Would any war historian say that unless these are 100% accurate, there's no reason to assume they are at all accurate? Unless these are 100% accurate, they are untrustworthy historical sources?

Clearly, Ehrman has a double standard when it comes to NT narratives. He says he approaches the issue historically rather than theologically, but he's blind to his own residual conditioning. Ehrman is still approaching the Gospels theologically. He holds them to the standard of inerrancy (as he defines it). Unless the Gospels are inerrant, he deems them to be unreliable. But that's a theological criterion, not a historical criterion. And it's based on his very square notions of inerrancy and historical accuracy.

3. FALSE DICHOTOMIES

Ehrman said, in reference to the allegedly lower Christology of the Synoptics (compared to John), that if Jesus went around Galilee and Jerusalem calling himself God, explain on historical, not theological grounds, how he managed to escape getting stoned to death for blasphemy.

Notice how he frames the issue by stipulating a historical explanation rather than a theological explanation. But what if that's a false dichotomy? Indeed, his disjunction is simply incoherent in this situation.

Suppose Jesus is God Incarnate. An omnipotent being would have no difficulty eluding death squads. He could not be cornered or executed unless or until he allowed himself to be taken into custody, or put to death. If the very question at issue is the deity of Christ, and the implications thereof, you can't logically exclude a theological explanation for his ability to elude lynch mobs. That follows from the nature of the ascription, if true. Ehrman must tacitly assume that Jesus wasn't God Incarnate. But isn't that a theological rather than historical judgment on his part?

Ehrman's dichotomy, which is question-begging even in general, becomes downright incoherent in this context. If the question at issue is whether Jesus was divine, and that's combined with the additional question of how he could escape stoning for blasphemy, then the true explanation may well be inseparable from his true identity. For instance, he could cause them to hallucinate, which would give him time to escape from their clutches.

4. CRITICAL CONSENSUS

Ehrman said his position reflects the consensus view among critical scholars. The only people who say the Bible is inerrant are fundamentalists or conservative evangelicals. But how can that be? Is everyone else apart from evangelicals not as intelligent? Are they blind? Demonically inspired? How is it that the only ones who think differently (the Bible is completely reliable) are evangelicals? That reflects a particular theological point of view. They take that position for theological rather than historical grounds. For theological rather than historical reasons. Their theological views require inerrancy. Otherwise, they'd agree with everyone else.

i) It doesn't occur to Ehrman that he's raising a circular and reversible objection. To begin with, that's an illicit argument from authority. It takes "critical consensus" as the standard of comparison. Yet that's the very issue in dispute.

ii) In addition, his objection amounts to a tautology: only inerrantists subscribe to inerrancy. Well, that's true by definition. But by the same token, only atheists subscribe to atheism. And Ehrman calls himself an atheist.

Likewise, are inerrantists like Gleason Archer, John Frame, Vern Poythress, Benjamin Warfield, Edwin Yamauchi, E. J. Young et al. not as intelligent? By the same token, are theists like Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Newton, Pascal, Edwards, Euler, Maxwell, Faraday, Riemann, Newman, Eccles, Gödel, Geach, van Fraassen, Plantinga, Dembski, Sheldrake, Don Page, John Lennox, Alexander Pruss et al. not as intelligent?

Atheism reflects a particular atheological point of view. That's not a historical viewpoint, but a philosophical viewpoint. Likewise, an atheist secularizes historiography.

He makes methodological naturalism a presupposition of historiography. Yet that is not, in the first instance, a historical viewpoint, but a philosophical viewpoint. The resultant historical viewpoint is the consequence of his prior commitment to secularism. Atheism requires methodological naturalism.

iii) Conversely, if the Biblical God exists, then the disjunction between history and theology is a false dichotomy—for if the Biblical God exists, then he is intimately involved in the historical process. There's no value-free position on historiography. To bifurcate history and theology is not to take history as your starting-point, but to take naturalism as your starting-point.

5. TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION

i) It's revealing that while Ehrman appeals to critical consensus in attacking the inerrancy of Scripture, he doesn't appeal to critical consensus in attacking the text of Scripture. Presumably, that's because his skepticism regarding the text of the NT is unrepresentative of textual critics generally.

ii) Ehrman treats the transmission of the text as a purely naturalistic process. But Christians believe God preserved the text "by his singular care and providence" (WCF 1.8). We are blessed to have such early and abundant attestation for the text. Although Ehrman would dismiss that as a theological claim, it's a claim that enjoys corroborative evidence. Moreover, to deny the role of providence is a philosophical assumption rather than a historical assumption. Ehrman's position is just as value-laden as the Westminster divines.

iii) Ehrman said, If God inspired the Bible without error, why hasn't he preserved the Bible without error?

A problem with that objection is that it he just leaves it dangling there. But if you're going to press that objection, then you need to ask yourself what that would involve. To change one variable changes other variables. It generates a domino effect. Moreover, the impact fans out over time, expanding exponentially. The farther into the future you move, the greater the change.

Compare it to a family tree. You begin with a couple. They have kids. Their kids have kids. And so on and so forth. What started with two branches out over time. If you were to change that initial variable, that would generate a different set of forking paths. When the timeline is changed, there are losers as well as winners. Some people miss out.

In addition to that general consideration, the need for textual criticism makes scholars extremely attentive to the exact wording of Scripture. That's a good thing.

iv) Ehrman complains about the number of mistakes in Greek MSS. But is that a weakness, or a strength?

a) When you have more MSS, you have more mistakes. But that's a side effect of having more evidence for the early text of the NT. Ehrman acts as though have more attestation for the NT text should make us less certain rather than more certain of the text. But that's a backwards way of viewing corroborative evidence. Having more lines of independent evidence ought to raise our confidence, not lower our confidence.

b) To say they contain mistakes takes for granted that we can identify the mistakes. These aren't undetectable errors,

but easily recognizable errors. So how is that a problem? Moreover, for every MS that contains a mistake, you have several that contain the correct reading.

c) Ehrman is judging ancient MSS by the standards of the printing press or Xerox copies. But since we're talking about transcriptions that were copied by hand, you naturally have accidental scribal errors. They won't exhibit the uniformity of photocopies, because human scribes aren't machines. Their work product lacks that mechanical regularity. But there's nothing deficient about that.

d) Furthermore, it's a good thing. It means there was no centralized command-and-control in the early church. It wasn't possible for any particular faction to gerrymander the text of Scripture as it comes down to us. No collusion. No concerted effort to doctor the text of Scripture. No way to supplant the original text with something else.

iv) Ehrman describes the chain of transmission this way: someone produced the original autograph of Mark. Then someone copied the original. Then someone else copied *that* copy. Then someone else copied the copy of the copy. Then someone else copied the copy of the copy of the copy. And so on.

Notice how Ehrman frames the issue. He presents it as though someone directly copied the original just once. Then the next person copies the copy of the original. And so on down the line. Hence, you have a chain of transmission like this:

Someone produces a single original autograph of Mark. A scribe then makes a single direct copy of the original. Call that A. The next scribe makes a copy of A. Call that B. The

next scribe makes a copy of B. Call that C. And so on down the line.

So Ehrman depicts this as if you have a linear series or sequence, where each succeeding copy must be a transcription of the immediately preceding copy. It can't go straight back to an earlier exemplar. No cutting in line! The way he lays it out, a 10th generation copy must be copied from a 9th generation copy, which must be copied from an 8th generation copy, and so on, up the line, going through one link at a time.

Now stop and think about how artificial that is. As long as the original autograph of Mark was available, there's nothing to prevent many different scribes from making direct copies of the original. So you wouldn't have one A, but many A's. By the same token, you'd have many B's. Rather than having nth generation copies, a scribe could skip over intervening copies to transcribe an A or B exemplar. There were many A's and B's in circulation.

Moreover, that isn't just speculation. Let's take some historical comparisons. As I understand the process, in a medieval scriptorium the monks copied Scripture, church fathers, &c, from editions in the monastery library. It's not as if Brother John copied the library edition, then Brother Bartholomew copied Brother John's transcription, then Brother Thaddeus copied Brother Bartholomew's transcription, &c. Rather, these are all first-generation copies of the same exemplar.

Likewise, suppose you were a medieval college student at the University of Paris, where Aquinas was your theology prof. Aquinas dictates a lecture to Reginald. (Reginald, was, in fact, a scribe assigned to Aquinas.) Reginald files that transcript in the library. Students then make hand copies of

that transcript. It's not one student who copies another student, who copies another student, who copies another student. Rather, these are all first-generation copies of the same exemplar.

Why does Ehrman seem to think the process was any different for Christian scribes? Or does he know better, but he's attempting to hoodwink a lay audience?

6. Ehrman says that in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus, John the Baptist, the narrator all sound the same. That's because the author modified voice of narrator to make them say what he wants them to say. He changed words of Jesus!

This allegation raises a range of issues:

i) Does John the Baptist sound the same? In Jn 1:19-28, he's a dead ringer for the Synoptic John the Baptist.

ii) Since Jesus usually spoke in Aramaic, and the Gospels are written in Greek, there's a sense in which the authors never use the words of Jesus when they translate his statements into Greek. So, yes, you could say they "changed the words of Jesus". They substitute Greek words for Aramaic words. Greek synonyms for Aramaic originals. It isn't even possible to quote him verbatim if you translate his statements into a different language.

But there's no point acting as if that's a shocking admission. Jesus founded a missionary religion. He never meant for his message to be confined to an Aramaic-speaking audience. The key principle isn't to reproduce the *words* of Jesus, but the sense of *Jesus*.

iii) Regarding John's Gospel in particular, I think the reason Jesus and the narrator sound alike is because John, unlike

the Synoptics, contains a lot of theological exposition. It will quote Jesus, then comment on his statement. Now, when you comment on what someone says, it's natural to use some of the same words and phrases in your exposition. If he expressed his ideas in certain words and images, then it's only natural for your editorial reflections to adopt the same vocabulary. So I'd say the narrator echoes the voice of Jesus. That's why Christ's statements and John's editorializing seem to blend into each other, so that it's sometimes hard to discern when the quote ends and the exposition begins. For John takes his cue from Jesus. He continues in the same vein. When he expounds something Jesus said, he picks up on the same words and motifs.

7. Ehrman trots out differences in the post-Resurrection accounts. Here I'll make a specific observation. There are different ways of presenting the same event. They can be written from the viewpoint of the narrator, or they can be written from the viewpoint of observers. Unless the narrator is an observer, the narrative viewpoint is indirect. He's talking about what other people saw, from a third-person perspective. That's how the Synoptics present the first Easter. Keep in mind that even if the narrator is an eyewitness, he may assume a third-person voice when recounting events that include other people. That's a stock convention.

By partial contrast, John is more selective. And he chooses to narrate the first Easter through the eyes of two witnesses in particular: Peter and Mary Magdalene. That's more direct. He isn't just talking about what they heard and saw, from his vantage-point, but describing it from their own perspective, as they personally experience that event. And the Johannine narrator was, himself, a participant. John uses a few people as the lens, but relates more about their particular experience, whereas the Synoptics mention more

witnesses, at the cost of saying less about how they individually experience the event. Both approaches are historical. It's analogous to the difference between direct and indirect discourse, viz. first-person speech and third-person narration.

8. Ehrman said: Was Jairus's daughter sick, but still alive when Jairus came to ask Jesus to heal her, as in Mark—or did she just die before Jairus came, so that he asked Jesus to raise her from the dead, as in Matthew? Hard to see how it could be both ways.

i) But that fails to draw a distinction between direct and indirect discourse. Let's take an example: Suppose someone said the narrator told Eve that she wouldn't die if she ate the forbidden fruit. But that's not true. The narrator didn't say that to Eve. Rather, the Tempter said that to Eve, and the narrator quoted what the Tempter said (Gen 3:4).

ii) On the one hand, there's whatever Jairus and his servants originally said. On the other hand, there's how the narrator quotes, paraphrases, or summarizes what was said. Jairus is addressing Jesus, but the narrator is addressing the reader. So these operate at different levels. Jairus isn't speaking directly to the reader. In Mark, you have two statements about Jairus by different speakers: Jairus and his servants. Due to narrative compression, Matthew simplifies a two-stage report as a one-stage report. The end-result is exactly the same. That's only a problem if you operate with Ehrman's boxy view of historical reportage.

iii) That, in turn, raises the question of what makes for an accurate quotation? Suppose a speaker misspoke. He failed to say what he meant. Should you quote him verbatim, or should you attributed to him what he intended to say? A

verbatim quote is more accurate in reference to what he actually said, but less accurate in reference to what he meant to say.

Likewise, it's common for people to speak in incomplete sentences. That's because speakers often interrupt each other. They don't give the speaker a chance to finish his sentence. If you were quoting him, should you reproduce his broken sentences, or should you fill in what he meant to say (if you knew how he was going to end his sentence)?

By the same token, speakers often talk over each other. If you quote them, you have to sort that out. Since they were speaking at the same time, there is no one correct sequence. Even if you had a tape recording, it would be necessary for you to separate out the overlapping statements, and put one after another—although that's not how it happened in real time.

9. Ehrman dusts off the musty chestnut of the two genealogies in Matthew and Luke. I'll venture some observations:

i) These aren't straight genealogies. Both genealogies are intentionally selective. Both genealogies use numerology as a selection criterion. In Matthew, that's explicit, with his units of 14. And in Luke, 77 is the numerical principle. Cf. R. Bauckham, **JUDE AND THE RELATIVES OF JESUS**, chap. 7. In addition, some names in Matthew's list are double entendres, to trigger literary associations with more than one individual. Cf. V. Poythress, **THE GOSPELS AND INERRANCY**, 70-71.

ii) There's the question of sources. Matthew and Luke probably had incomplete genealogical lists to work from. And their edited versions are even less complete. So their genealogies are two steps removed from the complete family tree of Jesus. That makes it difficult for us to collate the two.

iii) Keep in mind that Jesus wasn't born to famous parents. Rather, he made them famous. And he wasn't a famous child. Consider Jesse. No one would remember Jesse if he hadn't fathered King David.

Descendants of famous people may be prospectively famous or well-known. Their lineage is documented. By contrast, ancestors of famous people are retrospectively famous or well-known. As a result, their lineage may be undocumented or poorly documented. If people knew at the time that they'd have a famous descendent, then there might be a record of every link in the chain leading up to the famous descendent. But since that's only known in hindsight, the records may be fragmentary or nonexistent. Take Queen Elizabeth II. Even though she's one of the world's most famous individuals, and there are royal historians who expend enormous labors charting and retracing her lineage, they eventually hit a wall. That's because no one could know in advance that one of their descendants would be queen of England.

Unless Matthew and Luke knew by direct revelation the entire family tree of Jesus, they were only working with the links they had. That doesn't make their presentation erroneous, just incomplete. We can't fill in the gaps if we don't even know where they are. Not to mention the use of double entendres in Matthew.

"Jesus was indignant"

Bart Ehrman harps on Mk 1:41. He uses that as a showcase example to demonstrate the allegedly problematic state of the NT text. Consider two translations representing the two different variants:

Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" (NIV).

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean" (ESV).

i) Was Jesus "moved with anger" or "moved with pity"? A number of scholars think this verse presents a text-critical dilemma, because the two rival readings confront us with conflicting textual criteria. On the one hand, the "compassionate" reading enjoys far stronger external attestation. On the other hand, it's hard to see what would prompt a scribe to intentionally change the original from "moved with pity" to "moved with anger". So internal grounds favor the "indigent" reading.

Keep on mind that on this view, it's only a dilemma if the scribal variation was intentional.

ii) Peter Williams thinks this was an accidental scribal error:

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2012/02/mark-141-and-ehrman.html>

If his explanation is correct, that would dissolve the dilemma. An unintentional mistranscription would be consistent with the external attestation. Indeed, if this was an unusual, but accidental mistake, then it's unsurprising that it wasn't more widely disseminated in the MSS record, inasmuch as few scribes would independently repeat that kind of mistake in that particular location.

iii) Other textual critics propose a different explanation. See the ensuing discussion in the Evangelical Textual Criticism post I linked to.

iv) In that event, we don't have to puzzle over why Jesus was angry, since that's not the original reading.

v) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we think the "indignant" variation represents the original. On the face of it, it's perplexing that Jesus would get mad at a leper who approached him for healing.

Mind you, it's easy to speculate. Suppose a serial killer developed Parkinson's disease, and sought out Jesus for healing. Jesus knows something about his double life that the reader does not. And it's understandable that Jesus would take umbrage at the prospect of healing an evildoer like that. So there's nothing inherently inexplicable about the notion that Jesus would be irate about a certain kind of person who came to him for healing. His disapproval would be based on his divine insight into the character of the supplicant. But the reader isn't privy to that information.

However, that conjecture fails to explain why Jesus complied with the leper's request despite his disapproval.

vi) Another explanation is that Jesus is not indignant at the leper, but his condition. Jesus is outraged by the suffering itself.

vii) But whichever reading is original, that's consistent with Markan Christology, Synoptic Christology, and NT Christology generally. Our doctrine of Christ doesn't hinge on which reading is original in Mk 1:41. We needn't revise it depending on which reading is original. At worst, it means we can't read Christ's mind. We don't always understand what motivated his actions. But that's realistic.

Letter boards

Suppose, though, that the scribe got all the words 100 percent correct. If multiple copies of the letter went out, can we be sure that all the copies were also 100 percent correct? It is possible, at least, that even if they were all copied in Paul's presence, a word or two here or there got changed in one or the other of the copies. If so, what if only one of the copies served as the copy from which all subsequent copies were made — then in the first century, into the second century and the third century, and so on? In that case, the oldest copy that provided the basis for all subsequent copies of the letter was not exactly what Paul wrote, or wanted to write.

Once the copy is in circulation — that is, once it arrives at its destination in one of the towns of Galatia — it, of course, gets copied, and mistakes get made. Sometimes scribes might intentionally change the text; sometimes accidents happen. These mistake-ridden copies get copied; and the mistake-ridden copies of the copies get copied; and so on, down the line. Somewhere in the midst of all

this, the original copy (or each of the original copies) ends up getting lost, or worn out, or destroyed. At some point, it is no longer possible to compare a copy with the original to make sure it is "correct," even if someone has the bright idea of doing so.

Suppose that after the original manuscript of a text was produced, two copies were made of it, which we may call A and B. These two copies, of course, will differ from each other in some ways — possibly major and probably minor. Now suppose that A was copied by one other scribe, but B was copied by fifty scribes. Then the original manuscript, along with copies A and B, were lost, so that all that remains in the textual tradition are the fifty-one second-generation copies, one made from A and fifty made from B. If a reading found in the fifty manuscripts (from B) differs from a reading found in the one (from A), is the former necessarily more likely to be the original reading? No, not at all — even though by counting noses, it is found in fifty times as many witnesses. In fact, the ultimate difference in support for that reading is not fifty manuscripts to one. It is a difference of one to one (A against B). The mere

question of numbers of manuscripts supporting one reading over another, therefore, is not particularly germane to the question of which reading in our surviving manuscripts represents the original (or oldest) form of the text. B. Ehrman, Misquoting Jesus (HarperCollins, 2005), 59, 128-129.

This is one of Ehrman's stock objections to the authenticity of the NT text, as we have it today. He repeats variations of this objection in his debates.

The argument appears to undercut the common apologetic appeal to the number of Greek MSS and even the antiquity of some Greek MSS. Although we have lots of MSS, if these derive from the same copy, that really counts as one rather than many. Likewise, although some of our MSS are very early, if they derive from the same defective parent copy, their antiquity doesn't make them reliable. I've discussed this before, but I'd like to say a bit more about the issue.

i) We've all seen letter boards. These are signs with movable letters. You have a box with magnetic letters of the alphabet. That way you can change the message on the sign when you have a new product or service to advertise.

We've all seen signs in which one or more of the letters dropped off. Sometimes the effect is comical. It changes the meaning of the message. However, it's usually easy to figure out the original message. If you know the language (e.g. English, Spanish), if you know the context, you can mentally reconstruct the intended message. This is something we all do. You don't need to have access to the

original as a basis of comparison. Ehrman is overlooking really obvious counterexamples to his facile objection.

ii) Another problem with his objection is that we have four Gospels, not merely one. So he'd have to postulate that the chain of transmission was garbled, not just once, but independently for all four gospels.

iii) Ehrman has a "heads I win, tails you lose" approach to the Gospels. If they're different from each other, that's a contradiction! But if they agree, that's not independent multiple attestation. Rather, that just means Christians were telling each other the same stories, which eventually got written down. He's rigged it so that nothing can ever count as evidence for the historical Jesus.

Ehrman, Lewis & Clark

I'm going to comment on the Ehrman's latest installment in his debate with Mike Licona:

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

This post will be longish, not because I have that much to say, but because it will contain longish block quotes.

I myself came out of a similar religious context to that which Mike now finds himself in — the context within which he acquired his views about the Bible and about history.

I need to say that that kind of context is not the one in which historical scholars typically develop and advance their views. It is a highly unusual context, and the views, assumptions, and presuppositions held by people who live and work in those contexts are not those of academics who work in any other context. Sometimes, we see something the way we do simply because that's how everyone in our immediate context sees it, as well. It seems normal

to us. So normal that we think that it is normal. Even if it is not at all normal.

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.

I can simply tell you as someone who lives and works with historians, that this is not the kind of view that you would ever find in the context of a major research university. You may find it at Baptist colleges, or independent fundamentalist colleges, or other kinds of denominational schools (whether colleges or seminaries). But at least in my experience, you will not find it in major research universities. You will never, ever have a history class that argues for supernatural occurrences in the past. Never.

One obvious problem with his comparison is that Ehrman acts as though the status quo is self-validating. As if the fact that secular academics operate a certain way carries some presumption that that's how they *ought* to operate.

But that's like the naturalistic fallacy. Indeed, this is a good example of uncritical peer pressure.

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.

Several problems:

i) Note Ehrman's duplicity. On the one hand, to rationalize methodological atheism, he appeals to an elitist standard: how secular academic historians operate. On the other hand, to debunk the historicity of the Gospels, he appeals to a populist standard: what "people in general," or Christian laymen, who aren't academic historians, mean by historical accuracy. So Ehrman has a glaring double standard. He switches from elitist standards to populist standards, depending on the immediate needs of his argument.

ii) His statement is a half-truth. It's true that we need to have transcultural standards for historical accuracy. However, before you can even evaluate the veracity of a document, you need to interpret the document. You need to understand how the writer communicates. What he intends to affirm or deny. Making allowance for literary conventions is a necessary preliminary step.

iii) We *do* need to adjust for the period in question. Take **THE JOURNALS OF LEWIS & CLARK**. A modern audience would be interested in film footage. A modern-day expedition would bring along a camera crew. In a way, that would make it more realistic. More "accurate". The viewer could see it for himself. That would be more exciting and informative.

But it would be ridiculous to judge the expedition of Lewis & Clark by that anachronistic standard. They didn't have video cameras back then. So you have to settle for a written record and drawings.

In addition, there's a tradeoff. On the one hand, we have equipment they don't. On the other hand, the nation they explored, back in 1803-1806, no longer exists. The landscape has changed. You no longer have the same Indian tribes, in all the same places. The distribution of animals has changed. We have better equipment than they did to record their findings, but we can't see what they did due to the passage of time. Our only source of information for that time and place are records like **THE JOURNALS OF LEWIS & CLARK**. So we need to judge it, and to appreciate it, by the standards of the day. It was accurate for its time. Nowadays, in the age of audio and video recordings, we have a different standard of accuracy. That doesn't make **THE JOURNALS OF LEWIS & CLARK** historically unreliable. It just means they don't include the kind of supplementary information that video cameras could record.

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. 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.

i) That is a genuine weakness with Licona's comparison.

ii) Ehrman fails to distinguish between firsthand biographies and secondhand biographies. For instance, people who dictate an oral history don't need to document and verify what they say. Rather, they simply tell the interviewer their personal experience of the recent past. If the traditional authorship of Matthew, Mark, and John is correct, then Matthew and John are eyewitness accounts. That's very different than an academic historian who didn't participate in the events he recounts.

Conversely, Luke is getting his information from firsthand informants. Of course, he doesn't include dates and footnotes. It would be absurdly anachronistic to judge an ancient biography by that modern convention.

First, I was confused when Mike wants to argue that the Gospels contain “no historical anachronisms.” My handy Webster’s Dictionary defines an “anachronism” as “a chronological misplacing of persons, events, objects, or customs.” The reason I’m confused by

Mike's claim is this: He already has told us that he thinks the Gospels contain historical anachronisms. That's what it means to say that an author, because of artistic license, has changed the sequence of historical events so that they are no longer accurate.

Either Ehrman is playing dumb or he really is that dense. In historical scholarship, an anachronism is typically a statement or description that's too late for the ostensible period in which the narrative is set. That can sometimes be a telltale sign that the story was written much later by somebody who didn't live through the period in question, who's writing about the past based on his knowledge of the present, who's writing a fictional story set in the past. He puts his story in the past, archaizes his story, but because he doesn't know much about that historical period (or locale), his story reflects a knowledge of his own time and place—since that's his actual frame of reference. This can be a hallmark of OT and NT apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. Historical retroactions.

However, we have to be careful not to jump the gun. An account can be written by a contemporary, but edited at a later date. The editor may update the account based on subsequent developments. That will be anachronistic, but not because the account was unhistorical.

The Gospel of Luke is quite explicit (see 2:2) that Jesus was born when Quirinius was the governor of Syria; this was also during the reign of Herod, King of Israel (1:5; and, of course, Matthew 2). But this is an enormous problem. Luke appears not to have known the history of Palestine as well as we might like. We know from clear and certain statements in Josephus (the prominent Jewish historian) and inscriptions that Quirinius became governor of Syria in 6 CE. But Herod died in 4 BCE, ten years earlier. Their reigns did not overlap. Luke has simply made a historical mistake. It's an anachronism. (Christian apologists always try to reconcile this one: Mike may try to do so as well; but let me tell you, ancient historians who do not have a horse in this race have never ever been convinced by the extreme lengths one has to go to in order to make Quirinius and Herod rule at the same time. It simply is a historical mistake.)

That's a familiar chestnut. Among other things, notice how Ehrman uses Josephus as the standard of comparison. He treats Josephus as ipso facto accurate. Yet Josephus exercises literary license in his writings. Josephus believes in miracles. He relates portends and prodigies. Why isn't Ehrman as dismissive of Josephus as he is of Plutarch and Suetonius? Once again, we see how Ehrman switches his standards depending on the immediate needs of his argument.

Using the right names has no bearing on whether the stories are accurate or not. It simply means that the storytellers knew what names they should use in telling their tales.

Ehrman routinely says the Gospels were written long after the fact by people living in different countries, speaking a different language. In that case, using the right names would be surprising.

Each of us can remember things that happened to us many, many years ago. Often, these memories are still quite vivid to us. Right? Mike gives a number of personal examples. I'm afraid this is one area where Mike simply does not know the scholarship.

All of us have vivid memories of the past. These are the memories we trust the most. We are absolutely certain it happened the way we remember: Why else would it be vivid? The answer is that it might be vivid because we have replayed the event in our memory time and time again in the same, wrong, way. So now that's how we remember it. Vividly.

Here's an example of a 60-year-old man reminiscing about his childhood:

I was born and raised in Lawrence, Kansas (though, as a young child, I spent seven years in Fremont, Nebraska). My father was a salesman for a corrugated box company; my mother was a secretary.

Ours was a religious home. We went to church every Sunday, said grace before every evening meal, and talked about God at ease. I would say my mother was the steady rock when it came to religious upbringing. When we moved back to Lawrence, when I was in the fifth grade, we started attending Trinity Episcopal Church. We had tried several other churches, but my mom preferred that

one since it seemed to be the only one that “talked about God” (!). I was an altar boy there all the way through high school, faithfully in church every week.

I preferred playing baseball and tennis. But in my junior year in high school, I started to excel on the high school debate team, and in my senior year, I more or less went crazy on it.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

Guess who that is? Why, it's Bart Ehrman! Notice how confidently he talks about his childhood. About events in his life that took place 40-50 years ago. If he lives to be 70, 80, or 90, don't you think he'll be telling the very same stories about his childhood?

Can historians talk about miracles? Here, I would like to issue a challenge to Mike. If Mike wants to maintain that respectable historians can and do appeal to miracle, I want him to give us some examples. I would like the names of four or five reputable historians — not conservative evangelical Christians who

are personally committed to a belief in the resurrection (as is the main figure that he cites, Gary Habermas). But just regular ole academic historians. There are thousands in the country, in many historical fields (ancient Rome; European Middle Ages; American history; and on and on). Which of them agree that we can demonstrate miracles and which of them in fact to argue for miracles in the books that they have written about past events?

i) Of course, the challenge is rigged. What about academic historians who are personally committed to methodological atheism? What makes them the standard of comparison? Ehrman's challenge is circular: by definition, secular historians will only consider naturalistic explanations.

ii) Moreover, Licona already addressed that issue:

Most biblical scholars neither mention nor employ them in their work, probably because they don't receive any training in matters pertaining to the philosophy of history.

The laws of nature inform us of what typically occurs in the universe when left to itself. If I hold a pen in front of me and then let go, it will drop to the floor. I can repeat this act a million times over and get the same result. Now, let's say I let go of the pen and catch it before it drops even the slightest distance. That the pen did not drop is not a violation or suspension of the laws of nature, because my hand entered the scene and altered the normal course of events.

In a sense, then, we should say that nature has not always been left to itself. A miracle is not a violation or suspension of the laws of nature. Rather, it is when the hand of God enters our world and alters the normal course of events. Everyone will agree that the laws of nature inform us that a corpse will not return to life when left to itself. But if Jesus's resurrection occurred, it was God, the author of life, who altered the normal course of events and raised Jesus. His corpse was not left to itself.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/michael-licona-interview/>

Instead of engaging Licona's argument, Ehrman ignores it.

In addition, I would like Mike to take some specific historical events that we might believe God had a hand in, for example, the discovery of America by Columbus, or the victory of the Allies in World War II, or the election of Ronald Reagan — take any example.

Why *those* examples? Why not evidence of miraculous healing or a miraculous answer to prayer? Why not small scale historical incidents?

And as to hallucinations, if Mike really and truly believes that groups of people cannot have hallucinations, I would love to know how he explains the fact that we have extremely well-documented instances of the Blessed Virgin Mary appearing to large groups of her followers — within the past few decades!)

i) Ehrman needs to get specific.

ii) Moreover, to say the postmortem appearances of Jesus were hallucinatory fails to comport with the evidence. For one thing, some observers didn't immediately recognize Jesus. But if it's their personal hallucination of Jesus, then that should be an exact match for what they think Jesus is supposed to look like.

Incidentally, that's true for Marian apparitions. Instant recognition. Not surprisingly, reported Marian apparitions dovetail with traditional Catholic iconography. The "Mary" who appears to them looks just like artistic representations of Mary they see in church. (Of course, that's unhistorical.)

For example, he suggests that maybe Jesus was not raised from the dead, but that he had a “near-death experience,” as people sometimes have. This is an interesting thesis, and I wonder if Mike would be willing to pursue it. It would be possible, of course, for historians to make this argument (some have!) — that Jesus’s return from “the dead” was from being “nearly dead,” since near-death experiences do not require the existence of the supernatural (you may think they do, but they don’t; neurologists have given various completely natural explanations for why these things

happen; you may not agree with the scientific explanations, but my point is that they exist and you don't need to believe in the supernatural to think that some people have these experiences for completely natural reasons). And so, is Mike seriously proposing this as an alternative to the idea that God raised Jesus from the dead? Does he really think that it's possible that Jesus did not really die on the cross? That he simply woke up in the tomb, just as some people wake up on the operating table? If that is his view, I'd like to see him explain it more fully. If it's not his view, I'd like to know why he rejects it.

i) That's a complete misunderstanding of what Licona said. He never suggested the Resurrection was actually an NDE. Rather, he mentioned NDEs and other paranormal phenomena to challenge Ehrman's plausibility structure. That was the context: "Plausibility is the degree to which a hypothesis is compatible with our background knowledge." He uses those examples to demonstrate that methodological naturalism should not be the default paradigm.

ii) Moreover, Ehrman isn't paying attention to Licona's specific claim. Licona appealed to *veridical* NDEs. These resist "completely natural" explanations. A naturalistic explanation attempts to explain an NDE in terms of what was happening in the patient's brain, and what he could be physically aware of, in terms of his immediate surroundings. But the evidence for veridical NDEs goes beyond what's explicable in that regard. Now, Ehrman can attempt to deny veridical NDEs, but he's not engaging the actual cases. Here's what Licona actually said was:

There are about 100 cases of well-evidenced Near Death Experiences, in which a person who had died by all accounts (e.g., flat EKG and/or EEG) claimed to have gone somewhere or seen and heard things going on they could not have possibly known but turn out being accurate, apparitions of the dead in which percipients received accurate information from the apparition they could not have otherwise known, and extreme answered prayer. The evidence for a supernatural component to reality is very strong and provides significant background knowledge suggesting there is a supernatural element to reality. For this reason, the

***resurrection hypothesis has little if any
ad hoc element to it.***

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/licona-major-statement/>

Moreover, when one considers about a hundred cases of well-evidenced Near Death Experiences, apparitions of the dead in which percipients received accurate information from the apparition they could not have otherwise known, extreme answered prayer, and the historical case for Jesus's resurrection, the evidence for a supernatural component to reality is so strong that atheism becomes untenable. The evidence strongly suggests that the world in which we live is far more compatible with theism than atheism.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/michael-licona-interview/>

Back to Ehrman:

Sometimes, we can't show what happened because we just don't have sources of information. That's usually the case. Very rarely do we have sources of information for the trillions of things that happen every second of the day. It's no one's fault. History just can't accommodate all of the past. There are some things that are simply inaccessible to us, even if they are in the past.

That's another example of Ehrman's double standards. Consider how he says the traditional authorship of the Gospels must be wrong because Josephus is the only 1C Palestinian Jew who wrote in literary Greek. But, of course, that carries no presumption that he's the only Jew who did it—given the ravages of time.

The historical disciplines are forced by the very nature of things to build their case about what happened in the past on shared assumptions — shared by everyone engaged in the investigation. That means that historians — using historical methods — cannot show that the Christian God has intervened in

history in order to accomplish his will. They may think so, some of them. But belief in the Christian God is not one of the assumptions that historians share, and so when doing history, it cannot be part of the equation.

That's illogical. He acts as if secular consensus is self-validating. But the fact that secular historians agree with each other on methodological atheism doesn't make it rational. You can't use agreement to justify agreement. "Historical methods" can't properly preempt historical evidence. If they screen out historical evidence, that makes the methods unhistorical.

I forgot I had amnesia

I'm going to comment on Part 2 of the debate between Bart Ehrman and Richard Bauckham:

<http://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Ehrman-vs-Bauckham-Part-2-Can-we-trust-eyewitness-testimony>

(I swiped the title of my post from a song by Win Corduin.)

1. I suspect Ehrman's influence is actually quite limited. Whose mind is he changing? He's not changing the minds of conservative Bible scholars—because they reject his definition of inerrancy. He's not changing the minds of moderate Bible scholars—because they reject his definition of historicity. Moreover, both groups are quite familiar with his stock examples. Both groups are quite familiar with the same data that he is. They arrived at their own explanations before he became a celebrity apostate.

Some liberal scholars agree with him, but he didn't change their minds. Rather, they already shared a similar outlook.

Apostates and atheists rubberstamp anything he says so long as he is bashing the Bible and Christianity. He could contradict himself, and they'd still root for him.

I think the only group he has much impact on are stereotypical young people growing up in intellectually lazy evangelical churches. They make easy targets.

2. Here's one of Ehrman's tactics: if his opponent happens to agree with him on the "phenomena" of Scripture, he acts as though they made a damaging concession. Problem is,

they don't think the phenomena have the same implications that he does.

For instance, one problem with the debate was failure to define a "story". Do Matthew and Luke change Mark's "story".

That's equivocal. For one thing, it fails to distinguish between the underlying event and narrating the event. Although there's only one event (in any given case), it's not like there's just one right way to describe the same event. To the contrary, there are different ways to accurately present or represent the same event.

Take the difference between expository documentaries, observational documentaries, linear narration, nonlinear narration, immersive journalism, &c. These can all be accurate depictions. Indeed, the multiplicity of viewpoints makes a variety of techniques more accurate.

3. Apropos (2), Ehrman said the Gospels are historically inaccurate because narrators provide the framework, which varies from one Gospel to the next. But that's equivocal. There's a difference between providing the framework in the sense of arranging scenes in a narrative sequence, and inventing a physical or temporal setting.

Ehrman said the Gospel biographies not historically accurate in any modern sense of the term. Really?

What's the modern standard of comparison, exactly? For instance, I've seen hundreds—probably thousands—of documentaries in my lifetime. Is Ehrman denying that historical and biographical documentaries are selective? Use narrative compression? Nonlinear narrative (e.g. flashbacks)? Paraphrastic quotes?

There are different kinds of documentaries. For instance, you have expository documentaries with voiceover narrators. Both the narration and the narrative structure impose an editorial viewpoint. The genre may include reenactments to fill gaps in the record. They edit the raw material to form a logical rather than chronological progression that makes it flow smoothly, so that a viewer can follow the story more easily.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are observational documentaries, where unobtrusive cameras simply record what happens spontaneously, with minimal editorial intervention. Just let events speak for themselves. Presents material from the viewpoint of participants.

Is one more accurate than the other. Genre alone doesn't settle that question. Observational documentaries are more ostensibly lifelike. More realistic. More like verbatim quotation and strict chronology.

But that can be propagandistic. If subjects know they are being filmed, that affects how they behave. They may exploit that to influence the viewer through the image that participants consciously project. Rather than a director staging their actions, they stage their own actions to create a favorable impression. Conversely, the overtly interpretive nature of an expository documentary may be truer to events by evaluating events in light of the larger context and supporting evidence.

Ehrman has a positivist view of historiography. Just record things as they happened. But that's simplistic and misleading. On 9/11, airplanes flew into skyscrapers. Just showing what happened is barely informative. That fails to distinguish between an accident and a calculated attack.

What motivated the pilots? You have to go behind the events to explain *why* it happened. Ehrman has a bad habit of making oracular pronouncements that fail to consider obvious counterexamples to his confident generalities.

4. Ehrman labored to impugn testimonial evidence. But a basic problem with Ehrman's position is that even if, for the sake of argument, we say the Gospel writers had fallible memories, there's a big difference between the occasional memory lapse and systematically misremembering the life of Jesus. Unless the Gospel writers suffered from senile dementia, Ehrman cannot impugn the historical reliability of the Gospels by giving us cliches about how eyewitness testimony isn't "necessarily" trustworthy. His position requires a far more ambitious claim: observers consistently misremembered what Jesus said and did.

For instance, I've read reviews of biographies about C. S. Lewis which mention that Lewis is unreliable when it comes to dating events in his own life. biographers have to correct some of his dates. They go to great pains to work out a careful chronology of his life.

It would, however, be ridiculous to conclude that since Lewis misremembered *when* some events happened, that he misremembered *what* happened. Those are two very different things.

Indeed, it's often not a case of misremembering the date, but not remembering the date in the first place. If you didn't write it down or make a mental note, then it's not a case of forgetting or misremembering the date; rather, you never took notice of what day it was.

Later, you may attempt to reconstruct the date. But that's a different process. That's about attempting to remember

something else that happened around the same time, and using that as a frame of reference to fix the rough timeframe of the incident whose calendar date you can't remember directly.

5. Bauckham noted that witnesses may misremember the details of an accident because it was unexpected. To expand on what he said, they didn't see it coming. They were surprised. Unprepared. They only focus on the accident after it happens. After the initial shock wears off.

He also said most forgetting occurs in the first few hours or a couple of days after the incident. Memories that survive that window are likely to stick. Moreover, once we begin to rehearse what happened, it falls into a standard stable form.

We remember the gist rather than details. A persistent narrative core. He cited Synoptic parallels regarding Peter's denials, where the gist remains despite variations.

Regarding oral cultures, Bauckham drew a distinction between two different genres: stories that are meant to be entertaining, that have a new plot twist each time you tell it—and stories that try to faithfully preserve what happened. In addition, we need to consider what cultures bother to remember.

Bauckham says Gospel writers sometimes arrange material topically rather than chronologically. Mark has a whole series of miracles that happen one after another. That doesn't mean they all happened on the same day. That doesn't mean Mark is trying to put them in the "right" (i.e. chronological) order. Rather, he's grouping incidents by

topic. Sometimes the order is pedagogical rather than chronological.

Conversely, there are times when chronology matters. The baptism of Jesus needs to be at the beginning of his public ministry. By the same token, there's a natural sequence of events leading up to his death, in the final week of his life.

In editing Mark, Bauckham pointed out that Matthew and Luke feel freer to vary his plot than vary the sayings of Jesus.

He noted historians who vary their own accounts. To expand on his statement, Josephus has some overlapping material in the **ANTIQUITIES OF THE JEWS** and **THE JEWISH WAR**. The variations aren't due to oral tradition. It's the same author in both instances.

Bauckham doesn't think you can or should evaluate the historicity of the sayings by assessing them line-by-line, but by assessing the general reliability of the source. Bauckham dates Mark and Luke to the 60s.

6. Ehrman labored to use the Sermon on the Mount to illustrate the historical unreliability of the Gospels. How could anyone recall the Sermon on the Mount after hearing it one time 50 years ago?

Several issues:

i) He dates Matthew to 80-85. Of course, you have scholars who date it about 20 years earlier.

ii) Traditionally, Christians didn't assume that Bible narrators had to rely on their unaided memory of events.

Rather, they had inspired memories.

Of course, Ehrman rejects the inspiration of Scripture. Indeed, he's an atheist. However, since he's challenging the plausibility of the traditional view of Scripture, he needs to take inspiration into account for the sake of argument.

iii) His objection presumes the unity of the Sermon on the Mount. But you can affirm the inerrancy of Matthew or historical reliability of Matthew without assuming this was all said at one sitting. It could be a composite discourse. A compilation of independent sayings.

These independent sayings are individually memorable. Pithy sayings. Catchy phrasing. Memorable imagery. Memorable vignettes.

Moreover, Jesus would have occasion to repeat these sayings on multiple occasions. If Matthew's Gospel was written by an apostle, he'd have occasion to hear these sayings many times.

On this view, Jesus really did address a large audience on that occasion. Matthew is quoting things Jesus actually said at the time. But Matthew is taking the opportunity to piggyback other things Jesus said on other occasions. In addition to a core message, Matthew takes advantage of the situation to collate many independent sayings of Jesus and attach them to the original address. Grouping material makes it easier for his readers to keep track of the material. On that view, Matthew didn't have to absorb it all at one sitting. And that's perfectly consistent with the inerrancy of Scripture.

(Another view is that Jesus said it all at the same place, but not at the same time. That this was spread out over a few

days.)

7. More than once, Ehrman compared the canonical Gospels to the Gospel of Thomas. For instance, he said about half the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas are not at all like Matthew and Luke.

But that's very deceptive. That's not about "changing" sayings of Jesus, but *inventing* sayings of Jesus. Ehrman banking on the fact that the average listener knows next to nothing about the Gospel of Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas isn't comparable to the canonical Gospels. The document is just a collection of sayings with no narrative context. According to Simon Gathercole, it was written sometime between 135 AD and c. 200 AD. Cf. S. Gathercole, **THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS: INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY** (Brill, 2014), 121,124.

It borrows from Matthew, Luke, Romans, and Hebrews (120). So this is not an independent historical source.

Moreover, we only have fragments in the original Greek (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1). The full text is preserved in a 4C Coptic translation. Gathercole says "Clearly the Coptic is not a straightforwardly literal translation that would enable us to reconstruct the Greek behind it" (19); cf. S. Gathercole, **THE COMPOSITION OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS: ORIGINAL LANGUAGE AND INFLUENCES** (Cambridge, 2012).

Let's take stock. Consider how duplicitous it is for Ehrman to bring this up. He alleges that the Synoptic Gospels are historically unreliable because they were written some 50

years after the event. In other books and debates he questions the textual authenticity of the canonical Gospels.

Yet he's now citing an apocryphal Gospel that at a low-end estimate was written at least a century after the event. And at a high-end estimate, 170 years later! Moreover, we must rely on a loose, Coptic translation from the 4C for the full text. So this is filtered through a translation. And, of course, the MS attestation for the Gospel of Thomas is far inferior to the canonical Gospels. His comparison commits a whole litany of double standards.

8. Ehrman said the Challenger disaster happened on Jan 28, 1986. He uses the Challenger disaster to illustrate how reliable memory is, yet he recites from memory the exact date of the incident.

Indeed, throughout the debate, he cited from memory his recollection of memory studies about the unreliability of memory. He said he'd read hundreds of books and articles on memory studies. That's a lot to remember. So he had to rely on his unreliable memory of memory studies to demonstrate that memory is unreliable. But if memory is unreliable, why should we trust his summary of the evidence?

Ehrman is a NT textual critic by training. That's a very dry discipline. It requires you to memorize tons of arcane minutiae. How can you be a textual critic if memory is so fickle?

9. Memory isn't any one thing. When we discuss the reliability of memory, we need to draw many distinctions. For instance:

‘Propositional memory’ is ‘semantic memory’ or memory for facts, the vast network of conceptual information underlying our general knowledge of the world: this is naturally expressed as ‘remembering that’, for example, that Descartes died in Sweden.

‘Recollective memory’ is ‘episodic memory’, also sometimes called ‘personal memory’, ‘experiential memory’, or ‘direct memory’ by philosophers: this is memory for experienced events and episodes, such as a conversation this morning or the death of a friend eight years ago.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/memory/#VarRem>

10. Ehrman cited studies of students who misremembered details of the space shuttle Challenger disaster.

i) I resisted the impulse to Google it in order to refresh my recollection. So here's my 30-year-old recollection of the Challenger disaster:

I remember that morning switching on the TV and seeing footage of a rocket rising, then exploding. I remember the shocked, almost speechless reaction of the TV reporter.

It's possible that I saw it live, or maybe a replay. I'm guessing the latter.

I then had to drive a relative to a hair appointment. That's all I heard about the incident until I came home and saw the evening news, hours later.

I myself didn't think it was a huge deal when I first saw it. Sure, it was tragic for the astronauts, but accidents kill hundreds of people everyday.

I don't recall the number of astronauts. I believe it was between 5 and 10.

One of the astronauts was a woman. A school teacher.

I recall reporters who said her students were watching the liftoff live, and remarked on their reaction when they realized that their teacher went up in smoke.

I remember social commentators saying that for the younger generation, this was equivalent to the JFK assassination: Where were you when it happened?

I recall lots of subsequent news coverage about the investigation into the accident. I remember a Congressional hearing where Richard Feynman testified and performed a simple demonstration about what went wrong. He put rings in a glass of clear fluid and they began to disintegrate. Something like that.

I remember allegations that NASA administrators knew the O-rings were a design flaw, an accident waiting to happen (mechanical failure), but they refused to delay the launch.

ii) In general, I don't think the Challenger disaster is a good test of memory. What makes it memorable? For whom is it memorable?

You can have the same number of people killed in a freeway pileup. You can have hundreds of people killed in an airplane crash.

Is it the incident itself that was so memorable, or did the sustained coverage make it memorable?

Do people remember the incident itself, or coverage of the incident—including the personal interest story about the teacher who was killed, the scandal involving NASA administrators, &c?

The coverage can change how they remember it. That doesn't necessarily mean they misremember it. It changes the emphasis. Changes what they remember. That isn't inaccurate. Rather, that's additional information.

NASA has, or used to have, a certain iconic significance in American culture. So that hyped the coverage.

I think it was more memorable to a certain age group because they had nothing bigger to compare it with. By contrast, I was in my mid-20s when it happened. I lived through some harrowing coverage of the Vietnam War. The assassinations of JFK, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King.

In addition to public events, my grandmother had died three months after I graduated from high school, some 8 years prior. From a personal standpoint, that was far more memorable to me than the Challenger disaster. I don't wish to sound cruel, but by the time the Challenger disaster rolled around, I was already somewhat jaded.

What is historical accuracy?

1. Bart Ehrman spends a lot of time attacking the historical accuracy of the Gospels. However, he doesn't spend much time unpacking the concept of historical accuracy. Rather, he contents himself with examples of what he considers to be discrepancies in the Gospels. But what does it mean for something to be historically accurate?

2. Perhaps we'd say an account of an event is accurate if the event happened, and the account corresponds to how the event happened. In a sense, that's unobjectionable, but it's fatally ambiguous. Let's take a few examples:

i) Was the healing of Jairus' daughter an event? That's a trick question. In a sense, it's an event. But in another sense, it's a series of events. In Mark's account, Jairus comes to Jesus. That's an event. He talks to Jesus. That's an event. Jesus goes with Jairus. That's an event. While they are on their way to his house, servants come to say his daughter has died. The sending of the servants is an event. Her death is an event. And so on.

In other words, we can view this as one event, or a series of related events. And that's not a pedantic distinction. If we say an accurate account should correspond to the event, are we saying it must correspond to every link in the chain? But what if that makes the description bloated? Stuffed with extraneous details? Is it inaccurate for a narrator to cut the dead wood?

If, to be accurate, an account must correspond to every link in the chain of events, then where's the cutoff? You could always go back another step in the series of events leading

up to the conclusion. When did the daughter take ill? What was the history of the pathogen (if that's what it was)?

Any description of the event must somewhat arbitrarily isolate what's relevant from all the precipitating factors leading up to the denouement. In terms of causality, the event isn't a self-contained incident. Rather, it's the end-product of an ever-receding series of cause and effect. Any account will have to omit many details.

ii) Take another example: suppose we say an accurate account of the Civil War is an account that corresponds to what actually happened. In a sense that's a truism. But the Civil War isn't a single event. Rather, it's a network of various events at different times and places. That can't be shoehorned into one linear plot. Rather, you have multiple chains of events. What was happening in Virginia, South Carolina, Missouri, the District of Columbia, &c. What a Union general was doing, what a Confederate general was doing, what a Union politician was doing, what a Confederate politician was doing, and so forth.

No single narrative can correspond to everything that was happening at the same time, or different times, in different states during the Civil War. At best, you can have multiple narratives that correspond to one chain of events or another—related, but distinct—chain of events.

3. In one sense, a time machine is the ideal standard of historical accuracy. By taking you back into the past, that's an exact match.

In another sense, that's not what we mean by historical accuracy. For accuracy involves the concept of representation, not identity.

4. Apropos (3), take holodeck simulations of the past. The computer creates an interactive, 3D facsimile of the past. That would certainly correspond to the past.

But, of course, that's science fiction. Even if we had the technology to pull that off, we lack the fine-grained knowledge of the past to reproduce details. The computer would have to pad the simulation of generic, imaginary details to plug the many gaps.

5. Let's take another example. Suppose I'm a director. I'm going to make a miniseries on the Civil War. A nonfiction dramatization. I wish to make it as historically accurate as possible.

i) One challenge is dialogue. To my knowledge, not much original Civil War dialogue has come down to us. By that I mean, you didn't have stenographers following soldiers and statesmen around, taking down their informal conversations in shorthand. So how do I supply authentic dialogue? Or do I?

I could simply invent dialogue that's the kind of thing that characters might say in that situation. It would be accurate in that very broad sense.

However, it's possible to get much closer to the reality. There's tons of primary source material consisting of speeches, sermons, letters, memoirs, diaries, journals, essays, tracts, pamphlets, editorials, biographies, news articles, &c., by Civil War observers or participants. That could be mined for raw material to turn into dialogue.

Although it wouldn't be what they said in conversation, it would be in their own words. It would be about the war.

Therefore, I'd have the Robert E. Lee character saying things Lee actually said. Same thing with all the other characters.

Sure, that's not something they said on that exact occasion. As a filmmaker, I've changed the setting by adapting their statements to dialogue. But that's a necessary adjustment to the medium. No, it's not something they said *at* that particular time or place, but it is something they said *about* that particular time or place.

ii) Another challenge is viewpoint. Should the series have an editorial viewpoint? That's unnecessary. Different characters would naturally present different viewpoints. North and South. Generals. Statesmen. Foot soldiers. Slaves. Abolitionists. And the dialogue would be taken from things they actually said.

iii) On a related note, how would I depict battles? Well, if I have descriptions of the same battle from a Union soldier and a Confederate soldier, I might show the battle from both perspectives. After all, each soldier experienced the battle differently.

iv) Some of the original settings are gone. There are different ways to finesse that. There are still Antebellum buildings around. I could substitute one of those. I could build period sets, based on historic photographs. And in the age of CGI, I could simulate period landscapes and cityscapes, based on historic photographs. I could even digitally alter the facial appearance of the actors to make them look just like the historical figures they portray.

Now, all these devices are one or more steps removed from the original event. Yet all of them strive for authenticity.

Suppose I go to all the effort, only to have film critic Bart Ehrman exclaim that my miniseries wasn't historically accurate in any modern sense of the term. Really? Would any rational person agree with his review?

6. I think the Gospels are much closer to reality than the scenario I proposed in #5. But even if, for argument's sake, the Gospels were like my hypothetical miniseries, they'd be highly informative about what happened in the Civil War. If that's historically accurate in the case of a representation which is more steps removed from the original event, then that's even more accurate in the case of a representation which is fewer steps removed from the original event.

Bullwinkle is a dope

Once again, I'm going to explore the question of what makes a claim historically accurate. Bart Ehrman constantly impugns the historical accuracy of the Gospels, but rarely says much about what makes a claim historically reliable or accurate.

Sometimes he says we should judge the Gospels by modern standards of historical accuracy rather than ancient standards, but that assumes, among other things, that modern standards are indeed more accurate or reliable. It's true that we can measure space and time with greater precision. Down to multiple decimal places. But unless you're an engineer, that's pedantic.

Let's run through some examples:

#1 A newsworthy event happened on August 8, 1974.

#2 On August 8, 1974, Nixon tendered his resignation.

#3 In a televised address, Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#4 In a televised address from the White House, Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#5 In a televised address from the Oval office, Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#6 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#7 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Richard Milhous Nixon tenured his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#8 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Richard Milhous Nixon tenured his resignation on August 8, 1974, effective noon the next day.

#9 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Richard Milhous Nixon tenured his resignation on August 8, 1974, effective noon the next day, EST.

These successive descriptions are increasingly specific. Each is a bit more detailed than the previous description.

In that respect, you might say #9 is more accurate than #8, #8 is more accurate than #7, and so forth. Conversely, #1 is less accurate than #2, #2 is less accurate than #3, and so forth.

However, to be *less* accurate is not to be *inaccurate*. Each description is completely accurate.

Put another way: if a description mentions some detail, then to be accurate, the description must match the detail. However, including that detail is not a prerequisite for accuracy. Failure to mention that detail doesn't render the description inaccurate. Mere omission is not an inaccuracy. Rather, if it mentions some detail, and the description fails to match the detail, then that's an inaccuracy.

Compare three statements:

#1 Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow.

#2 Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

#3 Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Rocky Squirrel will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

Both #1 & #2 are accurate. The fact that #2 omits some details doesn't make it inaccurate. It just makes it less informative.

#3 is inaccurate because it contains a false identification. In a sense, #3 is inaccurate because it says too much, unlike #1. Omission is not a falsehood—although it can sometimes be deceptive.

Let's take another example:

Rocky J. Squirrel is Bullwinkle J. Moose's best friend.
Richard Nixon resigned in 1974.

That's an accurate statement. And it contains more information than a bare statement about Nixon's resignation. But that doesn't make it more historically accurate in reference to his resignation. Rather, it combines two entirely unrelated claims. Each claim is extraneous to the other.

The Synoptics and John

I'm going to piggyback on a recent post by Jason Engwer. Critics stress the differences between John and the Synoptics. They act as though it's problematic that John is so different than the Synoptics. But that really has it backwards. Framing the issue that way is misleading and counterintuitive.

What's striking is not that John is so different, but that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so similar. The conventional explanation is that Matthew and Luke use Mark. They adopt and adapt his basic plot, repeating many of the same incidents—in the same order.

By contrast, we'd expect two (or more) independent accounts to be very different from each other. That's not surprising. That doesn't require a special explanation. And that, of itself, doesn't call into question their historicity.

To take a few examples, consider the difference between a Civil War account by a Southern General and a Northern general. Or between a general and a foot soldier. Or between observers (or participants) in Virginia, Missouri, and South Carolina.

Or consider the difference between a WWII account by an American soldier and a Japanese soldier. Or between a participant in the Pacific theater and the European theater. Or between someone in the navy, air force, or infantry.

These will all be dramatically different. They could all be equally historical.

Admittedly, the Civil War—not to mention WWII—was on a far larger scale than Christ's two or three-year ministry in Palestine. But I use these examples to illustrate how dramatic differences between independent historical accounts are par for the course.

Literary Greek

Bart Ehrman repeatedly says the traditional authorship of the canonical Gospels must be false because they are written in sophisticated literary Greek whereas the disciples of Jesus were Aramaic-speaking peasants. He also judges 1 Peter to be pseudonymous for the same reason.

The way Ehrman frames the argument is false on the face of it.

i) According to traditional authorship, only one of the four Evangelists would even be a candidate for "an Aramaic-speaking peasant": John. Certainly that description doesn't fit Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

ii) It's simplistic to say John was an Aramaic-speaking peasant. For one thing, he had entree with the high priest. That suggests he moved in higher social circles. He was well-connected.

The next question is whether the Gospels are even written in sophisticated literary Greek. Keep in mind that this is only germane to Jewish authors. Since Luke was gentile, there's be no incongruity in his writing in literary Greek.

I'm going to quote the analysis of Nigel Turner in **A GRAMMAR OF THE NEW TESTAMENT GREEK; VOLUME IV: STYLE** (T&T Clark, 1980). I'm just giving samples of his detailed analysis.

Unlike Ehrman, Turner is a Greek scholar by specialization. That's his area of expertise.

MARK

Howard concurred with Lagrange that the Greek was translation Greek (11).

There is considerable evidence favoring influence of an exclusively Aramaic kind upon the style of Mark, but the case for the translation of documents is somewhat weakened by the fact that here in the same gospel are instances both of exclusive Aramaisms and exclusive Hebraisms side by side (15).

Mark's style is conspicuously different from the Ptolemaic Papyri and closer to the LXX, following the order: article>noun>article>genitive (54 times). He never has the position which is common in non-Biblical Greek: article>article>genitive>noun (17).

Some features of Markan style recall Latin constructions and vocabulary. That they are probably more frequent in Mark than in other NT texts, except the Pastoral epistles, may raise the question whether Mark was written in Italy in a kind of Greek that was influenced by Latin. However, supposing that his language is influenced in that way, we presume that it could have happened as well in the Roman provinces (29).

MATTHEW

On the whole, Matthew is not as Septuagintal in style as Luke (36).

It is sometimes assumed that Matthew writes Greek of a less Aramaic quality than Mark, and that he tends to soften the Semiticisms in general. That is not always true: we have found already many Semiticisms which may be attributed to Matthew independently of Mark.

If we examine the Markan sections of Matthew we shall find the contrary evidence, suggesting that Matthew has altered Mark to something more Semitic, conforming what we have already found...It would seem then that there is very little to choose between the relative Semitism of Mark's and Matthew's style (37).

LUKE

Hebrew influence: This is far more extensive, and is not confined to the Infancy narrative (46).

The literal translation of Hebrew infinitive absolute comes into Biblical Greek from the LXX (47).

Physiognomical expressions: The large proportion of its occurrences are not in the Koine, but in Biblical literature, and the papyri instances are relatively slight when compared line by line with the LXX, Testament of Abraham, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Greek Enoch, Psalms of Solomon, and other works of this kind. There are 34 instances in Luke Acts, 31 in Revelation. In view of its place in Luke's own composition, it is not only a word of translation Greek but belongs to Jewish Greek (49).

Semitic influence: This is vast, enabling the respective advocates of Aramaic and Hebraic sources to claim the features as Aramaic or Hebrew to suit their purpose (50).

And (or for) behold! An exclusively Biblical Septuagintal phrase, perhaps also from Aramaic, it is frequent in the LXX, and Luke and Paul probably obtained the expression from here. As it occurs in the possibly "free" Greek of the Testament of Solomon (seven times) and Testament of Abraham (ten times) it may be a feature of free Jewish Greek, derived perhaps from the translated books. It is scattered throughout Luke-Acts... (53).

JOHN

The Shepherd of Hermas [has] the same kind of Greek, influenced by Jewish idiom and marked by an over-use of asyndeton, though to a less extent than John (70).

The place of the verb is important: in Luke and John it is so often in the primary position that it is no longer secular Greek (72).

The Gospel vocabulary is limited to 1011 words, only 112 which are NT hapax. Many of these words are repeated, so that the vocabulary is only 6 1/2 percent of total word-use, almost the lowest in the NT (76).

We conclude that John's language throughout is characteristic of Jewish Greek, syntactically very simple, dignified but without the flexibility of the secular language, pointlessly varied in syntax and vocabulary... (78).

[Jewish Greek] appears in some free-Greek books of the LXX (e.g. Tobit), and some Jewish works as far away in time as the Testament of Abraham and the Testament of Solomon, which cannot be shown to be translations of Semitic originals. Ignorance of Greek as a cause of Jewish Greek, is altogether less probably than the influence of the

Greek Bible through widely scattered synagogues, forming a new community language (78).

We must conclude that 1 Peter wears a veneer of good stylistic revision upon a basic draft of the same kind of Greek that is found elsewhere in the NT. It is tempting to ascribe the veneer to an amanuensis, not necessarily Silvanus (130).

The longevity of oral history

One reason unbelievers claim Biblical accounts are unreliable is because they were (allegedly) written so long after the fact. For instance, Bart Ehrman recently published a book on the subject. Yet there are two preliminary problems with this claim:

- i) It presumes a late date for the documents or the underlying sources.
- ii) It disregards the possibility of revelation and inspiration.

That said, the claim suffers from another problem. For there's evidence that under the right conditions, oral history can be reliable across centuries or even millennia. For instance:

One time when the Chief of the Below World was on the earth he saw Loha, the daughter of the tribal chief. Loha was a beautiful maiden, tall and straight as the arrowwood. The Chief of the Below World saw her and fell in love with her. He told her of his love and asked her to return with him to his lodge inside the mountain. But Loha refused to go with him. The Chief of the Below World was very angry. He swore he would have revenge on the people of Loha, that he would destroy them with the Curse of Fire. Raging and thundering on the top of his

mountain, he saw the face of the Chief of the Above World on the top of Mount Shasta. From their mountaintops the two spirit chiefs began a furious battle. Mountains shook and crumbled. Red-hot rocks as large as the hills hurtled through the skies. Burning ashes fell like rain. The Chief of the Below World spewed fire from his mouth. Like an ocean of flame it devoured the forests on the mountains and the valleys. The Curse of Fire reached the homes of the people. Fleeing in terror before it, they found refuge in Klamath Lake. This time the Chief Below the World was driven into his home, and the mountain fell upon him. When the morning sun rose, the high mountain was gone. The mountain which the Chief Below the World had called his own no longer towered near Mount Shasta. For many years the rain fell in torrents and filled the great hole that was made when the mountain fell upon the Chief of the Below World. Now you understand why my people do not visit the lake. From father to son has come the warning "Do not look upon this place." - Klamath story, recorded 1865 [Clark 1953, 53-55]

Who can doubt that we have here a vocalic eruption, with its river of fire, quakes, ash-fall, and lava bombs? Certainly no one who has followed the recent eruptions of Etna, Pinatubo, and Shasta's neighbor Mt. St. Helens.

Is transmission of oral information across centuries even possible? We read in the newspaper about how unreliable the witnesses to accidents and crimes can be a month later. What hope is there that verbal information could survive so long intact?

The Klamath story quoted above refers specifically to the place we know as Crater Lake—in fact, the story was related as answer to a young soldier at Fort Klamath when he inquired why the native people never went to that breathtakingly beautiful spot.

After emptying its magma chamber of lava in a catastrophic eruption, [Mt.] Mazama collapsed to form a crater 4,000 feet deep which, as the narrative relates, never erupted violently again and gradually filled with water to form today's magnificent Crater Lake. That eruption, so

accurately described and vehemently warned against in the tale, has been ice-dated to 7,675 years ago. So, yes, real information can reach us intact across more than seven millennia of retelling. Even if we might not agree with their explanation of why these things occurred, the Klamath tribe in the 1860s still knew in considerable detail of events observed millennia earlier.

*Vine Deloria Jr. came to the same conclusion about the Klamath myth of Crater Lake in his book *Red Earth, White Lives* [1995, 194-98]. We find Deloria also interprets much the way we do the Bridge of the Gods (the Dalles), the disappearance of Spokane Lake, and various other Pacific Northwest myths—all as recording specific geologically reconstructible events. And he too has collected massive evidence for the extreme longevity of these myths. Both we and Deloria are also indebted to Dorothy Vitaliano's book *Legends of the Earth* [1973], which appeared not long before we began collecting our *Myth Principles*.*

Evidence abounds from several continents, in fact, that properly encoded information has passed unscathed through the oral pipeline for one to ten

thousand years and more—for example, in Australia [Dixon 1984, 153-55,295]. But the conditions must be right for this to happen.

First of all, the information must be viewed as important, as in the Klamath warning about innocent-looking Crater Lake.

Second, the information must continue to correspond to something still visible to the hearers, such as Crater Lake to the Klamath. If tellers of volcano myths migrate away from all volcanos, the original meaning of those myths is sure to become clouded or lost.

*The third condition for intact transmission is that it be encoded in a highly memorable way...An unbroken chain of good memories is part of the condition. But that chain is more likely to stay intact if the information is embedded vividly (so as to be more memorable) or encoded into the story multiple times (so there is a back-up)...The latter strategy is called redundancy. E. Barber & P. Barber, *When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 6-10.*

Consider how many Biblical narratives meet these conditions. Biblical narratives often record intrinsically memorable events.

Bible writers often live in the vicinity of the reported events, where natural landmarks are visible. In addition, God sometimes commands the Israelites to construct memorials.

Moreover, the event is often encoded in ritual. Religious ritual can function as a mnemonic device, where perennial repetition of the rite prompts collective memory of the event it commemorates (e.g. Passover; Eucharist). Furthermore, the event is often recorded in dramatic imagery. Finally, the event is often recorded in multiple sources.

Miracles and urban legends

I'd like to focus on two or three related objections that Graham Oppy raises to Christianity (or theism) in **FOUR VIEWS ON CHRISTIANITY AND PHILOSOPHY** (Zondervan, 2016).

1. Both here and in his monograph on **THE BEST ARGUMENT AGAINST GOD** (Palgrave-Macmillan), Oppy makes simplicity a criterion for judging atheism to be preferable to Christianity. But there are basic problems with that appeal:

i) There's no doubt that simplicity can sometimes be a useful criterion to adjudicate between competing explanations. However, it's hard to justify simplicity as a *general* criterion. For instance, occasionalism is infinitely simpler than secondary causation. Just consider the gazillions of individual causes in the universe. Not just the sheer number, but different *kinds* of causes for different kinds of events, as well as elaborate causal chains, or intersecting causal chains. Secondary causality in the universe is fiendishly complex. By contrast, occasionalism posits a single agent for everything that happens. But obviously, Oppy rejects occasionalism, despite the fact that it's an immensely more parsimonious explanation.

Occam's razor isn't plausible purely in the abstract. Rather, that's something we can only judge on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes simplicity is a methodological virtue, but that's context-dependent.

ii) Simplicity isn't just one principle. There's the distinction between a simpler ontology and a simpler explanation. These can be in tension. Postulating more entities can

simplify an explanation. For instance, physicists postulate subatomic particles to account for higher-level interactions.

iii) There's a metaphysical tradition that rejects the presumption of parsimony: the principle of plenitude. Leibniz is the best-known champion of that alternative. But it has a modern counterpart in theories of a multiverse. The principle is that anything that can happen will happen. It's a controversial claim, but hard to rule out a priori—or even a posteriori.

iv) Another basic problem with invoking Occam's razor is this: suppose we agree with Oppy that a world without God is simpler than a world with God. How does that contrast create any presumption that God doesn't exist?

At best, all it does is to note a consequence of a world with or without God. But how does noting that consequence make it more likely that one consequence is true while the other is false? It's just a logical relation between two things.

Suppose it's true that if God exists, the world will be more complex than if he doesn't exist. Assuming that's the case, how does that indicate that in fact we're living in a world where God does *not* exist? For if we *were* living in a world where God exists, then our world would be more complex. If God is real, then that consequences follows from his existence. Assuming that's the case, how does that observation provide any evidence that God *isn't* real?

2. Oppy says that alongside the miraculous birth of Jesus:

we can set reports of the miraculous births of Buddha, Krishna, Karna, Kabir, Zoroaster, Marduk,

Horus, Romulus, Asclepius, Oedipus, Augustus Caesar, Qi, Lao-tse, and others.

...the many similarities between Christian miraculous births and miraculous births in other religions and traditions. Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy, 37-38.

There are several problems with his comparison:

i) It fails to distinguish between fictional characters, mythological gods, and historical figures. It *stipulates* parallels to the virgin birth rather than *documenting* parallels. But we'd need to see the details. And it fails to consider the genre of the accounts, or the date of the source in relation to the date of the individual. It's deceptive to call these "reports". That connotes an account which, at least in principle, had its basis in observation.

ii) More to the point, a basic way of assessing a claim is to ask yourself what would follow if the claim were true. If Jesus was virginally conceived, would that prevent other religions and traditions from having tales of gods, heroes, and founders whose conception was extraordinary? Since there'd be tales like this whether or not Jesus was virginally conceived, the existence of such tales doesn't tell against his virginal conception. The existence of such tales makes no difference one way or the other on whether Jesus was virginally conceived. In that respect, the situation would be just the same if he were virginally conceived. The virginal conception of Christ would be a fact regardless of what other stories might exist.

3. In the same book, Oppy automatically discounts testimonial evidence for miracles by appealing to the rapid development of urban legends (pp36-37,68-69). But that suffers from the same problem. Once again, ask yourself what would follow if the claim were true. If miracles do occur, then some miracles will be witnessed. And if miracles do occur, there will still have the phenomenon of urban legends. A world in which miracles occur won't eradicate urban legends. Urban legends would develop whether or not miracles actually happen. So how does the existence of urban legends discredit any and all reported miracles?

Testimonial evidence for miracles is just a subset of testimonial evidence in general. If urban legends create a presumption against reported miracles, do urban legends create a presumption against reported events generally? If not, why single out miracles as if the existence of urban legends only casts doubt on *them*?

4. Finally, his appeal to urban legends cuts both ways. You can have urban legends that attempt to explain away miracles. Take the cover story of the stolen body (Mt 28:11-15).

"Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday"

I was thinking some more about Bart Ehrman's position on the unreliability of eyewitness memory. I'm referring to his debate with Richard Bauckham. I have seen a library edition of Ehrman's new book, but the preview of his position he gave in the debate was so idiotic that I figure the book must be a waste of time.

At least in the debate, Ehrman thinks memory is either reliable or unreliable. He flattens memory.

If, however, we reflect on memory, that's grossly simplistic. Take the question, "What were you doing in 9/11?" or "Where were you on 9/11?"

The question takes for granted that Americans of a certain age remember the 9/11 attack. The question isn't "Do you remember what happened on 9/11?"

Rather, the question presumes that because 9/11 was such a memorable event, not only will you remember the event itself, you will remember contextual details in relation to the event. To spell that out, because 9/11 was so memorable, that makes some otherwise forgettable details memorable by association.

Or let's go back to the title of the post. That's the famous opening line of **L'ÉTRANGER** by Albert Camus. The first line is arresting because the death of your mother is a paradigmatically-memorable event. If you don't remember that, what do you remember?

For those of us who've lost loved ones, we don't merely recall the day they died. Rather, we are apt recall certain things we were doing on that day. The principle is that an intrinsically memorable event makes related incidents extrinsically memorable by association.

This introduces another distinction. An event can be prospectively insignificant, but retrospectively significant. Take the day before your loved one died. Or the day before you heard about their death. Especially if the death was sudden, if the death was unexpected, you probably don't recollect anything you did on the day before they died. But if you had advance knowledge that they were going to die the next day, then the day before they died becomes instantly significant. That might be the last full day you will ever have with them. The significance of the day they die makes the day before they died significant, with the benefit of hindsight. And if you had the benefit of foresight, you'd be likely to remember what you were doing on both days.

Indeed, suppose the doctor tells you that your loved one probably has only a few days left. That advance warning can make the days leading up to their death memorable. The foreboding. Spending extra time with them. Your loved one is now on a countdown. So you make the most of the remaining time.

Suppose we apply that reasoning to the Gospels. Suppose we bracket inspiration. And suppose, for the sake of argument, we say the only historically reliable accounts in the Gospels are accounts centered on naturally memorable events. So what would those be?

For one thing, the miracles of Christ are memorable. In the nature of the case, a miracle is a memorable event. If Christ

performed miracles, that's the kind of event we'd expect people to recall, and talk about.

But it's not just the miracle that's memorable. As my other examples illustrate, a memorable event enhances our recollection of contextual details. We remember, not merely the event itself, in isolation, but we're apt to remember other things that were said and done in relation to the event. Where and when. Who was there. Normally, these contextual details might be utterly forgettable, but a memorable event is like a light that's not only luminous in its own right, but illuminates the surroundings.

But even if all we had to go by were the accounts of dominical miracles in the Gospels, there's an awful lot of theology in those accounts. If those are historically reliable, because they're so memorable, that's quite a lot to work with.

Consider some other memorable events in the Gospels. The nativity accounts are studded with unforgettable incidents.

Or Holy Week. That was a harrowing experience for the disciples. They couldn't bring themselves to believe that Jesus would be martyred. And when Jesus was arrested, they lost their protector. They became marked men. They were terrified that the authorities were going to hunt them down. What could be more memorable?

And what about the empty tomb? And the Risen Christ appearing to them? Not only is that unforgettable, but it's even more dramatic in light of their harrowing experience.

The Gospels are interwoven with reported events that would be indelible to observers. And the events would make many incidental details stick in the mind.

The law of large numbers

Unbelievers often raise contradictory objections to Christianity. I've noted some of these in the past. Here's another example:

On the one hand, you have debunkers (e.g. James Frazer, Joseph Campbell, Robert Price, Richard Carrier) who draw attention to alleged parallels between Bible narratives and heathen mythology. They cite these to show that Bible writers borrowed their material, in which case their own accounts are fictitious.

On the other hand, you have debunkers (e.g. David Hand, John Littlewood) who dismiss reported miracles, answers to prayer, and cases of special providence on the grounds that coincidences are bound to happen, and happen with some frequency.

But these two objections cancel each other out. If, according to the law of large numbers, coincidences are inevitable and commonplace, then even assuming there are genuine parallels between Biblical narratives and heathen mythology, that's consistent with the historicity of the Biblical narratives. That's to be expected. That happens in real life. So that, by itself, creates no presumption that Biblical narratives are fictitious.

If, on the other hand, alleged parallels between Biblical narratives and heathen mythology are deemed to be too unlikely to be coincidental, then the same can be said for some reported miracles, answered prayers, and cases of special pleading.

So this poses a dilemma for secular debunkers. Either they must make a damaging concession to the historicity of Scripture or make a damaging concession to the credibility of miracles.

And this assumes, for the sake of argument, that these are genuine parallels. Of course, that's very dubious. If so, then Christians don't suffer from a comparable dilemma.

Is the virgin birth poorly attested?

1. A stereotypical objection to the virgin birth is that it's only attested in two of the four Gospels. Likewise, Paul is silent on the subject.

A potential problem with stereotypical objections is how they condition people who view an issue. If an issue is routinely framed in a particular way, it may not occur to people to think outside that framework.

2. Before getting to my main point, Paul's silence is to be expected. He was an adult living in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's public ministry. It's hardly surprising that he talks about events so close to his own time and place, in the life of Christ. By contrast, the birth of Christ probably took place several years before Paul was born.

3. Apropos (1), I'd recast the issue. If anything, what's striking is not that the virgin birth wasn't recorded in more than two Gospels, but that's recorded at all. Reporting the circumstances of his conception poses a dilemma. In the nature of the case, a NT author can't mention the virgin birth without simultaneously informing his readers that Mary was pregnant out of wedlock. After all, you can't have one without the other.

But the moment he says Mary was pregnant out of wedlock, that opens a can of worms. Only people who are already Christian believe the story of the virgin birth. By contrast, people who aren't Christian are inclined to view the virgin birth as a cover story for a prenuptial scandal.

Indeed, that was Joseph's initial reaction. When he discovered that she was pregnant, he was planning to

divorce her, on the assumption that she had a child by another man.

So why would Matthew and Luke record the virgin birth unless they thought it happened? You might say they reported the virgin birth despite the virgin birth. For surely they knew that by recording that story, their account invited a contrary interpretation.

By narrating the virginal conception of Christ, they were starting a fire they couldn't extinguish. Enemies of the faith will seize on that to discredit Jesus. They will say this is a transparent alibi to camouflage the fact that Mary had premarital sex. Not only would that stigmatize the mother, but stigmatize the illegitimate child.

So, if you think about it, NT writers had to overcome a disincentive to report it at all, since the very mention of it would play into the hands of their enemies. They only record it because that's what happened, even though it hands enemies of the faith a propaganda coup. Sometimes you have to tell a true story knowing that people will twist the truth.

4. Now, a critic might object that my explanation misses the point. Given the rumors of a prenuptial scandal, they had to say something to squelch the rumors. But there are problems with that objection. For instance:

i) That would be a counterproductive alibi. Rather than draw attention away from the specter of a prenuptial scandal, it would draw attention to the specter of a prenuptial scandal. Hostile readers will view this as a coverup.

ii) If the Gospel writers were attempting to conceal a prenuptial scandal, and if they felt free to invent a cover story, why not just say Jesus was conceived after Mary and Joseph got married? After all, the Incarnation doesn't require a virgin birth. The sinlessness of Jesus doesn't require a virgin birth.

If some people find the story of the virgin birth fishy, there's nothing suspicious about saying he was born to married parents. So that would be a better cover story.

5. But a critic might say that misses the point. If Mary was known to be pregnant out of wedlock, then it's too late for Matthew and Luke to fabricate a cover story that denies that fact. The best they can do is to spray paint it with miraculous whitewash. But there are problems with that objection, even on its own grounds:

i) People who deny the virgin birth typically think Matthew and Luke were written about a century after the birth of Christ. They don't think Matthew or Luke had access to firsthand information about the circumstances surrounding his conception and birth. So what, exactly, is there to rationalize or cover up? By that late date, who knows any better what really happened?

ii) Likewise, even if we take the historicity of Matthew and Luke far more seriously, how many people were really privy to the timing of Mary's pregnancy in relation to her engagement and marriage? Other than some relatives and villagers, who else would know about it? Mary wasn't born famous. She was a nobody. She's one of those people who becomes retroactively famous in association with a famous person. Jesus himself only became relatively famous towards the end of his short life, and even then he was just a local celebrity at the time of his death. Had anyone heard

of him outside some pockets in Palestine? So why assume, decades later—when Matthew and Luke were written—that there'd be a widespread rumor about the illegitimacy of Jesus?

iii) Presumably, the target audience for Matthew and Luke are people who don't already know about the life of Christ. So what would possess Matthew and Luke to introduce a cover story about the circumstances of his conception? That would create a problem that hadn't existed before in the mind of the reader. For the average reader would never have reason to suspect anything untoward unless Matthew and Luke gratuitously interject this subterfuge.

Left to their druthers, I wouldn't expect any NT writer to mention the circumstances of Christ's conception if they could avoid it, since the story of the virgin birth will be used against them. It's one of those dilemmas where doing the right thing looks like doing the wrong thing. What's striking, therefore, is that we have even one, much less two Gospels, that record the virgin birth. For they must do that despite the derision which that will provoke.

Are the Resurrection accounts irreconcilable?

i) Critics often say the Resurrection accounts are contradictory. Even if that were true, it wouldn't mean the Resurrection is in doubt. You can have discrepant accounts of a plane crash, but that doesn't mean there was no plane crash. The fact that eyewitnesses may get details wrong doesn't mean they mistook the underlying event.

ii) There is, however, a basic confusion about the oft-repeated claim that the Resurrection accounts are irreconcilable. It's possible for the Resurrection accounts to be irreconcilable, yet each account is completely accurate. It doesn't take much imagination to see how that's possible, but critics lack imagination.

iii) Let's begin by considering how to represent the same scene in time and space. Suppose I photograph a landscape. Say I photograph the same scene from two different angles. I now have two different pictures of the same scene.

Suppose I turn these two pictures into two different puzzles. Two boxes of puzzle pieces depicting that scene.

Even though these are both depictions of the same scene, no piece from one puzzle will fit into any piece from the other puzzle. The pieces from these two puzzles are irreconcilable.

I can't map one puzzle onto the other puzzle, yet both puzzles map onto the same underlying scene. Two completely accurate, but irreconcilable depictions.

iv) Or, instead of shots from different angles, I could take two shots at different times. I might photograph the same scene morning and afternoon, Or spring, summer, fall, and winter.

I'd shoot the same scene at the same angle, but each picture would look different due to different lighting conditions, weather, deciduous trees in bud, or turning brown, &c.

Once again, I could turn these pictures into puzzles. But I couldn't piece the scene together using pieces from different puzzle boxes. Yet each separate depiction is a completely accurate representation of the same scene.

v) In addition, when we assemble a puzzle, we have the benefit of the complete picture on the cover to use as a guide. That gives us the part/whole relation.

But in the case of the Resurrection accounts, we don't have direct access to the original scene. All we have to go by are edited accounts. We're comparing each account with another account, rather than comparing each account to the original. It's like piecing a puzzle together after the picture on the box top was lost. All you have are pieces. You don't have an image that shows the original composition.

vi) In addition, the Resurrection accounts are very selective. So that's like attempting to assemble a puzzle with missing pieces.

But even if you can't reconstruct the original scene, that creates no presumption against the accuracy of the accounts. Just as your inability to assemble a puzzle using pieces from different puzzles (of the same scene, from different angles or seasons) doesn't mean the

representation is inaccurate. Just as your inability to assemble a puzzle with missing pieces or a missing box top picture doesn't mean the representation is inaccurate.

vii) Incidentally, the same group of people could go to a park or cemetery at the same time, but miss connections because various objects obstruct their view of each other. Even if they were all there at the same time, they may not see each other, depending where they stand in relation to trees, buildings, hillocks, &c.

viii) Dropping the metaphor, let's take a comparison. We have parallel accounts of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Matthew and Mark. These are clearly about the same event. It's likely that Mark preserves the original order. In Mark, Jesus curses the fig tree as he enters Jerusalem, then cleanses the temple, then exits Jerusalem by the same route. Next day, the disciples see the withered tree. In-between coming and going, there's the cleansing of the temple.

By contrast, Matthew exhibits narrative compression. Matthew places the cleaning of the temple before the cursing of the fig tree. That reduces a three-stage action, spread over two days, to a two stage action.

That's a useful example of how a Gospel writer (Matthew) edits a source. And if Matthew was all we had to go by, we'd be unable to reconstruct the original sequence, both because we're missing key information, and because historical events, due to their contingency, often have no necessary sequence. We don't know in advance when somebody will do something in relation to something else. He might curse the fig tree first, then cleanse the temple—or cleanse the temple first, then curse the fig tree. The order

of events is up to the discretion of the agent, which makes it unpredictable. What was sooner? What was later?

Unless we were there and saw what happened, it's often impossible to say who did what when. For there's more than one way it might have happened. Given different possibilities, we can't expect to nail down the chronology in many cases.

Consider all the things you do in the course of a day. In some instances, you have to do one thing before you can do something else. But in many instances, there's no fixed order in which you must do them. And those may be snap decisions you make on the spot.

Herod and the dragon

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. 5 She gave birth to a manchild, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days (Rev 12:1-6).

Critics say Matthew invented the nativity stories. In particular, they say he began with messianic prophecies, then concocted stories to make Jesus fulfill the prophecies. But there are multiple problems with that objection:

i) The same critics say Matthew is quoting OT passages out of context. His prooftexts are ill-fitted to illustrate his stories. If, however, Matthew fabricated the stories, then he

could make the details exactly match his chosen prooftexts. If, conversely, they don't seem to line up in a straightforward fashion, that's because Matthew is constrained by biographical facts about Jesus.

ii) If Matthew invented the nativity stories, we'd expect a string of stand-alone vignettes. They wouldn't be related to each other, but related to the prooftexts.

By contrast, what we actually have in Mt 2 is a series of events in which one thing leads to another by cause and effect. Because the Magi witness a celestial portent or prodigy, they journey to the Holy Land. Because they lack sufficient information to pinpoint the address, they go to the capital to seek directions. Because they ask, that tips off the paranoid Herod about a perceived rival to the throne. Because Herod is alerted to the threat, he dispatches soldiers to assassinate the child. Because a death squad is on the way, Joseph must spirit the child out of Herod's jurisdiction. Because Herod dies, Joseph is free to return to Israel, but because Herod's son is ruling in his father's place, Joseph relocates the family to a region outside his successor's jurisdiction.

But if the incidents in chap 2 were made up in reference to isolated prooftexts, we'd expect a string of isolated vignettes. These would be self-contained little stories about unrelated incidents in the life of the Christchild, rather than a consistent plot development.

iii) Finally, Rev 12 may well afford independent corroboration for Mt 2. It's hard for a reader who's familiar with the events in Mt 2 not to be reminded of the same thing in Rev 12. Herod is the dragon whose endeavor to liquidate the newborn child forces the Holy Family to take refuge in Egypt. I'm not suggesting that Rev 12 is reducible

to that background event. It's a multilayered text with many allusions. But between Mt 2 and Rev 12, we have multiple attestation for the plot to bump off the Christchild.

History, dreams, and forgeries

Unbelievers are skeptical about the Gospels. That's a self-defeating skepticism on their part, because it commits them to general skepticism regarding testimonial evidence, yet they themselves rely on testimony evidence for most of what they believe.

1. However, I'd like to consider a limiting case. Take dreams. At best, dreams are at least one step removed from reality. Indeed, we usually classify what we experience in dreams to be a paradigm case of something imaginary—in contrast to what we experience when we're awake. Philosophers use dreams as paradigm-examples of illusion. Some researchers classify dreams as hallucinations.

Suppose a biographer's only source of information about the subject was his dreams. Suppose a biographer had direct access to the subject's dreams. The biographer could see what the dreamer was dealt. How much could a biographer reconstruct about the subject's actual background from his dreams? That doesn't seem like very promising raw material.

Perhaps the least reliable part of dreaming is the plot. The plot is imaginary. Even if, in a sense, you dream about what happened to you that day, when you were awake, the overall dream plot will deviate significantly from what really happened.

Dreams have two other unrealistic features. We dream about imaginary characters. Strangers. People we never met in real life. And we dream about them just once.

Likewise, we dream about imaginary places. Strange, sometimes surreal landscapes we've never seen in real life.

However, dreams also have features that correspond to real life. Sometimes we dream about real people.

Acquaintances. Usually family and friends—or coworkers. When we dream, we recognize certain people—unlike strangers we encounter in dreams.

Likewise, sometimes we dream about familiar places. Where we live and work, or used to live and work.

In my observation, recurring dream characters are based on real people. Likewise, recurring dreamscapes are based on real places. And when we dream about familiar places, these can be detailed and fairly accurate.

If all I knew about you was your dreams, one way I could sift the core biographical elements from the imaginary elements is by distinguishing the recurring characters and recurring dreamscapes from one-off encounters and one-off dreamscapes.

A biographer could figure out the time period in which you lived from the cityscape in your dreams. If it's a 20C cityscape rather than a 19C cityscape or 18C cityscape or medieval cityscape or ancient Near Eastern cityscape. He could draw the same inference from the way people dress. And the cars. Or furniture in houses. Interiors as well as exteriors. So he could place you within a particular period in history. This is true even when you dream about strange places you've never seen in real life. For imaginary scenes will still reflect your generic experience of architecture from your own time and place.

By the same token, if you dream about high school on a regular basis, he could reasonably infer that you're a teenager. He could infer that from the setting, and classmates—if they're recurring characters.

He could infer your nationality from the language you use other dream characters use. He might well be able to infer your social class from the dream characters you hang out with.

If you have erotic dreams, he could infer if you're heterosexual or homosexual.

From recurring dreams and nightmares, he might be able to infer your unrequited yearnings and deepest anxieties.

If the dreamer is religious, that will sometimes be reflected in his dreams.

2. Let's consider another limiting case. Take forgeries. In the nature of the case, a forgery stands in contrast to history or reality. Typically, a forger impersonates an eyewitness about a time and place other than his own. What makes it detectably a forgery is the telltale presence of anachronisms. That's because the forgery knows his own period better than the period he feigns. Indeed, he's so conditioned by his own period that he can't put enough conscious distance between himself and his impersonation to be aware of the anachronisms.

And therein lies a paradox. Although a forgery is an unreliable or worthless window into the fictitious past setting, it can be quite informative about the forger's background and interests. The Koran's garbled versions of OT events and the life of Christ are historically worthless. However, the Koran is highly revealing about Muhammad's

time, place, character, loves, hates, foes, and followers. Likewise, although the Mormon "scriptures" are historically worthless in reference to the fictional past they clumsily portray, they unwittingly reveal a lot about Joseph Smith's character, interests, and the religious currents of the day. Same thing with apocryphal Gospels. Paradoxically, even an unreliable source can be indirectly reliable in terms of what it unintentionally divulges about the circumstances and agenda of the author. They tell you nothing about the projected situation, but quite a lot about the situation of the forger.

My point is to mount an a fortiori argument: if it's possible to learn a lot about a person from his dreams, or forgeries, surely it's possible to learn a lot about a person from historical sources, even if those are generally unreliable.

Did Jesus claim to be God?

A perennial question that some people raise is whether Jesus claimed to be God. The skepticism underlying the question is that while NT writers claim divinity for Jesus, that's not a claim he made for himself. In other words, he was just human, and a divine Jesus reflects legendary embellishment on the part of NT writers.

Now, in one respect, I think the question is unimportant. I mean, if Jesus is God Incarnate, then we'd expect him to indicate that fact, but what I mean is that Jesus didn't write anything, so if someone is skeptical about the historicity of the Gospels or the NT generally, they will be just as dismissive of accounts in which Jesus claims to be God. They will say the Gospel writers put those words on Jesus' lips. So when the question has that frame of reference, it's futile to distinguish what Jesus said about himself from what NT writers said about Jesus. Since we don't have an autobiography of Jesus, there's no point attempting to prove to a "skeptic" that Jesus claimed to be God. If they distrust the historicity of the Gospels, they'd say statements attributed to Jesus are reducible to what the Gospels authors said about him rather than what he said about himself. To that extent, I think a "quest for the historical Jesus" that labors to isolate his statements from the narrator's statements is pointless.

There is, though, a more interesting question. How would Jesus prove that he's divine? It's not enough to claim divinity. After all, some people claim to be God, but we typically dismiss them as crackpots.

So it's less about Jesus saying he was God than Jesus showing he was God. Mind you, saying that he was God

would help to prep the observer, but that needs to be reinforced by corresponding actions. Doing things that are associated with divine action.

However, that, of itself, is not without ambiguities. For instance, God is not the only agent who can perform miracles.

Now normally, when a crackpot claims to be God, that doesn't pose a threat to the true religion since most folks don't take him seriously. Indeed, the claim itself is sufficient reason for them to discount him as either delusional or a charlatan.

If, however, a person made a credible claim to be God; if he garnered an enormous following; if, indeed, that became the dominant religion, then it would pose a threat to the true religion unless either the claimant is, indeed, what he claims to be, or else God intervenes to discredit him.

Take the cliché of the blasphemer who dares God to strike him dead. Normally, there's no lightning bolt that calls his bluff. But that's because the garden-variety blasphemer is not that important. God won't give him the satisfaction. God can't be compelled.

If, though, a religious impostor was so successful that he'd lead the faithful astray, then it's up to God to safeguard his name and to protect the faithful from mass deception and apostasy. The OT talks about how God is "jealous" about his name, which some readers might find a bit theatrical or egotistical, but it's in the context of heathen idolatry, where you had pagan religions holding humanity in their thrall.

John's Gospel and the Inklings

The [Fourth] Gospel is formally anonymous, which means that its author's name does not appear in the text of the work itself. This does not mean, however, that the text is intentionally anonymous, shielding its author's identity from the readers. From its beginning the Gospel speaks in a first person manner identical to other ancient books that were also formally anonymous but not intentionally anonymous (e.g. Lucian's Life of Demonax). For this reason, then, the Gospel was not intended to be formally anonymous, which almost certainly explains the title added to the Gospel sometime after its completion. Quite simply, book "publishing" in the ancient world was entirely different from today. Authors commonly spoke in the first person in a formally anonymous document because their works would have been circulated in the first instance among friends or acquaintances of the author, who would know the author personally from the oral context in which the work was first read. Knowledge of authorship would be passed on when copies were made for other (less

familiar) readers, and the name would be noted with a brief title on the outside of the scroll or on a label affixed to the scroll.

No other title was ever used for any of the Gospels in known literature, a remarkable fact which demands that the titles be viewed as early or even original...To suggest a name other than "John" is to disregard the author-designating title affixed to the Gospel from its earliest stage of origin.

There are several kinds of ancient literary forms which have appendices as a normative feature. This was especially common in legal documents, for which "to label this...an 'appendix' or a 'supplement' is consequently misleading; it was not a merely postscript, dispensable as such, but rather the crucial means by which the business at hand was made legally binding upon its principals." Chapter 21 bears many resemblances to such legal documents, especially 21:24, which assumed the disposition of eyewitness testimony. This makes the subscription a requirement for the witness to be official, certifying the veracity of the report.

The Beloved Disciple declares himself to be an eyewitness of the things written in this book and therefore to be personally connected to the people and events themselves [21:24]. Although the character called the "Beloved Disciple" did not explicitly appear until chapter 13, he was almost certainly implicitly (i.e., anonymously) present in 1:40 with Andrew, Peter's brother, as one of the two first disciples of Jesus [cf. 146-47]. The placement of the Beloved Disciple as a witness at both the very beginning and the very end of the Gospel creates a technical literary device common in the ancient world called the inclusio of eyewitness testimony. This technique not only makes clear that this disciple fulfilled the requirements of apostolic testimony ("from the beginning you have been with me" [15:27]), but it also serves to solidify the witness as participating in the reliable practices of historiography. Edward Klink, John (Zondervan, 2016), 42-43; 892; 919.

Incidentally, the commentator's distinction between formal and intentional anonymity reminds me of the Inklings. Members of that literary circle (e.g. Tolkien, Lewis, Williams) shared drafts of their literary products with each

other. These circulated anonymously, yet the identity of the authors was known to the recipients.

"Fishermen"

On Facebook, I responded to an atheist:

If no one knows who wrote the gospels, then they are anonymous. We know they were not written by illiterate fisherman living decades earlier who spoke a different language and couldn't write in any language.

According to traditional authorship, only one of the four gospels was by a "fisherman" (John). Luke was not a fisherman. He was a gentile convert to Christianity/Judaism. Greek was his native language.

Matthew was not a fisherman, but a gov't official.

Mark was not a fisherman, but a native of highly literate, cosmopolitan Jerusalem. And his family migrated from Greek-speaking Cyprus (Acts 4:36; Col 4:10).

Mark and Luke are written in very simple Greek.

There's evidence for bilingualism in 1C Palestine.

Moreover, traditional authorship doesn't require John to directly pen his Gospel. He could dictate his Gospel to a scribe. Transcribing oral history. His scribe could be bilingual.

Palestinian Jews and Diaspora Jews

Bart Erhman's basic objection to the traditional authorship of Matthew is the improbability that a Palestinian Jew could write literary Greek. This raises several issues:

i) For many Jews, Greek was their native tongue. Indeed, that was so widespread that it necessitated Greek translations of the OT like the LXX.

ii) "Palestinian Jew" is ambiguous. The fact that Matthew was living in Palestine at the time Jesus summoned him doesn't imply that Matthew was a native of Palestine. As the religious capital of Judaism, Jerusalem was a magnet for Diaspora Jews. There's no presumption that Matthew was born and raised in Palestine just because he happened to be there as an adult when Jesus summoned him.

A textbook example is St. Paul, a bilingual Diaspora Jew who took up residence in Jerusalem—as did his sister (Acts 23:16). Barnabas is another example of a Diaspora Jew living in Palestine (Acts 4:36).

iii) Likewise, Matthew's job as a minor gov't employee doesn't tell us much about his background, aside from the fact that he needed to be bilingual to communicate with Greek-speaking Roman officials (his employers) and Aramaic-speaking Jews.

Paul was a tent-maker. That gives you absolutely no indication regarding Paul's social class or education.

Unless you were an aristocrat, or you were born rich, you had to take what you could get to support yourself.

iv) There are different levels of proficiency in a language. An ability to understand the spoken word. An ability to speak it. Read it. And/or write it.

Suppose Matthew lacked the educational background to compose Greek. He could still dictate to a scribe.

Paul used scribes even though he had the educational background to do his own writing if he wanted to. The fact, moreover, that both Peter (1 Pet 5:12) and Paul used scribes tells you something about the availability of Christian scribes to assist early church leaders.

Gospel criticism

A common objection to the inerrancy or even general historical reliability of the Gospels is synoptic variants, where there are differing accounts of the same event (although in some cases these may be similar, but different events). One account words things differently from another account. One account contains details absent from another account.

Let's take a comparison. In this talk, Don Carson relates a personal anecdote:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U21MquBWfag&feature=youtu.be&t=15m>

The segment is between the 15-19 min mark. The anecdote is a combination of firsthand and secondhand information. He wasn't present when his wife prayed. Obviously, she was his unstated source of information for that. However, he personally knew the cancer patient and her husband.

In addition, he has written about the same incident:

Not long ago in my church, a woman I'll call Mary experienced a recurrence of cancer. Within a few months it had spread throughout her body, and despite treatment, she was very ill. The people in our church gathered for prayer. And although this is not a church from a charismatic tradition, the

prayers throughout the day became more and more enthusiastic.

“Lord, you’ve said you will answer if two or three are in agreement. We have 287 in agreement, and we want you to heal her!”

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We want you to show that you are still the Great Physician!”

“Lord, will you not have mercy on her husband and her children?”

Finally it was my wife’s turn to pray (she who had almost lost her life to cancer twice) and she prayed, “Heavenly Father, we would love it if you would heal Mary. But if it is not your will to heal her, teach her to die well. She is going to die anyway, and so if the time is now, teach her to die well. Give her a joy of the Lord. Give her a heritage of godly faith, with one foot firmly planted in heaven, so that her husband and children will be stamped by it, and will look to Christ. We don’t ask that she have an easy time, but ask that she be so full grace, people will see Christ in her.”

Well, you could have cut the air with a knife. No longer were there 287 people agreeing in prayer. My wife's prayer seemed to create a break in the chain. She was letting down her side. We found out afterward that some of Mary's relatives rather wished my wife would go to heaven first so she would know whereof she was praying!

*A few months later, Mary's husband called me, and was desperate to talk. Mary's health was going down and down despite every treatment conceivable. The church was wonderful, bringing in food, reminding them, "We're praying for you . . . the Lord is faithful." But he wanted permission to talk about his wife's impending death. The heated atmosphere had made it impossible for them to talk in those terms, as if it would no longer be walking by faith. Mary couldn't focus on eternity or talk about it, because there were so many Christians around her telling her she was going to be healed. D. A. Carson, "Dying Well," N. Guthrie, ed. *Be Still, My Soul* (Crossway 2010), 113-15.*

http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2010_dying_well.pdf

Compare and contrast these two accounts. Notice how the talk contains information omitted in the written version. This despite the fact that both accounts are from about the same time.

Suppose we were to approach this in the same way critics approach the Gospels. Suppose we didn't know that both accounts came from the very same observer. And suppose there was a literary convention of writing in the third-person even though the narrator was an eyewitness to the event he relays.

Imagine how critics would seize on the differences. Imagine how they'd ingeniously reconstruct the underlying sources. Imagine how they'd appeal to redactors to explain the variations.

I Am

A friend asked me about why the Synoptics don't include the "I am" statements of Jesus, and the views of Craig Evans on John's Gospel.

Evans is mainly a Synoptic scholar. He rejects inerrancy. He's in the camp of those who argue for the "basic historical reliability" of the Synoptics. At the same time, he thinks John's Gospel contains historical "nuggets".

Some scholars claim John's Gospel has a Wisdom Christology. I disagree. So does Richard Bauckham.

So Evans compares statements of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel to the character of wisdom in Proverbs 8. But that's a very different genre. In that case, Lady Wisdom is a metaphor. A personification. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is not a figurative personification but a real person in time and space (but in another respect, preexisting the world of time and space).

It's true that people don't normally go around making "I am" statements like Jesus does, but that's because Jesus is not an ordinary person. Some of his "I am" statements evoke OT motifs, like the manna in the wilderness, Yahweh as the shepherd of Israel, Yahweh as the Creator of light in Gen 1, climaxing with the absolute "I am" statement in Jn 8:58, which triggers associations with the burning bush episode as well as proclamations in Isa 40-48 regarding Yahweh's unique deity. Likewise, Jesus is "life" because he's the life-giving Creator God of Gen 1.

These statements don't come out of the blue. They have their background in OT themes about God and God's history

with the people of Israel. Jesus is in continuity with that.

It's only unrealistic for Jesus to say things like that about himself if he's merely human. But that's the point: he's making statements that put him on the same plane as Yahweh. And it has an a fortiori quality, from the lesser shadows of OT history to the sunrise of the Incarnation.

At the same time, Evans said in one of his debates that he's very hesitant to discount the historicity of Gospel accounts because NT scholars have, in the past, made fools of themselves by prematurely discounting the historicity of Gospel incidents, only to have some archeological discovery confirm the disputed incident. He mentioned something from the Dead Sea Scrolls that paralleled a statement in whatever Gospel it was, thus debunking the critical view that this statement was invented whole cloth, having no connection with the thought-world of the historical Jesus.

Evans is on the cutting edge of biblical archeology. I believe he makes annual trips to Israel, to inspect archeological digs. He frequently mentions archeological findings that confirm statements in the Gospels or corroborate the setting.

Part of the difference between John's Gospel and the Synoptics is that the Synoptics are cramming everything they know about Jesus into what will fit on a scroll. There are chunks of material jammed together to get it all said. The Synoptics are dense-packed.

By contrast, John is more selective. The pace is more leisurely. That's in part because the Synoptics have already covered a lot of ground, so he doesn't need to repeat the basics. As a result, John's Gospel has more of a narrative emphasis. Gives the reader more of the setting for each

episode. The time and place. Who said what when. Who did what when.

This in part reflects someone recalling what he saw. It's in his mind's eye. The impression made by the Synoptics on the reader is more about **hearing** what was said; the impression made by John's Gospel in the reader is more about **seeing** what took place. It's easier for the reader of John's Gospel to visualize the action. It has more atmospheric detail.

i) In the Synoptic Gospels, the sayings of Jesus are often detached from their original setting. In many cases we don't know when and where they were originally spoken. Matthew and Luke in particular like to group similar sayings. That makes them easier to find or easier to remember.

In John's Gospel, by contrast, the sayings of Jesus are always moored in the original setting. And they grow out of the original setting. Unlike the Synoptics, John doesn't have free-floating sayings of Jesus.

So one reason John records sayings the Synoptics omit is because he records the occasion when Jesus said these things. They go together.

ii) Assuming traditional authorship, there's a concentric data-base. On the outer circle is Luke, who relies on secondhand information throughout. That's not a bad thing. For instance, suppose a WWII vet writes a memoir about his experience. That will be authentic, but narrow. By contrast, suppose a journalist who was not a vet interviews Churchill, Eisenhower, Marshall, MacArthur, Patton, and Ridgeway. That will give the reader a far broader view of the war.

iii) Mark is arguably one circle in from Luke. Since Jerusalem was his hometown, and his mother's home was a house-church frequented by the apostles, Mark probably had some firsthand knowledge regarding the public ministry of Christ whenever Jesus blew into town. And it's possible that Mark was in the crowds that followed Jesus around Palestine. He also had access to some of the Eleven.

iv) Matthew occupies the inner circle. As a member of the Eleven, he has much more firsthand knowledge than Mark. So he supplements Mark's Gospel. Although he uses Mark's Gospel as an outline, he may well have been one of Mark's informants. If so, when he's quoting Mark, he's quoting himself!

v) John occupies the inmost circle. Christ's most trusted disciple. Spent more time with Jesus than any other disciple.

It's not surprising that he records some sayings which the Synoptics don't, because he was on the scene more often than Matthew was, much less Mark, much less Luke. We'd expect him to record more if he was present on more occasions.

Is Doubting Thomas doubtful?

Moreover, with Judas now dead, there were eleven main disciples. Thus Luke 24:33 can speak of Jesus's first appearance to a group of his male disciples as including "the eleven and those with them." However, John 20:19-24 tells us Thomas was absent during that event. Thus, only ten of the main disciples would have been present. Accordingly, either Luke conflated the first and second appearances to the male disciples, or John crafted the second appearance in order to rebuke those who, like Thomas, heard about Jesus's resurrection and failed to believe it. M. Licona, Why are There Differences in the Gospels? (Oxford U 2016), 177-78.

A few observations:

i) It's not my primary objective to offer my own harmonization. But I'll make two brief observations. I think Luke and John were written about 30 years after the event. By that point I think it would be natural for "the Eleven" to

be a stereotypical descriptor. Because the Gospels (and Acts) are written from a retrospective viewpoint, it's not unexpected if they'd use terms that reflect later usage, just like a historian might refer to a particular state as Arkansas even though it was technically Indian Territory at the time the historian is referring to. Historians sometimes employ conventional anachronisms to make historical referents recognizable to modern readers. I suspect that by the time of writing, "the Eleven" was a traditional designation rather than a count noun.

I'd add that, assuming traditional authorship, John has firsthand knowledge of the event whereas Luke has secondhand knowledge of the event. Therefore, it's not surprising if John's account of this particular incident is more detailed, whereas Luke's is more sketchy. An outline and a plot are both compatible.

ii) I don't object to the category of redaction in reference to the Gospels, but it's overused. There's a common assumption that redaction is theologically motivated. But I think redaction is typically more mundane: to touch up the language, to free up space for independent material, to forestall a misunderstanding on the part of the reader.

iii) Let's talk a bit about genre. Suppose a director makes a movie about a past event, like the Civil War. The movie might be classified as historical fiction. We expect the director to exercise artistic license.

Even in that respect, there's a difference between artistic license and historical revisionism. For instance, Ridley Scott was criticized for airbrushing Islam and minimizing Medieval Christianity in **KINGDOM OF HEAVEN**. That wasn't a case of taking artistic liberties to improve the dramatic values of

the story. Rather, that was filtering the past through the political and secularizing sensibilities of a British director, c. 2005. Even in a fictional or quasi-fictional genre (historical fiction), where we make allowance for artistic license, that doesn't justify an ideological misrepresentation of the past.

iv) Compare a movie about the Civil War to an account of the Civil War by an academic historian. It would be unethical for him to "craft" an incident that never happened. That's because we're reading the book for information about what really happened.

By the same token, Christians have always read the Gospels for information about the life of Christ. The Gospels are the backbone of the Christian faith.

v) Notice, too, the openness to classifying a reported Resurrection appearance as a fabrication. But if that's a fabrication, what about the other Resurrection appearances in John? And if the Johannine narrator concocts imaginary accounts of the Resurrection, what about the Synoptics?

vi) Moreover, the purpose of recording this particular anecdote is to attest the reality and physicality of the Resurrection. Jesus is not a ghost! This wasn't a vision of Jesus. Rather, God bodily restored him to life. To suggest this account may well be pious fiction is especially ironic for a Christian apologist who makes the Resurrection the centerpiece of his apologetic.

Script or history?

On Jonathan McLatchie's Facebook wall, Mike Licona posted a response to Lydia McGrew. Here's the "meat" of his response:

I agree with all Johannine scholars that Johannine adaptation is present in his Gospel. However, scholars differ on the degree of adaptation that is present. I wouldn't go as far as Craig A. Evans for whom I have the highest regard. To be honest, I do not know how much John adapted certain traditions. But some is obviously present to anyone who spends a significant amount of time studying the Gospels. Are the "'I am' without predicate" statements in John part of his adapting things Jesus implicitly said and presenting them in a manner in which Jesus says them explicitly? In other words, are we reading the ipsissima vox (his voice) of Jesus here rather than the ipsissima verba (his very words). I don't know. In my single reply to Bethel, I provided reasons why many, perhaps

even a majority of Johannine scholars say they are Johannine adaptations. I have argued elsewhere that historical data strongly suggests Jesus believed He was deity. So, if Jesus made implicit claims to deity and John recasts those claims in a manner that has Jesus making them in an explicit sense, then that's what John did and we need to be comfortable with that. Otherwise, we take issue with the way God gave us the Gospels. What Lydia needs to do is spend years in the text, learn how to read the Gospels in their cultural setting and in their original language rather than having an anachronistic view of demanding their authors to write how she believes they should have. That's what having a high view of Scripture entails.

This raises a number of issues. The fundamental question at issue is whether the Johannine narrator wrote a script which he put on the lips of Jesus.

1. Licona appeals to the generic notion of NT "scholarship", but that's hardly monolithic. NT scholars vary in their philosophical presuppositions. Some operate with methodological atheism. NT scholars vary in their skill set. Some are strong on linguistics and historical background while others are into hermeneutics and mechanically apply whatever represents the current fad in Bible criticism. Some NT scholars are intellectually gifted individuals who buck consensus while others are second-rate thinkers who simply copycat what they were taught in grad school.

2. There's a sense in which Licona's claim is true, because he cast his statement in hypothetical (if>then) terms, but whether the hypothetical is true is the very issue in dispute.

3. It's also true that critics typically impose artificial standards of accuracy onto Scripture. Ehrman does that all the time. The problem, though, is how Licona defines "reading the Gospels in the cultural setting". He's been using Plutarch as his benchmark. But one issue is whether the implied reader for Plutarch is comparable to the implied reader for the Gospels. Is Plutarch's primary aim to inform his audience or to entertain his patrons? What's the genre of his bioi? History or historical fiction? How much artistic license does he allow himself? That's a question that Plutarch scholars examine. Cf. Barbara Scardigli (ed.), **ESSAYS ON PLUTARCH'S LIVES**. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Why assume Gospel writers had the same aims and methods as Plutarch?

4. Then there's the underlying question of whether the Gospel writers even have literary exemplars, and assuming they have, their proper identification. Take the popular classification of the Gospels as Greco-Roman bioi.

To begin with, should we mash the Gospels together in that regard, or consider them individually? On the face of it, Mark and John don't seem to be modeled on any literary exemplars. Mark is written in the style you'd expect if traditional authorship is correct: a breathless, unfiltered, literarily crude biography by a young man captivated by Jesus the exorcist and wonder-worker. Likewise, John reads like a dictated oral history.

Matthew and Luke have more literary culture, but are quite different from each other, despite the overlapping material. The literary culture of Matthew is very Jewish. Assuming he has literary models, why presume those are Greco-Roman bioi rather than OT historical narratives? The OT is rich in biography. Luke is the best candidate for Greco-Roman bioi, yet he, too, is immersed in the OT.

5. In his book (**WHY ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN THE GOSPELS?**), Licona says almost all Johannine scholars acknowledge that the author often adapted his "source material" (115) or "traditions about Jesus" (166).

Notice a hidden assumption that's driving scholarly consensus. The implication is that whoever wrote John's Gospel had no direct knowledge of the historical Jesus. Instead, he relied on secondhand sources. To say the narrator adapted dominical "traditions" or "source material" would be a curious way of to characterize someone who's an eyewitness. A writer who *is* the source of what he narrates. It makes little sense to say the narrator adapted dominical "traditions" or "source material" if, in fact, he's reporting events which he himself saw and heard. Rather, that makes more sense on the assumption that the Johannine narrator relies on written or oral sources. And, of course, that's what many "scholars" believe. But once you

make assumption explicit, it needs to be defended. Why should that be the operating assumption?

That, however, illustrates the problems with generalizing about Johannine scholars, and it likewise illustrates the need to identify critical presuppositions that drive the analysis.

Once you deny that the Johanne narrator was an eyewitness, then of necessity, that eliminates certain possible explanations and points to alternative possibilities. So that's not a neutral assumption.

Plutarch

I'll comment on Licona's interview, which summarizes his book:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/06/why-are-there-differences-in-the-gospels-an-interview-with-michael-r-licona/>

Most evangelicals are willing to acknowledge that the Gospel authors used some compositional devices.

Agreed.

I first observed how Plutarch reports the same stories in two or more of the biographies he wrote. I then assessed how the same author—Plutarch—told the same stories differently. Then I identified patterns of the differences. I then inferred compositional devices Plutarch likely employed that resulted in those differences.

That strikes me as a fallacious inference:

i) Suppose Plutarch writes three biographies in which he narrates the same event, but there are differences in each telling or retelling. Is that due to compositional devices? Possibly. But consider other explanations:

ii) The account in the first biography is based on his sources. When he writes a second or third biography in which he narrates the same incident, he relies on his memory of what he wrote the first time around.

iii) Conversely, the same story is different in the second biography because he was using different sources for the second biography. Same thing with a third or fourth biography. On (ii) or (iii), the differences are not due to compositional devices. And I think that's at least as plausible as Licona's explanation.

iv) Finally, it makes no sense to chalk up the differences to audience adaptation inasmuch as Plutarch presumably had the same implied reader for his biographies.

The majority of New Testament scholars agree that, at minimum, the Gospels share much in common with the genre of Greco-Roman biography. Therefore, it should be of no surprise to observe the Gospel authors using the compositional devices that were part-and-parcel of that genre. In fact, we should be surprised if we did not observe it.

i) Plutarch was a pagan Gentile who studied at the Platonic Academy in Athens. His background is completely different from at least three of the four Gospel writers. Since they didn't have his training, why imagine that they'd use the same rhetorical techniques?

ii) Even assuming that differences in the Gospels are due to literary devices, why attribute that to the genre of Greco-Roman biographies? The Gospels are steeped in the OT. The OT is full of literary conventions. OT narratives employ compositional techniques. Is it not at least as likely, if not far more likely, that they are indebted to OT exemplars?

iii) When I used to ask my late grandmother questions about her life, her answers weren't modeled on literary exemplars. Rather, her answers were based on memory, articulated in her Southern working-class speech. Why assume that all four Gospels must conform to a self-conscious literary genre? Especially in the case of Mark and John, why not use oral history as the frame of reference?

A truly high view of Scripture embraces the Gospels as God has given them to us rather than forcing them into a mold of how we think he should have.

When Licona doubts or denies that Jesus ever uttered the "I am" sayings in John's Gospel, he's not accepting the Gospel accounts *as is*. His actual practice is diametrically opposed to receiving the accounts as they come to us. By the same token, when he says the Doubting Thomas anecdote may

be pious fiction, that's not crediting the account as God gave it to us, but filtering the account through Licona's screening device.

Before Abraham was, I am

In the video, Ehrman asks Evans if he thinks Jesus actually uttered the “I am . . .” statements in John’s Gospel. Evans answered that most of them were probably not uttered as recorded and that John was probably of a genre different than the other Gospels...Now I realize some of my rather conservative brothers and sisters in Christ will experience some discomfort at Evan’s statement...It’s a matter of whether Jesus made those claims implicitly and John recast them in an explicit manner. In John, are we reading Jesus’ words or the message behind them? That’s the question.

<https://www.risenjesus.com/reading-adapted-form-jesus-teachings-johns-gospel>

There are several basic problems with Licona's explanation:

i) A claim like Jn 8:58 is not a self-enclosed statement. Rather, what Jesus said in v58 grows directly out of the

preceding exchange, while the reaction in v59 is in direct response to what he say in v58:

39 They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, 40 but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. 41 You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” 42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? 47 Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The

reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

48 The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” 49 Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. 50 Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” 52 The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” 54 Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ 55 But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” 57 So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” 58 Jesus said to

them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” 59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple (Jn 8:59).

The narrator can't simply take an originally implicit claim by Jesus, recast that as an explicit claim, without disrupting the flow of argument. In v58, Jesus is responding to what his enemies said, while, in v59, his enemies are responding to what he said. V58 is embedded in a dynamic exchange, where statement leads to another. Rejoinder and surrejoinders. The Abraham motif gives rise to v58. Jesus seizes on that comparison, then draws a pointed contrast between himself and Abraham. In v58, Jesus talks about himself in a way that deliberately invites comparisons with classic monotheistic statements in the OT (e.g. Exod 3:14; Isa 41:4; 43:10-11,25; 45:18-19,22; 48:12; 51:12; 52:6). His opponents are reacting to that specific formulation (or an Aramaic equivalent).

ii) Although the Synoptics attest the deity of Christ, that's generally through allusive actions rather than mere statements. Statements in combination with illustrative actions. But in Jn 8:58, the Jews are incensed, not by something Jesus did, but by something he said. The statement in itself has that effect.

iii) Jn 8:58 is not an explicit claim to deity, but an implicit claim. A provocative statement designed to trigger associations with OT statements stressing the unique status of Yahweh—in contrast to heathen nonentities. To say that Jesus originally said something more oblique than v58 fails to explain the reaction in v59. V58 is an allusive statement that intentionally and inevitably evokes those OT texts. To

claim that what Jesus original said was more muted leaves the comparison shrouded in obscurity.

Christ and Churchill

Critics of the Gospels make a big deal about what the Gospels *don't* say. They deploy the argument from silence to question the historicity of the Gospels. And it's true that the argument from silence can sometimes be telling, if there's an expectation that a writer would mention something in case he knew about it. But even that inference can be precarious.

I've been dipping into **THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF C. S. LEWIS; VOLUME II : BOOKS, BROADCASTS, AND THE WAR, 1931-1949**. I begin with the index, then read entries that interest me.

There's only one letter (April 21, 1940), to Warnie, that mentions Churchill in passing:

On Thursday I dined at the Carlyles. The old man was in great form. He highly praised Churchill's Marlborough...(399).

That's in a volume with a 1000 pages of letters spanning the lead up to the war and the war proper. Jack doesn't even mention Churchill in his pivotal role, at the time of writing, as the wartime prime minister, but Churchill as author and historian.

The only reason he even mentions Churchill at all is because Carlyle referred to Churchill's biography of Marlborough at dinner, and Jack thought that tidbit would interest his

brother since Warnie had a copy of the biography (according to a footnote). So it's just happenstance that there's even a single reference to Churchill in Jack's collected correspondence.

You'd never know from the letters what a dominant figure Churchill was in English politics during this long ordeal, when England was facing a war for national survival. Indeed, a political giant at the time.

Ironically, the reason he doesn't crop up more often in the correspondence is because he was too central, too important to mention. That's ubiquitous common background knowledge.

The voice of Jesus and John

1. One issue regarding the authenticity of John's Gospel is similarity between the voice of Jesus and the voice of John (the narrator). Conversely, the difference between the voice of the Johannine Jesus and the voice of the Synoptic Jesus.

Explanations range along a continuum. At one end is the view that John's Gospel is pious fiction. The whole thing was fabricated by the anonymous writer.

Less radical is the view that the author rewrote the sayings of Jesus to impose stylistic uniformity on his Gospel.

2. On one hand, there's the danger of exaggerating the difference between Jesus and John.

i) For instance:

Reynolds lists about 150 words that are placed on Jesus' lips in John but are never used elsewhere by the Evangelist. Not a few of these are sufficiently general that they would have been as appropriate in the Evangelists's narrative as in Jesus' discourse. D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (IVP 1991), 45.

ii) Commentators typically think we can distinguish the words of Jesus from the words of the narrator in Jn 3. They

think the narrator takes over at v16. So John's style is less homogenous than the objection assumes.

3. The difference can be accounted for in part by demographic and geographic factors entirely consistent with the historicity of John and the Synoptics alike. For instance:

The location and setting of most of John's discourses differ from those in which the Synoptics take interest...Some variation in style may occur because in the Synoptics Jesus converses especially "with the country people of Galilee," whereas "in the Fourth Gospel he disputes with the religious leaders of Jerusalem or talks intimately to the inner circle of his disciples".

Further, although only John reports lengthy interchanges between Jesus and Jerusalem leaders, there can be no question that interchanges occurred, especially during Passion Week, and they were undoubtedly longer than the Synoptics report.

Most scholars hold that Jesus used mainly Aramaic when he conducted his ministry in the rural parts of Galilee, But at times he probably taught in Greek, the regional trade language and language of the urban centers. He lived in a multilingual society, even if most people were not equally proficient in

both Greek and Aramaic. C. Keener, The Gospel of John: A Commentary (Hendrickson 2003), 1:76-78.

4. In addition, the Matthew and Luke are basically a collage of disparate materials: monologues, dialogues, prosaic teaching, parables, miracles, exorcisms, travels, &c. Moreover, Matthew and Luke are crammed with this disparate material.

By contrast, John is far more selective. He takes more time to cover less ground. That in itself results in a pronounced stylistic difference, but it's not "stylistic" in the rhetorical sense of how to word things.

5. What is meant by the distinctive Johannine style, anyway? In John's Gospel and 1 John, the author is repetitious. His style is often an extension or elaboration of his favorite key words, key metaphors, and key motifs from the OT. He rings the changes on these elements.

But what's the source of those elements? It's possible that this reflects his own observation and cast of mind. But it's equally possible that Jesus is the source of his key words, metaphors, and OT motifs.

6. Sometimes one person's speech imitates another person's speech. A paradigm example is how the syntax and diction of kids will imitate their parents or older siblings.

7. Bishop Robinson (**THE PRIORITY OF JOHN**) has argued that Jesus and John were probably cousins.

According to the Gospels, John's hometown was Capernaum while Christ's hometown was Nazareth. These are only 20 miles apart. At a time when people travelled on foot, that's not a great distance.

Therefore, it's quite possible that Jesus and John were childhood friends. If so, Jesus may have made a profound impression on John during his formative years. Jesus has an overwhelmingly dominant personality. And if he was an older cousin, one can imagine John, as a boy, looking up to Jesus, as an inspirational role model.

Even if you think this is too conjectural to lay much weight on, it brings out the fact that we know next to nothing about the background of the disciples. About their social life before Jesus summoned them. It's not something we can rule out. And there's no presumption against it.

8. In my experience, people are apt to recount the same anecdotes. Although we experience life like a continuous movie reel, we remember and interpret our lives by mental snapshots. Particular events of personal significance that we use as a frame of reference.

In that respect, John's Gospel is consistent with an eyewitness account. A naturally selective focus on events that stand out in his mind. If you spend much time around older relatives, they have a habit of repeating a handful of anecdotes. These are paradigmatic experiences. John's Gospel is like that.

9. Assuming that John authored the Fourth Gospel, how could we envision the process of composition? Was he hunched over a desk, manually writing his biography? I doubt that.

More likely, he dictated his memoirs to a scribe. Other Christians may have been in attendance when he did that, listening to him reminisce about Jesus. They might have asked him questions. The scribe would record the answer, but not the question.

If the process was basically along those lines, then John's Gospel is a transcription of oral history. A record of the spoken word. If so, the spoken word has a different flow than the written word. Who said what—the speaker or the narrator—may sometimes seem blended insofar as there won't be the explicit literary transitions you have in a history or biography that originated in a written text from the outset. That's not a stylistic difference in the rhetorical sense of how to express things, but a difference in medium between the spoken word and the written word.

10. I'd add that many of the shorter statements of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. the "I am" sayings) are aphoristic sayings in simple, and frequently picturesque language. There's no obvious incentive for John to rewrite them. No reason they couldn't reproduce what he actually said in the way he said it.

Jesus, John, and plagiarism

In the recent past there were two plagiarism stories involving Peter T. O'Brien and Andreas Köstenberger. O'Brien was accused of plagiarizing F. F. Bruce while Köstenberger was accused of plagiarizing Don Carson. Specifically, O'Brien was accused of plagiarizing Bruce's commentaries on Hebrews and the Prison Epistles while Köstenberger was accused of plagiarizing Carson's commentary on John.

I myself noticed how Köstenberger's commentary reads like a paraphrase of Carson's. Since, moreover, Carson has authored a (periodically updated) NT commentary survey, I thought it must be a strange experience for Carson to read and review Köstenberger's commentary, which borrows so heavily from Carson. Offhand, I think the accusation against O'Brien is a pedantic technicality.

But here's why I bring this up: many readers notice that John's Gospel generally has a very different style than the Synoptics. Moreover, they notice that it's hard to distinguish the style of the Johannine narrator from the style of Jesus. As a result, some scholars conclude that either Jesus in John's Gospel is a fictional character or else the author has reworded the ideas of Jesus in his own style.

Now let's go back to plagiarism. It seems to me there are two basic ways to explain the similarities between the voice of Bruce and O'Brien or Carson and Köstenberger. One possibility is that Köstenberger and O'Brien had the commentaries right in front of them while they were writing their own. They were literally on the same page, and they copied from the commentary, only they paraphrased the original.

Here's another possibility: O'Brien was a student of Bruce while Köstenberger was a student of Carson. They had read those commentaries so often, as well as other writings by their mentors, that they became imbued with the same style. Unconscious assimilation. By the same token, the Apostle John may have become so steeped in the style of Jesus that it's second nature for him to speak the same way. To take another comparison, the style of Apocalypse is marinated in the OT.

It's also striking that, unlike the Synoptics, John often records private conversations between Jesus and another or other individuals. So that's one reason John's Gospel differs from the Synoptics.

Who got what from whom?

NT scholars typically assume that if Matthew and Luke are quoting and editing Mark, they are not just literarily dependent on Mark, but substantially dependent on Mark. He's their source of information. Now, let us compare these three statements:

Reynolds (pp. cxxiii-cxxv) lists about 150 words that are placed on Jesus' lips in John but are never used elsewhere by the Evangelist. Not a few of these are sufficiently general that they would have been as appropriate in the Evangelists' narrative as in Jesus' discourse. D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (IVP 1991), 45.

It is interesting to note as one proceeds through the Gospel how often stylistic peculiarities of John appear on Jesus' lips first and only afterwards in John's narrative material (e.g. 2:4; 3:15; 5:17-23; 6:39; 7:33), suggesting that John's own style may at times have been

*influenced by Jesus' manner of speaking. And it is not quite true that the discourses of Jesus in John are wholly indistinguishable from John's narrative style elsewhere. No less than 145 words spoken by Jesus in John appear nowhere in the Evangelists's narrative material, and many of these are general enough in meaning that we might have expected them elsewhere (Reynolds 1906: cxxiii-cxxv). C. Blomberg, **The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel (IVP 2001), 52.***

*It is not true that the discourses of Jesus in John are wholly indistinguishable from John's narrative style elsewhere. H. R. Reynolds's much-neglected commentary lists over 145 words spoken by Jesus in John that are never used by the Evangelist elsewhere, and many of these are general enough that they would have been appropriate in narrative as well as discourse. C. Blomberg, **The***

Historical Reliability of the Gospels (IVP, 2nd ed., 2007), 232.

1. I think there's clearly some literary dependence at work. And given the sequence of publication, I take it that Blomberg's statement in his earlier work is indebted to Carson.

2. However, I think it's highly likely that Blomberg has direct knowledge of the commentary by Reynolds. So he and Carson share a common source. Blomberg is both dependent on Carson and independent of Carson. In other words, I assume he read both.

In the earlier work, the wording of his statement seems to be influenced by the wording of Carson's statement. There's stylistic carryover. Stylistically, the data in Reynolds is filtered through Carson.

In theory, it could be that he had the text of Carson right in front of him when he was writing his own commentary, and he consciously paraphrased Carson. But it could also be, and more likely be the case, that Carson's phrasing stuck in his mind, which subconsciously conditioned how he wrote that paragraph.

And even if he's stylistically dependent on Carson's wording, he presumably had independent knowledge of what Reynolds wrote. It's an interesting question which he read first. Did he read Carson first, which alerted him to Reynolds, then he consulted Reynolds? As a careful scholar, he might double-check Carson's summary interpretation against the original source.

3. Then there's the relationship of his later work to his earlier work as well as Carson and Reynolds. Did he still have Carson in the back of his mind when he wrote the later book? Seems more likely that in his later work, he paraphrased and abbreviated his own statement in the earlier work—without going back to reread Carson or Reynolds. He may have done that from memory or perhaps had the text of his own earlier work in front of him.

Yet the statement in his later work shares some wording with Carson that's absent from his earlier work. It maybe that Carson's phraseology was still floating around in Blomberg's mind.

Finally, we have:

*Although John writes in a fairly uniform style throughout his Gospel—even when Jesus is speaking—there are at least 145 words used only by Jesus that appear nowhere in John's narrative sections. C. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (B&H 2009), 181.*

By this stage, Craig may well have a stereotypical memory of original claim that's psychologically detached from Carson. Craig has written this often enough that it's like stock imagery.

4. This illustrates some of the imponderables of source criticism and redaction criticism, as well as how some

reconstructions erect a false dichotomy between firsthand and secondhand knowledge. Sometimes it's demonstrably both.

Ear to the ground

I heard the first two minutes of an interview with Peter Hitchens.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7ZE_tsItm4

I stopped listening because Eric Metaxas is so obnoxious. There are two kinds of interviewers: those who showcase the guest and those who showcase themselves.

Anyway, Hitchens said he spends lots of time in London because:

It's the capital city, I'm a national newspaper journalist. If I don't work in the capital I lose touch with events very quickly. You can pick up gossip and rumor and feelings about things...

The reason I mention this is that critics of Bible history generally and the Gospels in particular constantly impugn the historicity of Scripture as if they know what really happened. Yet as Hitchens noted, there's a lot of information you can only pick up on site. You must be at that time and place or speak to people from that time and place, to fill in the gaps.

Even though Hitchens lives in the age of the Internet, where there's such an abundance of real-time information his fingertips, that's still not enough to keep on top of national

events. He must be at the epicenter of the events he covers to have the behind-the-scenes viewpoint that provides a connecting thread.

Imagine how much less critics writing 2000+ years after the fact are in a position to correct the Bible. There's so much information that was never written down. Even if we had more surviving writings from that time and place, there's so much they'd leave out. So much linking material. So much contextual background information. Bible history gives us a synopsis. Many events are inexplicable in isolation.

Ten questions Christians must answer!

I ran across a village atheist website with "Ten Questions a Christian Must Answer". At last count it had about 1250 comments.

I'm going to ignore most of the questions because I've answered them or questions like them before. These are cliché questions. But there's one question I'll single out. Indeed, I've seen two variations on the same question:

How do we explain the fact that Jesus has never appeared to you? Jesus is all-powerful and timeless, but if you pray for Jesus to appear, nothing happens. You have to create a weird rationalization to deal with this discrepancy.

How do we explain the fact that Jesus has never appeared to you? Jesus could appear to you, but he doesn't. He appeared to Paul after he died, so it's not like he hasn't done it before. He could appear to give you advice for a tough decision, give you comfort in person like a friend would, or just assure you that he really exists.

i) I explain the fact that Jesus never appeared to me because I never asked him to appear to me.

ii) In addition, Jesus never promised to appear to every Christian, so there's no expectation that he will appear to every Christian.

iii) Moreover, I don't view Jesus as a genie whom I can summon to do my bidding.

iv) As far as decision-making, that doesn't require private revelation. Throughout Scripture, you have people making

decisions because God providentially orchestrated events in a certain way or implanted subliminal suggestions. So I can do God's will without even thinking about it.

And even at the level of private revelation, that doesn't require a dominical vision. What about an audible voice or revelatory dream? To demand a personal audience with Jesus is an arbitrary stipulation, even if we grant the general principle.

v) There are many well-documented reports of Jesus appearing to people, viz.,

<https://epistleofdude.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/visions-of-jesus/>

<http://denverseminary.edu/resources/news-and-articles/a-wind-in-the-house-of-islam/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2015/06/03/dreams-and-visions-the-muslim-encounter-with-isa/>

Another example is Bishop Hugh Montefiore, who converted from Judaism to Christianity due to a dominical vision.

To say Jesus doesn't appear to people because he doesn't exist backfires, considering the many reported examples to the contrary. There's no dearth of evidence.

And if an atheist discounts these reports as tall tales or hallucinations, then his challenge was duplicitous. If, when you call his bluff, he says it doesn't matter, then he was arguing in bad faith all along.

vi) From what I've read, reports of Jesus appearing to people typically involve situations where they didn't ask or

expect Jesus to appear to them. It wasn't in response to prayer, but an unsolicited visitation.

vii) Furthermore, when Jesus appears to people, it may be to summon them to a life of costly discipleship. So there's a tradeoff. A grueling vocation in exchange for the vision. I don't envy St. Paul's life.

viii) I'm not vouching for any particular report. I'm just responding to the atheist on his own grounds. I don't presume that every reported dominical apparition is legit. I can't assign percentages. But I do think that if you have enough reports by prima facie credible witnesses, that makes it likely that some reports are true.

ix) Likewise, I don't need to personally experience something to know it's true. Secondhand information suffices for most of what we know. Why carve out an ad hoc exception in this instance?

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.

Performance variants

Bart Erhman pretentiously instructs people to read the Gospels horizontally as well as vertically. Don't just read through one Gospel at a time, but compare them side-by-side.

Of course, that's hardly a novel approach. There are published Gospel harmonies that do just that.

For Erhman, this exposes discrepancies between the Gospels. Some scholars explain these "discrepancies" by appeal to redaction criticism.

In this interview, Andy Bannister discusses the oral nature of the Koran. Around the 30-36 min. mark he describes the nature of "performance variants," and then applies that to the Gospels. These are not redactional variants, but reflect the living voice of Christ:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmRGhxnDu0&feature=share>

Piggybacking on his argument, I'd like to make an additional point. It's common for scholars to remark that since Jesus was an itinerate preacher, we'd expect him to repeat himself at different times and places. And by the same token, we'd expect performance variants. There'd be minor verbal changes as he adapted his message to a particular audience at a particular time and place. Different synonyms. Adding a word here, subtracting a word there. Even when talking about the same thing or retelling the same story, speakers naturally reword things. Spontaneous variations.

Yet there's a related, but neglected consideration. We shouldn't expect performance variants to be confined to the same speech at a different time and place, but to the same speech at the same time and place.

It's generally acknowledged that the speeches, sermons, and dialogues in the Gospels and Acts are condensed. One stereotypical difference between the spoken word and the written word is that speech is a redundant medium.

That parallels the difference between readers and listeners. A reader can process the material at his own pace whereas a listener hears what is said at the speaker's pace. Likewise, if a reader doesn't follow a sentence the first time he sees it, he can stop, go back, and reread it.

By contrast, a listener can't pause the speaker. If an idea is spoken only once, it may get past the listener too fast to register. If a listener doesn't understand a statement, and he puzzles over what it means, he can't simultaneously pay attention to the rest of what the speaker says. For the speaker just keeps on talking.

As a result, a skillful speaker will repeat himself in the same speech to make it easier for listeners to process the message. He may repeat some phrases verbatim as well as paraphrasing the same idea.

It's likely that Jesus expressed the same idea in different words in the course of the same discourse. The original discourse probably had performance variations. Not just wording things differently when he spoke to a different audience at a different time and place, but to the same audience at the same time and place.

If two or more people jotted down in journals what they heard Jesus say, they could, in principle, quote him verbatim, yet there'd still be verbal variations in their respective excerpts because they're quoting different parts of the same discourse. Where Jesus uses similar words to express the same idea. So there's no presumption that synoptic variants are redactional variants rather than performance variants.

That doesn't rule out redaction in some cases. But we shouldn't default to that.

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.

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 Inklings and the Synoptic problem

The two source hypothesis goes basically like this: Matthew and Luke made use of Mark, which they supplemented with additional sources.

There's certainly some truth to that, but it can be misleading. It's frequently presented as a vertical model of literary or conceptual information-sharing, based on order of publication. If Mark was published first, while Matthew and Luke show familiarity with Mark, then they were literarily or conceptually dependent on Mark.

But the question of literary or conceptual dependence can be more intricate and intractable. Consider the Inklings. Tolkien and Lewis both took a keen interest in Nordic/Teutonic mythology. Likewise, Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, and Barfield all took a keen interest in the Arthurian mythos. And there were primary sources from which they drew.

Conversely, there was horizontal information-sharing as they bounced ideas off each other, and shared drafts with each other. They influenced one another.

But that raises a tricky question: when you find Arthurian or Nordic/Teutonic motifs in their writings, what's the source? It is primary source material? Or did one Inkling get this from another Inkling? If two Inklings have the same motif, what's the direction of borrowing?

The order of publication is inconclusive. One Inkling might be the first to publish a story using that motif, followed by another Inkling publishing a story with a parallel motif. But even if we find "synoptic parallels" in writings of the

Inklings, publication order faults to demonstrate that the author of the later writing borrowed from the author of the earlier writing. On the one hand, there's the possibility that both used a common source. On the other hand, there's the possibility that the author who published first borrowed the idea from an unpublished source. That is to say, that might reflect horizontal information-sharing rather than vertical information-sharing if he originally got the idea from a fellow Inkling during informal conversation. In some cases there may be letters or diaries that enable us to retrace the genesis of the idea, but in many cases, it isn't possible to reconstruct the creative process.

In application to the Synoptic problem, in some cases it could be due to independent access to a common source. In other cases, an earlier publication might be indebted to the author of a later publication.

Although Matthew's *writing* can't be a source for Mark, Matthew the *writer* might possibly be a source. A writer preexists his writings. The writer of a later writing can be a source of information for an earlier writing by a different author.

Again, consider the Inklings. Even where there's evidence of borrowing, publication dates are not a reliable indicator of the direction in which that took place.

Tarry in Jerusalem

Last night I was watching the recent debate between Mike Licona and Bart Ehrman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qP7RrCfDkO4&feature=youtu.be>

In this post I'm just going to comment on some of Ehrman's allegations. Ehrman is a tedious debater because he recycles the same objections year after year, from one debate to the next. In this debate he used many of the same examples he cited in his written debate with Licona. Likewise, he used many of the same example he cited in his 2005 book **JESUS INTERRUPTED**. Ehrman rarely revises his examples and objections in response to correction. Rather than transcribe or summarize when he said in his recent debate with Licona, it's simpler to quote the same objections in written sources:

<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-major-statement/>

<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

1. VERBATIM RECOLLECTION

In the Gospel of Matthew we have the famous “Sermon on the Mount.” It is one of the best known and most beloved set of ethical teachings the

planet has ever seen. It takes up fully three chapters of the Gospel (it is not found in any of the other three). But Matthew was writing his account some 50 years or so after the sermon was allegedly given. How would he know what was said?

Give it some thought. Suppose you were supposed to write down a speech that you yourself had listened to a while ago. Suppose it was a speech delivered by a presidential candidate last month. If you had no notes, but just your memory—how well would you do? Or suppose you wanted to write down, without notes, Obama’s first “State of the Union” address? That was only seven years ago. How well would you do? How well would you do with the first “State of the Union” addressed delivered by Lyndon Johnson? My guess is that you wouldn’t have a clue.

i) For starters, I doubt that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount at one sitting. It would be impossible to a listener to absorb that density of the material. Rather, I suspect the Sermon on the Mount is a composite speech. Some of that was spoken on that occasion, and some of that was spoken on other occasions.

ii) I don't assume that the Gospels are the product of what the authors could naturally remember. Rather, their memory

is enhanced by inspiration.

2. SYNOPTIC/JOHANNINE CHRISTOLOGY

In John, however, Jesus's preaching is almost entirely about his own identity. Here he makes the most breathtaking claims about himself, repeatedly claiming to be God, to the dismay of his Jewish listeners who regularly take up stones to execute him for blasphemy. You don't find anything like that in the public ministry of Jesus in the other Gospels. But here in John, Jesus says such things as "Before Abraham was, I am" (Abraham lived 1,800 years earlier! John 8:58); "I and the Father are one" (10:30); "If you have seen me you have seen the Father" (14:9). Here, Jesus speaks of the glory that he shared with the Father before the world was created (17:5).

These are spectacular passages, all of them. But did the man Jesus, during his life, actually say such things about himself? Here is a point worth considering. The other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are all considered to be based on earlier sources. Scholars call these earlier sources Q (a source used by both Matthew and Luke for many

of their sayings of Jesus), M (a source used just by Matthew), and L (a source used just by Luke). All of these sources were written much earlier than John, much nearer the time of Jesus's public ministry.

So, here is the question. If the historical Jesus actually went around claiming that he was God on earth, is there anything else that he could possibly say that would be more significant? That would be the most amazing thing he could conceivably say. And if so, it would certainly be what someone who was recording his words would want their readers to know about him. If that's the case, how do we explain the fact that such sayings are not found in any of our earlier sources?

That's a deceptive comparison. John is far more selective than the Synoptics. If you read an outline of John, he doesn't recount that many incidents in the life of Christ. Rather, he prefers to focus on the most dramatic episodes. He spends more time on fewer incidents. By contrast, the Synoptics spend less time on more incidents.

3. TARRY IN JERUSALEM

Let me explore briefly just one of those differences to show you why the accounts seem to be truly at

odds with one another. Do the disciples meet Jesus in Galilee or do they never leave Jerusalem? In Mark's Gospel, the women are told to tell the disciples to go to meet Jesus in Galilee. But they never tell them. So, it's not clear what Mark thinks happens next: Did no one ever hear? Surely, someone heard, since Mark knows the story!

In any event, the women are told something very similar in Matthew, and there they do tell the disciples to go meet Jesus in Galilee. And the disciples go to Galilee (again, it's about over 60 miles, and they would have gone on foot). Jesus meets with them there and gives them their final instructions, and that's the end of the Gospel.

But how does that stack up with what we find in Luke's account? In this case, the women are not told to tell the disciples to go to Galilee...Jesus then appears to the disciples, shows them he has been raised from the dead, and gives them their instructions, which include the injunction that they are to "stay in the city" until they receive the promised Spirit from on high (24:49).

I am giving this relatively detailed summary in order to make a fundamental point. In Luke's version of the events, the disciples are told to stay in the city of Jerusalem and they do stay in the city of Jerusalem. Not for a day or two, but for weeks. This is where Jesus appears to them before ascending. But in Matthew's version, they leave Jerusalem and travel up to Galilee (it would take some days to get there on foot), and it is there that Jesus appears to them.

So, which is it? It depends on which Gospel you read. Can they both be absolutely accurate? I don't see how. They are at odds on a most fundamental point.

i) Ehrman fails to distinguish between contradictory *commands* and contradictory *events*. Although contradictory events are impossible, contradictory commands are not impossible.

At most, this would be a case of Jesus giving a general command, then contravening his general command with an exception. It's not inaccurate for a historical account to record conflicting commands. If someone gives a command, then contravenes the initial command, an accurate account will record the original command as well as its abrogation or exception.

ii) And this isn't just hypothetical. For instance, God gives Abraham contradictory commands (Gen 22:2,11-12). Likewise, God appears to send mixed signals to Balaam (Num 22:20-22) and David (2 Sam 24). Each of these prima facie discrepancies takes place in the very same account by the same narrator. Back-to-back commands. A divine command permission followed by what seems to be an inconsistent divine reaction.

My point is not to explain these examples, but demonstrate that this phenomenon doesn't imply that the source is inaccurate. Ehrman's inference is fallacious.

iii) One way to understand what a statement was intended to mean is to consider the implicit point of contrast. The disciples didn't live in Jerusalem. They were in Jerusalem for the Passover. Left to their own devices, they'd go home. Moreover, they had an additional incentive to go home because it was risky for them to hang around Jerusalem. The Roman and Jewish authorities had their eye out for the disciples.

In context, I take Christ's prohibition to mean, Don't leave on your own initiative. Put your own plans on hold. Wait for further instructions.

The 50-day interval leaves ample time for an excursion to Galilee. They were back in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. They didn't have to be there the whole time to be there for Pentecost. And Jesus is at liberty to make an exception to his general command.

iv) And the larger point is that rather than returning home, they are required to preach about Jesus in the very city where he was persecuted and executed. That's provocative. That exposes them to danger. If they had their druthers,

they've exit Jerusalem for their own safety. So they need to be commanded to resist that impulse.

4. NATIVITY CHRONOLOGY

Luke then indicates that eight days later, Jesus was circumcised and 33 days later, after Mary performed the “rites of purification” (this is in reference to a law in the Old Testament, Leviticus 12), they returned back to Nazareth.

In Matthew, Herod decides to kill all the children in Bethlehem because he doesn't want any competitors for his throne as “King of the Jews.” But Joseph is warned in a dream and he escapes with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they stay until Herod dies. But if that's right, how can Luke also be right that they stayed in Bethlehem just 41 days (eight days till the circumcision; 33 days before the rites of purification) and then returned to Nazareth? If Luke's right, then Matthew can't be, and vice versa.

i) The episode of the Magi took place over a year after the birth of Christ. So that's after the Lucan account. We need to draw a further distinction:

a) Luke doesn't say the flight into Egypt ever happened

b) Luke says the flight into Egypt never happened

(a) doesn't imply (b). Luke's silence doesn't contradict Matthew.

5. CENSUS OF QURINIUS

The Gospel of Luke is quite explicit (see 2:2) that Jesus was born when Quirinius was the governor of Syria; this was also during the reign of Herod, King of Israel (1:5; and, of course, Matthew 2). But this is an enormous problem. Luke appears not to have known the history of Palestine as well as we might like. We know from clear and certain statements in Josephus (the prominent Jewish historian) and inscriptions that Quirinius became governor of Syria in 6 CE. But Herod died in 4 BCE, ten years earlier. Their reigns did not overlap. Luke has simply made a historical mistake. It's an anachronism.

i) Notice Ehrman's selective credulity and incredulity. He's credulous about Josephus but incredulous about Luke. Ehrman constantly says the Gospels are unreliable because they were written decades after the fact. Yet Josephus is writing decades after the fact. Indeed, it's arguable that Josephus is writing some 30 years later than Luke. So even assuming there's a discrepancy between Josephus and Luke, why does Ehrman assume Luke made a historical mistake rather than Josephus? See how arbitrary Ehrman is when appealing to historical evidence?

ii) Our information for that period is scattershot. There are many gaps in our knowledge of the period.

6. NAMING NAMES

Using the right names has no bearing on whether the stories are accurate or not. It simply means that the storytellers knew what names they should use in telling their tales.

Yet out of the other side of his mouth, Ehrman keeps telling us that the Gospels are unreliable because they were written at a different time and place from the life of Christ. Well, he can't have it both ways. If the Gospels authors are that out-of-touch with Palestine during the life of Christ, then how can they be so accurate in this respect?

7. THE GENEALOGIES OF CHRIST

*The easiest way to see the difference is to ask the simple question, Who, in each genealogy, is Joseph's father, patrilineal grandfather, and great-grandfather? In Matthew the family line goes from Joseph to Jacob to Matthan to Eleazar to Eliud and on into the past. In Luke it goes from Joseph to Heli to Mathat to Levi to Melchi. The lines become similar once we get all the way back to King David (although there are other problems, as we'll see), but from David to Joseph, the lines are at odds. **Jesus Interrupted (37).***

i) First of all, it's prejudicial and misleading to classify this material as genealogies. That has narrow, technical connotations for a modern reader that may be off-the-mark in reference to Scripture. In Scripture, genealogies have more than one function. It's not just to trace lineal descent.

For instance, the genealogies on Gen 5 & 11 function as shorthand history. They form a bridge between major events. The narrator doesn't wish to give a continuous history. He skips around. Genealogies are a way of filling gaps and preserving historical continuity without having to narrate the intervening events. They transition from one anecdote to the next.

In addition, the Table of Nations (Gen 10) doesn't have a single unifying principle. Rather, it's about ethnicity, geography, mother tongues, &c.

ii) Apropos (i), genealogies are a way to locate an individual within a particular time, place, or people-group. Biblical genealogies evoke Jewish history and world history. The genealogies of Christ aren't simply about lineal descent. In Scripture, ancestry is a broader concept. The genealogies of Christ identify Jesus with Jewish history and world history. Named individuals in the genealogies evoke particular periods in Jewish history and OT history. They trigger associations in the mind of a reader steeped in OT history. They situate Jesus in the history of his people (Jews), as well as world history (Gentiles). People he came to redeem. The relatives of Jesus needn't be linear ancestors to discharge that function.

In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19).

Some scholars doubt or deny that Jesus actually said this. The purpose of my post is not to convince readers people who think Matthew is pious fiction. I'm not aiming at readers who think Matthew is largely legendary or hagiographical. My more modest point is that there's nothing surprising about Jesus saying this.

i) One side issue is whether this is a baptismal formula in the sense of a liturgical formula recited at baptism. That may not be what it originally meant. Rather, it may indicate the nature of baptism. Of course, it came to be the standard baptismal formula in ecclesiastical practice, and I don't have a problem with that development.

ii) In the OT, it's not unusual for Yahweh and the Spirit of Yahweh to be paired.

iii) "In the name of Yahweh" is a stock formula in OT usage.

iv) In Matthew, the Father, Son, and Spirit are often mentioned separately. In addition, "God" and "Father" are often used interchangeably, as synonyms, where "God" functions as a proper name for the Father.

v) The Father, Son, and Spirit are the major players in Matthew. They are above the angels. They occupy a unique echelon, on the divine side.

vi) The use of the singular is striking: one name for three named individuals. And what would the one name be? Presumably the divine name. The name of God. All three can be subsumed under the one name of the one God.

vi) Not only are the Father, Son, and Spirit mentioned separately in Matthew, on multiple occasions, but collectively in 3:16-17.

vii) Moreover, I doubt it's coincidental that the two occasions in Matthew where they are collectively mentioned is in a baptismal context: the baptism of Christ and the baptism of Christians.

16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:16-17).

viii) Likewise, this is the first time since that occasion that baptism is mentioned. So I think there's an intentional parallel between the baptism of Christ and the baptismal formula in 28:19. In both cases you have a baptism setting with "Trinitarian" players. The baptism of Christ is the template for Christian baptism.

ix) Finally, it's not unexpected that Matthew would conclude his Gospel in a climatic note. Good writers, including good historians, like to finish strong. Mt 28:19 seems to be an

allusive summary of 3:16-17, only 28:19 is repeatable and forward-leaning.

Are the "I am" statements authentic?

Some critics doubt that Jesus could have made the "I am" statements attributed to him in John's Gospel. If, however, Jesus *is* Yahweh Incarnate, then there's nothing surprising or incongruous about Jesus making those statements. This isn't a theological innovation. Rather, it has OT precedent in the Pentateuch and the prophet Isaiah:

God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you'" (Exod 3:14).

**See now that I, even I, am he,
and there is no god beside me (Deut 32:29)**

**Who has performed and done this,
calling the generations from the beginning?
I, Yahweh, the first,
and with the last; I am he (Isa 41:4)**

**"You are my witnesses," Yahweh declares,
"and my servant whom I have chosen,
that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me (Isa 43:10)**

**Also henceforth I am he;
there is none who can deliver from my hand;
I work, and who can turn it back?” (Isa 43:13).**

**“I, I am he
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
and I will not remember your sins (Isa 43:25).**

**even to your old age I am he,
and to gray hairs I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save (Isa 46:4)**

**“Listen to me, O Jacob,
and Israel, whom I called!
I am he; I am the first,
and I am the last (Isa 48:12)**

**“I, I am he who comforts you;
who are you that you are afraid of man who dies,
of the son of man who is made like grass (Isa 51:12)**

**6 Therefore my people shall know my name.
Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I
who speak; here I am (Isa 52:6).**

Given that such "I am" statements are an idiomatic self-designation and recurring motif in the OT, it's to be expected that Jesus will make claims about himself that evoke those OT statements.

And given how that functions as a refrain in Isaiah to distinguish Yahweh from false gods, when Jesus uses the same language, that unmistakably implicates his own deity.

In addition, this isn't unique to John's Gospel. In Revelation, the First/Last, Alpha/Omega title is applied to Jesus (Rev 1:8,11; 21:6; 22:13), and that's another Yahwistic refrain in the same section of Isaiah (Isa 40-48) that uses the "I am" language.

Likewise, the "I am" statement in Mt 14:27 is arguably theophanic. Cf. R. Bauckham, **Is "HIGH HUMAN CHRISTOLOGY" SUFFICIENT? A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO J. R. DANIEL KIRK'S A MAN ATTESTED BY GOD, BULLETIN FOR BIBLICAL RESEARCH 27.4 (2017) 503-525.**

It's Greek to me

A stock objection to the historicity of some dominical statements is the claim that they rely on puns or double entendres which only work in Greek, yet Jesus normally spoke Aramaic. One example is the use of *anothen* ("above", "again", "anew") in Jn 3. I've discussed this before, but I'd like to make some additional points:

i) My post is not addressed to hardline skeptics. My immediate aim is just to consider whether the narrator slipped up. Is Jn 3 internally inconsistent or anachronistic? Did the narrator neglect to consider what a realistic conversation in that setting would amount to?

ii) Do we have a representative sample of 1C Aramaic? In addition, the types of ancient language that are apt to be preserved are official, literary, and/or legal texts and inscriptions rather than vernacular. Colloquial usage is underrepresented.

iii) Since Nicodemus initiated the conversion, it would be in whatever language he used at the outset.

iv) As some scholars point out, he has a Greek name, so he may well be polyglot.

v) As the Son of God, Jesus knows every human language. His divine consciousness can share information with his human consciousness on a need to know basis.

A critic might object that this begs the question. However, I'm just discussing whether the account is inconsistent, not whether it's factual. From the narrative viewpoint, Jesus is

omniscient. So the account can't be faulted on *those* grounds.

vi) Sometimes two polyglot conversation partners who are with a group of people will speak a language the two conversation partners understand but the group does not. They don't want everyone within earshot to know what they are saying to each other. Using a language only they know preserves the secrecy of their communication.

vii) Apropos (vi), at this stage, Nicodemus is noncommittal. He's intrigued by Jesus and impressed by Jesus, but he hasn't made up his mind. He has some questions for Jesus. Questions about Jesus that he brings to Jesus.

He comes at night to be discreet. One or more of the disciples were probably in attendance when Nicodemus came to see Jesus. He doesn't want the disciples to eavesdrop on the conversation. He doesn't wish to fuel gossip or rumors about his interest in Jesus. At this stage of his investigation, it's premature to stick his neck out. Later he will be bolder, but at this preliminary stage, he has some questions he needs to settle to his own satisfaction, by taking his questions about Jesus straight to Jesus. How Jesus answers them, as well as subsequent developments, will be decisive.

viii) A critic might ask, in that event, what's the source of this account, if one or more disciples who overheard it didn't understand. It's possible that Jesus explained it to them after Nicodemus left. Certainly they'd be curious. Mind you, that might be breach of confidence.

Or Nicodemus might have recounted the conversation to the narrator (the apostle John/Beloved Disciple) after Nicodemus became a convert.

Over and above that is the general phenomenon of the omniscient narrator in Scripture. Unbelievers regard that as a fictional convention. By contrast, believers attribute that to inspiration or revelation.

Raising the dead

1. There are three accounts of Jesus raising the dead. One is the widow's son (Lk 7:11-17). Another is the daughter of Jairus (Mk 5:21-43, Mt 9:18-26, Lk 8:40-56). Then there's Lazarus (Jn 11). Suppose a skeptic said that due to the lack of medical technology back then, they may only have appeared to be dead?

2. One issue is that Matthew reports the father of Jairus telling Jesus his daughter is already dead whereas Mark and Luke report him telling Jesus that she's dying/at the point of death. There are different explanations:

i) One standard explanation is that Matthew has a simplified account. Since, in Mark/Luke, after Jairus leaves home to find Jesus, someone is dispatched to tell him that his daughter has died, so the quest is moot. Due to narrative compression, Matthew cuts to the chase by having Jairus say his daughter is dead, since, by the time he found Jesus, she was gone. And I think that's a plausible explanation. Matthew paraphrases his statement.

ii) Of course, it's quite possible that Jairus said more than one thing. Did people only speak to Jesus in one-liners?

iii) Also, there's a couple of dilemmas. To begin with, what parent wants to leave their child's deathbed? There's the anxiety that their child will pass away while they were absent. Parents wish to be there at the moment of death to comfort their child right up to the bitter end. They'd kick themselves if they weren't there when it happened.

So what is Jairus to do? On the one hand, he might think it's better to risk leaving her bedside while she's still

hanging on to go find Jesus. If he waits until she's dead, that may be too late.

On the other hand, he might think it's better to see if she dies, then go find Jesus. That way he won't risk missing the moment of death.

Agonizing calculations in both directions. I expect he was torn.

It could be that she already expired when he left to find Jesus. But that presents another dilemma. If he tells Jesus that his daughter has died, he doesn't know if Jesus will say it's futile to go to his house. The reader knows that even if she's dead, the situation isn't hopeless, yet that's because we know how the story ends. But Jairus is in the thick of things, having to make snap judgments in a state of desperation and emotional turmoil. So maybe Jairus is stretching the truth to make it worthwhile for Jesus to go there. That's psychologically realistic.

3. Consider how much time it would take for Jairus to track down Jesus, then how much time it would take for Jesus to follow him back home. That's a round trip.

To my knowledge, the ancient way of determining death was cessation of breathing. But if somebody stops breathing, it's generally a matter of few minutes before the brain begins to die.

So even in the time it took for Jairus to leave home, locate Jesus, elbow his way through the crowd, explain the situation to Jesus, then double back, if the daughter had ceased breathing for that duration, she'd be truly dead. And minimally, it would be several hours before the widow's son was buried. So even without medical equipment/diagnostic

techniques, they'd surely be dead if they permanently stopped breathing for that long an interval.

This won't fly for readers who think the Gospels are fiction, but my post isn't addressing that mindset. I'm considering a different potential objection.

Ear on the ground

51 And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, 52 but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked (Mk 14:51-52).

This is a curious anecdote. Readers puzzle over the identity of the anonymous figure. One conjecture is that he might be living in a house on the garden grounds, and went outside to see what the commotion was about (Lagrange)

A more interesting conjecture is that Jesus celebrated the Lord's Supper at the home of John Mark. That's a good candidate for the site of the Lord's Supper (Cf. Lk 22:11-12; 24:33,36; Jn 20:19,26; Acts 1:13; 12:12).

Maybe Judas led the posse to Mark's house in case Jesus was still there. That awakened Mark, who hastily dressed and tailed them (Lane, Gundry).

(BTW, this may indicate that Mark's family was wealthy. Most homes in Jerusalem didn't have an upper room. And if his family was wealthy, that says something about his education and literacy, *pace* Bart Ehrman.)

But modern readers are in the dark. And that's the point. This is one of those incidental details which indicates how close Mark's Gospel is to the events. His cryptic aside takes for granted that readers in his immediate social circle will recognize the referent. But once you get a two or more generations out, the allusion is lost on later readers. It's very topical information.

Ipsissima verba

For some time now, evangelical scholars have drawn a distinction between the ipsissima verba and ipsissima vox of Jesus in the Gospels. I don't know when that category originated, although it goes back at least to Ned Stonehouse's **ORIGINS OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS** (1963).

Here's one definition:

Latin phrases meaning "the very words" and "the very voice" respectively, often used in the context of the quest for the historical Jesus. Ipsissima verba Jesu refers to the words or sayings that Jesus actually spoke in contradistinction to those merely attributed to him by subsequent tradition. Since Jesus probably spoke Aramaic and the NT is written in Greek, we probably do not have the ipsissima verba Jesu of Jesus apart from a very few exceptions (abba, ephphatha). Ipsissima vox makes a lesser claim: it designates words or sayings that give the sense but not the exact linguistic form of Jesus' speech. Soulen &

**Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism
(WJK, 3rd. ed., 2001), 88.**

Here's how a major evangelical scholar unpacks the distinction:

In examining the wording of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, we must distinguish between the ipsissima verba ("his very words") and the ipsissima vox ("his very voice," i.e. the presence of his teaching summarized). One universally recognized reality makes assessing the presence of the exact words of Jesus difficult and argues for the distinction between verba and vox. In is that Jesus probably gave most of his teaching in Aramaic...[so] most of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels is already in translation.

A second factor also argues for this distinction. Most accounts of Jesus' remarks are a few sentences long. In fact, even his longest speeches as recorded in the Gospels take only a few minutes to read (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount or the Olivet Discourse). Yet we know that Jesus kept his audiences for hours at a time (e.g. Mk 6:34-36). It is

clear that the writers give us a reduced and summarized presentation of what Jesus said and did.

Third, the distinction between verba and vox is valuable when we look at the way the Bible cites itself, i.e. the way the NT uses the OT. NT citations of the OT are not word for word, even when taking into account translation from Hebrew to Greek...If the Bible can summarize a citation of itself in this way, then to see the same technique in its handling of the word of Jesus should come as no surprise.

*One can present history accurately whether one quotes or summarizes teaching or even mixes the two together. To have accurate summaries of Jesus' teaching is just as historical as to have his actual words; they are just two different perspectives to give us the same thing. All that is required is that the summaries be trustworthy... D. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex," M. Wilkins & J. Moreland, eds. *Jesus Under Fire* (Zondervan 1995), 77-78,88.*

In a later essay, Bock draws a distinction between "accuracy" and "precision", as well as "the principle of

variation and gist". "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?** J. Hoffmeier & D. Magary, eds. (Crossway 2012), 367,71.

Up to a point, these are valid distinctions. There are, however, some additional assumptions that often drive that distinction.

1. One apologetic method is to bracket the doctrine of verbal inspiration and simply treat the Gospels (and Acts) as historical primary sources.

2. However, for some NT scholars, that's not just an apologetic strategy. Even in principle, they really don't make allowance for verbal inspiration. They consider that theological rather than historical. For them, Mark is based on oral tradition, fallible memory, while Matthew and Luke, where they parallel Mark, are dependent on Mark. Likewise, they think Matthew, Luke, and John uses other sources and oral traditions. At best, the Gospels are based on fallible memories. On this view, even the *ipsissima vox* may well be several steps removed from what was available to the Gospel writers.

3. BTW, there's a distinction between oral tradition and oral history. In oral history, you get a report straight from the lips of an eyewitness, whereas an oral tradition is more mediated.

4. In addition, here's how a couple of dictionaries define "paraphrase":

to state something written or spoken in different words, esp. in a shorter and simpler form to make the meaning clearer.

a restatement of a text or passage giving the meaning in another form, as for clearness; rewording.

i) There can be different reasons to paraphrase what a speaker said. Sometimes to cut the dead wood. It isn't always necessary to reproduce an entire speech to convey the basic idea.

Or it may be to forestall misunderstanding. We need to distinguish between the initial audience for something Jesus said and the readers of the Gospels. A reader may lack the full context. So a Gospel author might incorporate an editorial qualification, consistent with what Jesus intended.

ii) The spoken word is more redundant than the written word. So Jesus had occasion to paraphrase himself. Say the same thing in different words.

iii) One problem with the *ipsissima verba/vox* distinction is when that's applied to pithy phrases or sentences like the baptismal formula (Mt 28:19) or the "I am" statements in John's Gospel. There's no need to summarize what Jesus said on those occasions because these are already very simple statements. A pithy phrase or short sentence. How hard is it to remember "I'm the light of the world" or "Baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"? That doesn't overtax human memory.

So what some scholars claim is not that sayings attributed to Jesus are the gist of what he said, but editorial elaborations. An explanatory gloss. That's not reductive but expansive. That, however, is a different principle. It moves in the opposite direction. And it doesn't convey the same idea in different words.

iv) Most listeners don't have verbatim recollection of long sayings. It's implausible to claim that the narrator is giving the gist of what Jesus said in Jn 13-17 if all the narrator has to rely on is fallible memory. I don't see how we're going to preserve historicity without reintroducing verbal inspiration.

A Broad View Of Ipsissima Vox

I'm going to comment on two papers by Dan Wallace. In this post I will comment on a 1999 paper he read at the ETS ("An Apologia for a Broad View Of Ipsissima Vox"). In another post I'll comment on a 2000 paper read at the SBL:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/04/silly-putty-jesus.html>

Wallace never published these two papers. Due to rumors about their content, I was curious, so I asked one of my informants at the NSA to send me copies.

To some extent this may have its background in an internecine battle between classical Dispensational hermeneutics, represented by TMS, and progressive dispensational hermeneutics, represented by DTS. In one footnote, Wallace takes aim at John MacArthur, Robert Thomas, and David Farnell.

Two technical expressions need to be defined at the outset of this paper. Ipsissima verba means "the very words" and ipsissima vox means "the very voice." These expressions are used in New Testament scholarship to refer to the words of Jesus and the ideas that Jesus communicated, respectively...Thus, ipsissima vox means that the concepts go

back to Jesus, but the words do not—at least, not exactly as recorded. The issue of this paper has to do with how broadly we should define ipsissima vox. Many evangelicals take a fairly narrow view of it; I wonder if our definitions adequately handle all of the data.

The meaning of ipsissima verba is self-explanatory. By contrast, ipsissima vox is an artificial expression, modeled on ipsissima verba, as a kind of antithetical parallel. Ipsissima vox is an opaque term that has no evident meaning. Indeed, it's nonsensical. A misnomer. So any definition is purely stipulative.

At the root of this, for many, may be something of a subconscious "docetic bibliology"...Such a view is inadvertently anti-incarnational, for it divorces the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith.

That's a slipshod analogy which needs to be retired from theological discourse. The Incarnation is not a generic principle that you can stretch to cover other things, much less using that slapdash comparison as a benchmark to formulate inspiration.

One of the greatest dichotomies that exists within evangelicalism today is that although we generally try to ground our exegesis in the biblical author's world, our theology is too often rooted in Greek philosophy, rationalism, the Enlightenment, and Scottish Common Sense Realism.

That's a jumbled overgeneralization.

Commentators on Luke or Acts routinely note that Luke patterned his historiographical method after that of Thucydides...Yet Thucydides never pretended to produce the ipsissima verba in his reported speeches...Thus, the historian after whom the most historically sensitive writer in the New Testament patterned his own writings felt no compulsion about getting the words exact—or even getting them close." He regarded faithfulness to be on the level of meaning, not vocabulary... Now if the genre of the gospels is in

keeping historiographically with the best of ancient historians,1 should we not expect the gospel writers to employ at times a broad use of ipsissima vox?...And even if Luke consciously followed a Thucydidian model, the other evangelists, especially John, hardly seem to. On a continuum, Luke would be on one side and John on the other: If Luke is regarded as the most historically sensitive evangelist, John is often considered the most theologically sensitive. Hence, if Luke felt certain liberties in the speeches he recorded, John may well have done so much more.

i) The only evidence that Wallace offers for this claim is a citation from the 1951 edition of Bruce's commentary on the Greek text of Acts. Why doesn't Wallace at least reference the final, third, revised and expanded edition (1990) that Bruce issued shortly before his death? Moreover, that has an important section on the speeches in Acts (§6).

ii) Why assume that Luke is patterned on Thucydides rather than OT historical narratives?

iii) 1C Christians (indeed, Christians throughout church history) had far more interest in having the actual words of Jesus than readers of Thucydides had in knowing what some statesman or general said in reference to the Peloponnesian War, so the comparison is wildly inapt.

iv) In some notable respects, John's Gospel is the most historically situated of all four Gospels.

Much if not most of Jesus' instruction was in Greek...Jesus usually spoke in Greek.

That's an interesting claim. Wallace cites an article by Stanley Porter:

http://www.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/tynbull_1993_44_2_01_porter_jesusteachgreek.pdf

However, Porter's thesis is far more modest.

To avoid unnecessary repetition, I'm now going to provide some extensive excerpts from Wallace's paper, then discuss them en bloc:

The general pattern in each of the following five areas will be to begin with non-dominical material (i.e., material that is either narrative or the words from others besides Jesus) and conclude with

dominical sayings. Prima facie, it seems that they are all of a piece, that the methods of reporting one are not significantly different from the methods of reporting the other.

One of the arguments for Markan priority involves the perception of a relatively exalted Christology in Luke and Matthew in comparison with Mark.²⁶ For example, in Mark 6:5 the evangelist comments on Jesus' actions in his home town, "And he was not able to perform any miracle there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them." In v. 6 Mark adds, "And he was amazed at their unbelief." The parallel in Matt 13:58 softens the statement about the inability of Jesus: "And he did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief." While Mark 6:6 implies the reason for Jesus' inability to perform miracles, Matthew's statement lacks any implication about inability, but adds a specific reason as to why Jesus' miracles were restricted. Similarly, in Mark 1:32, 34a we read that the townspeople brought to Jesus "those who were ill and demon-possessed... and he healed many who were ill from various diseases and cast out many demons..." The implication on the reader

might be that Jesus was unable to cast them all out; Matthew's alteration is thus understandable: in Matt 8:16 the evangelist says, "they brought him many who were demon-possessed, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick." The parallel in Luke (4:40) is similar: "laying hands on each one of them, he healed them." Cf. also Mark 3:10 ("he healed many") with Matt 12:15 ("he healed all"). The exegetical questions evangelical scholars face on such passages are of two sorts: (1) Why didn't or couldn't Jesus heal all and (2) Can Matthew and Luke still be considered trustworthy guides on the *Leben Jesu* in light of such changes? Please understand: I am not saying that Matthew and Luke have somehow twisted the Markan statements; rather, it seems that Mark simply leaves things unnuanced and that Matthew and Luke clarify what was implicit in Mark. We should not take these questions lightly; nevertheless, however we resolve such issues it does seem that the synoptists* hermeneutical license is outside the scope of typical conservative historiographical definitions.

More significant than these examples are three dominical sayings. The first illustration involves the rich young ruler (never so called in any one gospel, though in the second century this pericope got that label). In Mark 10.17-18 we read: "As Jesus was starting out on his way, a man ran up to him, fell on his knees, and said, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.'" The parallel in Matt 19:16-17 has, "Then someone came to him and said, Teacher, what good thing must I do to gain eternal life?' He said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? Only one is good.'" The changes that Matthew makes are subtle, essentially involving the "good" referent: he changes it from a question about Jesus' identity to a question about the kinds of works needed for salvation. Such changes are very minor on the surface level, but seem to involve significant issues of Christology. They are evidently borne out of pious motives to deflect some historical problems that Mark's representation could involve. Part of the change involves Jesus' reply: Rather than "Why do you call me good?"

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus says in Mark 13:32, "But about that day or hour no one knows—neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son—except the Father." In the parallel in Matt 24:36 there is substantial doubt as to whether the words "nor the Son" are authentic. Without them, the text reads: "Now concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, except the Father alone."

More significant than either of the previous two illustrations is the omission of "Abiathar" in Matthew's and Luke's parallels to Mark 2:26...1 will not here go into the theological difficulties that this text poses (nor their likely solutions), as this is the beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

This text does seem to illustrate, however, that some of the word changes in synoptic parallels of the dominical sayings may involve greater hermeneutical latitude than what is envisioned by our normal treatment of ipsissima vox.

The following discussion involves three illustrations that many evangelicals embrace as bona fide additions to the words of Jesus. First, the dominical

aphorism in Mark 2:17, Matt 9:13, and Luke 5:32 is virtually identical in all three synoptics: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."³¹ But Luke adds at the end "to repentance", thus "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Second, in the beatitudes, Luke 6:21 has "those who hunger now" while Matt 5:6 reports Jesus* words as "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

Third, in his discussions with the disciples/Pharisees concerning divorce. Mark 10:11-12 records Jesus as saying, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Luke's version, in a different context (16:18), is briefer: "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery, and the one who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." The problem with the Markan version is that, as far as we know, "the right of a wife to divorce her husband was not recognized by Jewish law."⁴² Thus, since Jesus was speaking to Jewish men, and is addressing in this clause not ethical precept but cultural realities, it

seems difficult to claim that "And if she divorces her husband and marries another she commits adultery" really belongs to Jesus' original utterance. However, since Mark was writing to Gentiles in Rome (where women had been permitted to divorce their husbands for over one hundred years), he is apparently extrapolating a legitimate principle from Jesus' utterance. The situation in Matt 19:9 is similar; there we read, "Now I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery." Matthew does not have the line about a woman divorcing her husband, but does add "except for immorality"—a phrase missing from both Mark's and Luke's accounts.

To sum up: There seems to be evidence in the synoptic gospels that, on occasion, words are deliberately added to the original sayings of Jesus. In a few instances, these words seem to alter somewhat the picture that we would otherwise have gotten from the original utterance; in other instances, the meaning seems to be virtually the same, yet even here a certain amount of exegetical spadework is needed to see this. On the other hand,

there seem to be examples within the synoptics where the words are similar, but the meaning is different.

The conundrum of multiple accusers of Peter's allegiance to Jesus in the night in which the Lord was betrayed, though not dominical sayings, illustrates how the gospel writers sometimes view those with "speaking parts" in the narrative. Matthew and Mark speak of two servant-girls and "some bystanders" as the three accusers (Matt 26:69, 71, 73/Mark 14:66, 69, 70) who prompted Peter's threefold denial of knowing Jesus; Luke speaks of one servant-girl, followed by two men (Luke 22:56, 58, 59); John lists a servant-girl, a group of people, and a male slave (John 18:17, 25, 26). As it stands (assuming that no gospel is necessarily trying to give a strict chronological sequence of events), at least two servant-girls, two men, and one group of people each asked the question and got a response. But that is five questions and five denials. Not only this, but an examination of the location of each denial (e.g., in the courtyard, at the gate, before the fire)

complicates matters and seems to add even more denials.

But does the "speaker alteration" phenomenon happen with dominical sayings? It is possible that it does. In Luke 10:25-28 we read of a certain lawyer who asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer then answers by combining two commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart..." (Deut 6:5), and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). In Matt 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-31 there is a similar incident involving a lawyer.

...while Mark 2:4 implies that a mud thatch roof was torn apart for a paralytic to gain access to Jesus, Luke 5:19 specifically calls it a tiled roof... Others argue that first century Palestine perhaps did have tiled roofs.⁶⁵ Even if this possibility were conceded, it seems unlikely that Peter's house (where the miracle took place) had a tiled roof⁶⁶ A more plausible explanation may be simply that "Luke here 'contextualized' the tradition for Theophilus and provided a thought-for-thought

translation, whereas Mark in his description (cf. Mark 2:4) provided a word-for-word translation." 67

In Mark 3:5 we read that Jesus looked around at the people in the synagogue "with anger", a comment omitted in Matt 12:13 and Luke 6:10. In Mark 1:12 it is claimed that "the Spirit drove him into the wilderness", while both Matthew and Luke soften the statement about the Spirit's role (Matt 4:1 has "Jesus was led up by the Spirit" and Luke 4:1 says. "Jesus... was led by the Spirit." In Mark 4:38 the disciples seem to impugn Jesus' character when they ask, "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" Both Luke and Matthew change this into a simpler statement that involves no such implied rebuke (Luke 8:24 reads, "Master, master, we are perishing" while Matt 8:25 has, "Lord, save [us]! We are perishing"). These examples represent only a small sampling of the kinds of redactional activities that the synoptic writers were engaged in. But even in the examples displayed here, the alterations in meaning seem to be more than what our typical views of historiography allow for.

Regarding dominical material, one of the most well-known and extensive examples involves the Olivet

Discourse. In general, Luke focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem, Matthew on the second coming, and Mark is somewhere in between.

We will not belabor this point, since all New Testament scholars embrace the fundamental proposition that the gospels are not strictly chronological, but involve certain thematic arrangements that would wreak havoc of a simplistic chronological reading of the text...In other words, there seems to be no intent on the part of the evangelists to present a strict chronological sequence of events. Thus, from the different order of the devil's three temptations of Jesus (cf. Matt 4:1-11 with Luke 4:1-13) to the various placements of Jesus' healing miracles (collected especially in Matt 8-9 and generally more scattered in Mark and Luke 70), this point can be easily established.

The question that we are entertaining here is this: Is it possible that some of the sayings of Jesus, and not just the events in his life, are dislocated or even patched together?

1. Before commenting on specific examples, let's consider key assumptions that underly Wallace's approach. Assuming traditional authorship, did the Gospel writers know each other? Presumably, Wallace isn't hostile to traditional authorship. He may even affirm it. Moreover, I think traditional authorship is highly defensible.

Assuming that's the case, Matthew and John undoubtedly knew each other. Indeed, they knew each other quite well, since they spent so much time together during the public ministry of Christ. Since Mark and Luke were both members of the Pauline circle, it's likely that they knew each other. Since Mark's home was located in Jerusalem, where the church was originally headquartered, and since his home as a house-church, it's likely that Mark knew the Eleven when Jerusalem was still their base of operations. Indeed, Mark may well have been an eyewitness to Jesus when he came to Jerusalem, or followed him around Palestine, with the crowd. Finally, it's safe to say that Luke made a point to hunt down the disciples. So it's likely that all four Gospel writers knew each other.

That means there was probably a fair amount of information-sharing before they ever wrote their Gospels. Cross-pollination from many conversations before they ever wrote their Gospels.

As a result, some Synoptic parallels, including Synoptic variants, could well be based on their recollection of conversations they had with each other. In that event, it's dubious to infer that Synoptic variants are redactional. Rather, Synoptic variants may be due to their remembering the gist of what they told each other.

2. Assuming that Matthew and Luke read Mark, or that John read one or more of the Synoptics, this doesn't imply that

variations in parallel accounts are due to conscious redaction. It's quite unlikely that they were writing with the text of another Gospel at hand. Rather, it's much more likely that they'd be working from memory—their recollection of what they read. In that case, differences in wording, sequence, &c. are due to the fact that they remember the gist of what they read. They write differently because they remember differently.

It's ironic that Wallace and other NT scholars lay so much emphasis on remembering the *gist* of what a speaker said, yet it doesn't seem to occur to them that the same dynamic applies to reading a book. Luke could well get some information from Mark in person. But suppose he got some information from Mark's Gospel. That doesn't mean that when Luke writes his own Gospel, he's constantly referencing the text of Mark. Rather, he paraphrases Mark because *memory* is paraphrastic. The way we remember the content of a book is to subconsciously make a mental summary of the content. That's not a *literary* process. *Memory* is editorial. *Memory* is selective. *Memory* condenses. *Memory* rewords.

Different people remember different things, as well as some of the same things. If you go to a movie with a friend, then discuss the movie afterwards, different things stand out for different viewers. You're describing the same movie, but particular scenes significant to you may be insignificant to your friend. You have different interests.

3. There's a basic difference between reporting a speech and reporting an event. When reporting an event, a reporter has to verbalize what he saw. The event is nonverbal. But when reporting a speech, the speech, by virtue of being speech, is already verbalized.

The fact that Matthew, Luke, and/or John may not reproduce how Mark worded the description of an event doesn't create any presumption that they exercise the same license when reporting a speech or conversation by Jesus. Suppose Matthew, Mark, and/or John saw the same event, and one of them wrote it down first. Even if Matthew or John read Mark, there's no reason they'd feel bound to reproduce his verbal description of the event if they were independent witnesses to the same event. It's only natural for them to record what they saw in their own words. Having read Mark, that may have some influence on how they write about the same event, but that doesn't control how they remember and report it. These variations aren't presumptively due to editing Mark. Rather, if they saw it for themselves, then you'd expect some variation.

4. Sometimes the order may vary because they don't know the original order. For instance, Jesus was alone in the wilderness when Satan tempted him. Only he knows the order of temptations. If he tells the disciples about his experience in the wilderness, he doesn't necessarily narrate the temptations in a particular order. Since they weren't there, the sequence is flexible. Even if (ex hypothesi) the disciples were with Jesus in the wilderness, the order of the temptations might be inaudible or invisible to an outside observer. What if the devil appeared to Jesus in a series of visions?

5. Apropos (4), Mark and Luke may arrange some material topically, not because they're rearranging the original sequence, but because they don't know the original sequence. They don't know when and where Jesus said this and that.

6. Regarding divorce, in the cosmopolitan context of the Roman Empire, there's no reason to assume Jesus only

spoke to Jewish audiences. We'd expect gentiles as well as Jews to be in the crowds that followed him around. Parts of Palestine were predominantly gentile. Greeks and Romans lived in Jerusalem, along with Jews.

What about intermarriage between Jews and gentiles? Would Jewish law or Roman law govern divorce in those cases?

7. Regarding the tile roof, I don't object to the possibility that Luke uses an architectural term more familiar to his gentile audience. I am, however, amused by the assumption that Peter's house must have had a uniform style.

Two years before I was born, my parents bought a waterfront property with a log beach cabin. Then, when my mother was pregnant with me, they made an addition in a completely different style. And my parents did a lot of the construction on their own. Then a few years after that, then had another addition, by professional carpenters. As a result, I was raised in a composite house in three different styles with three different roofs. Redaction critics would have a field day.

8. Regarding Peter's multiple accusers, consider a family reunion. There are rotating conversation partners. Repetition as a different relative asks the same question. ("So, how are the kids?" "How's your job?"). Conversations take place in the living room, dining room, kitchen, man cave, backyard.

Suppose, after they went home they made diary entries about the family reunion. Comparing diary entries, it would be hard for someone who wasn't there to sort it out. Heck, it would be hard for someone who was there to sort it out since he can only be in one room at a time, having one

conversation at a time. But that doesn't mean the diary entries are contradictory. Rather, the social interaction was complicated.

Silly Putty Jesus

At a 2000 meeting of the SBL, Dan Wallace read a paper ("Ipsissima Vox and the Seven Words from the Cross: A Test Case for John's Use of the Tradition"). Wallace's 2000 address may well be building on his 1999 address, so they go together. Hence, this is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/04/a-broad-view-of-ipsissima-vox.html>

Somebody might object that I'm quoting and commenting on unpublished presentations. However, the Christian faith is not supposed to operate like a secret society, where there's one message for the rank-and-file, and a different message for favored initiates. Christianity is a public religion. It's the same message for everyone, believers and unbelievers alike. There is no *disciplina arcana*. Christianity isn't supposed to have a dichotomy between what is said from the pulpit, for popular consumption, and what the preacher really believes—which he only shares with fellow elites.

My hypothesis is that instead of seven discrete words from the cross, the gospels actually record four. This reduction comes through two avenues: one text-critical and one redactional. That is to say, I regard Luke's first saying [Lk 23:34] as a later addition, and I take the last two words in John as this

evangelist's version of two of the utterances found in the synoptic tradition.

From what I've read, Lk 23:34 may well be a scribal gloss or scribal interpolation. I don't have a problem with that part of Wallace's address.

Narrative plot. John's plot is the most highly developed of all the gospels.

i) I suppose you could put it that way, but it's misleading. Too literary. Why not say John often has the most historical detail, including a fuller chronology?

Since so much Scripture is narrative, it can be convenient to borrow terms that drama critics and literary use to analyze plays and novels. But we need to maintain the distinction between fiction and nonfiction.

ii) This goes to a larger issue. Because the Bible is a text, Bible scholars have a textual orientation. That's legitimate and necessary up to a point. There are, however, different kinds of texts. John's Gospel and **PILGRIM'S PROGRESS** are both texts. In addition, they are both narratives. However, John's Gospel is referential in a way that **PILGRIM'S PROGRESS** is not. As a fictional story, **PILGRIM'S PROGRESS** is self-enclosed world.

By contrast, a text like John's Gospel originates in real-world events. A witness to history. John's Gospel is a window, not a painting. The narrative isn't like the composition of a painting, which is self-referential. The narrative points outside itself.

There has been much discussion, from the second century to the twentieth, as to how these seven words should be arranged.² Those who are prone to see them all as authentic dominical sayings still have some difficulty in the proper chronological sequence, though the most common arrangement is 2, 3, 5, 1, 6, 7, 4. Our point here is that the assumption of authenticity is almost always the foundation on which seven sayings are in view.

The fourth word, the final word from the cross, can now be examined. Both Matthew and Mark record this final cry as simply an inarticulate "loud cry." Luke says that Jesus proclaimed, "Into your hands I commit my spirit" and John has "it is finished" as the final utterance...Luke's and John's final sayings — "Into your hands I commit my spirit" and "it is finished" — are victorious words of the one who accomplished the task set before him. What Matthew and Mark record only as an inarticulate cry, Luke and John give form to. Luke's "into your

hands I commit my spirit” is probably closest to the tradition, while John’s “it is finished” transforms this into the language of accomplishment that is a subtheme of John’s gospel, as we saw earlier.

We need to guard against treating Jesus' words from the cross as literature. For instance, does someone dying know when he's about to die? Someone who's dying may sense that the end is near. He may know that he could expire at any moment. He may feel himself slipping away, at which point he assumes that this is the moment of death, and he may say something that's appropriate to go out on.

Yet there may be several moments like that, where he passes in and out of consciousness. The fact that he says something that sounds like he intended that to be the very last thing he says doesn't mean that's the very last thing he says, for depending on his condition, he may be intermittently lucid. The words on the cross aren't scripted. Jesus isn't a character in a play who has the perfect closing statement to round out that scene. Not unless you think the Gospels are inspirational hagiographies.

***My proposal is this: the Johannine Jesus’
“I thirst” (John 19:28) is a dynamic
equivalent transformation of “My God,
my God, why have you forsaken me?”***

Designations like the Johannine Jesus can be innocuous descriptors for the record of Jesus in the respective Gospels,

but it becomes dangerous when that means each Gospel has a designer Jesus.

A flat reading of the language here not only misses a Leitmotiv in John but also necessarily imports a meaning that is foreign to this evangelist..Thirst in John fundamentally involves a double entendre.19 To thirst in John means to be devoid of the Spirit, to stand in the place of the sinner, to be abandoned by God.

Although John's Gospel contains irony and double entendres, that's context-dependent. And the fact that John uses theological metaphors about thirst and water doesn't mean you turn every episode using that imagery into a parable. In John's Gospel, there's real water, like the body of water used by disciples of John the Baptist. There's real wine. Real bread. Sometimes Jesus is really hungry and thirsty. John's Gospel isn't an allegory like the **INFERNO** or **PILGRIM'S PROGRESS**. It's not a fictional plot with a set of internal relations.

But why would John feel the need to make such a substitution? As many authors note, the cross in John is seen as Christ's moment of glory—even of his

enthronement. “Jesus hangs on the cross not as a sufferer, but as the hidden ‘king’...” 27 But more on that later. Suffice it to say here that, as Brown notes, “the theme of Ps 22:[1] which has Jesus forsaken by God would be irreconcilable with Johannine christology.” 28 Thus, instead of screaming out²⁹ the question of his abandonment by God with a great voice, the Johannine Jesus makes a statement that is nevertheless pregnant with the same spiritual ramifications as Psalm 22:1.

On Wallace's interpretation, the four Gospels reflect divergent Christologies. John crosses out Ps 22:1 because the Johannine Jesus wouldn't say something like that—even if that's what Jesus actually said. Wallace is driving a wedge between the historical Jesus and the Johannine Jesus. Crafting a Christ of faith who doesn't match up with the Jesus of history.

In Matthew-Mark, when Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1, people think he's calling for Elijah to come and save him (a common

Jewish expectation). But Matthew-Mark do not make clear why, therefore, wine is then offered to Jesus. John not only does not mention Psalm 22:1, he also does not mention Elijah. His treatment of Elijah, in fact, is more subdued than that of the synoptic gospels (occurring only in the Jewish interrogation of John the Baptist in chapter one). Further, to introduce Elijah's name here would be to diminish Jesus as being in control of his own circumstances. John consistently paints a portrait of Jesus in which he is seen at all times to be the master of his own fate, in complete control of his own destiny. Even a perception of a cry for Elijah might disrupt that picture.

This reduces the Johannine Jesus to a storybook character who only says what the narrator allows him to say. The narrator composes speeches which he puts in the mouth of Jesus. That's a classically and quintessentially liberal view of the Gospels. And at that juncture the canonical Gospels blend into the apocryphal Gospels.

However, there is another thematic layer in John that would seem to prevent the evangelist from saying this kind of thing: the Spirit is given to the disciples in John, not to God. And the Spirit could not be given until Jesus was glorified (John 7:39). Thus, the glorification of Jesus, seen in his death and articulated by his last utterance of “it is finished,” is the very thing that permits the release of the Spirit.

Is the Holy Spirit trapped inside the body of Jesus? Can the Spirit only escape when the host dies?

The last breath is simply an idiom for death, based on the practical association between breathing, expiration, and death.

Second, John’s method opens up some other possibilities to ponder. Is, for example, John 15:1-17 (the story of the vine and the branches) a transformation of the parable of the soils— perhaps to make the organic connection between Jesus and his followers explicit

(something that the original parable could not do)? There are many parallels between John 15 and the parable of the soils on a deep theological level, though the surface of course looks quite different.⁴³ John 15 has come as close to a parable as anything in the Fourth Gospel; there is thus the possibility that it is a repackaged parable.

Yes, there are some conceptual affinities between the parable of the sower and the parable of the true vine. There's no reason to think that means the Johannine narrator rewrote the Synoptic parable of the sower. Rather, it's much more natural to think Jesus used the same basal agricultural metaphor to compose two different parables.

And what about John 14:1-3? If we start with John's basic realized eschatology and his focus on believers as opposed to outsiders, what remains of the Olivet Discourse is present and heavenly comfort to believers.

Is Wallace suggesting that the author of John rewrote the Olivet Discourse, then put that speech on the lips of Jesus? Wallace is treating Jesus like a character in novel or play

who says what the novelist or dramatist makes the character say. A Jesus who's the literary artifact of the narrator. A Jesus who only exists and acts in the self-contained universe of the fictional plot.

Notice how Wallace says you can keep extending this principle to other dominical discourses in the Gospel of John. This is like the Jesus of the apocryphal Gospels. A Jesus who's the product of the author's theological imagination. A mouthpiece of the author's agenda. Instead of the Johannine narrator as a witness to an objective historical figure, the Johannine Jesus is a personification of the narrator. Yes, it may be based on a true story, but it undergoes legendary embellishment. Historical fiction, mixing fact and fancy.

Healing touch

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. **32** And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. **33** And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. **34** And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” **35** And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly (Mk 7:31-35).

22 And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. **23** And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” **24** And he looked up and said, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.” **25** Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly (Mk 8:22-25).

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6 Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7 and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing (Jn 9:1-7).

This is striking for several reasons:

- i)** Jesus could simply willed people to be healed, without resort to any means whatsoever. So why are there occasions when he heals by touch?
- ii)** Likewise, why the use of saliva on three different occasions?
- iii)** Commentators find this a bit puzzling. The fact that we have to guess at why Jesus did it this way indicates that Gospel writers aren't inventing stories to illustrate theological claims, for had that been the case, we'd expect the symbolism to be more overt. Rather, they record these

details because that's how it happened, and not due to the theological significance, if any, of the details.

iv) I don't claim to know the reason, but these incidents are recorded for our benefit, so we should explore the possible reasons. One factor may be that sick and disabled people often suffer from physical isolation. People are more likely to avoid them. Humans are social creatures, and touch is extremely important in human relationships. By physically engaging them, at such a personal level, Jesus is affirming their worth.

v) In the first two examples, the narrator mentions that Jesus tried to heal the individuals as privately as possible. One reason might be that he's not treating them like circus animals. He's not trying to prove anything to others by healing them. Rather, he has the sensitivity to heal them in private because he cares about them. They likely already felt stigmatized, and by healing them away from public view, Jesus shields them from the shame of prying eyes and gossipy tongues. Their suffering is nobody's business. In that regard, notice how Jesus restored the daughter of Jairus. Where possible, he sometimes prefers to do these things in a more secluded setting.

vi) Because these individuals suffer from sensory deprivation (deaf, blind), Jesus takes a tactile approach. Two can't see him act while a third can't hear him speak, so he comes down to their level, entering their blinkered experience. Expressing solidarity. Leading them out of their predicament by going with them into their predicament.

vii) These gestures reinforce the fact that the healing comes from Jesus. A chain of physical continuity. From his mouth to their mouth, his hands to their ears and eyes.

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.

<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.

Fireflies

I'd like to consider some stock objections to the historicity of the Gospels, using the Victorian art critic John Ruskin as a comparative reference frame.

1. ARGUMENT FROM SILENCE

A stock objection is that if something is only mentioned in one Gospel, or if something is mentioned in the Gospels but not in extrabiblical sources, then it's fictional. Now the argument from silence is sometimes compelling provided that there's an expectation that if someone existed or something happened, there'd be an extant record of that, or that the writing in question would mention it. Likewise, that one Gospel writer may suppress a statement from his source. So goes the argument.

i) Although Ruskin was, among other things, a social critic who wrote extensively about politics, his autobiography (**PRAETERITA**) fails to mention Queen Victoria, even though his life spanned her entire reign.

ii) Ruskin knew Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll). In his autobiography, Ruskin mentions that he used to visit the Liddell daughters, including Alice Liddell, who was the inspiration for the fictional character by that name in Carroll's two storybooks. Yet in the autobiography, Ruskin never mentions Dodgson, or mentions the relationship between Alice Liddell and the storybooks.

iii) In his autobiography, Ruskin mentions his "friend Rossetti". Actually, there were several family members with

that surname. He's alluding to Dante Rossetti, but he fails to mention his brother William or their famous sister Christina.

iv) In his autobiography, he fails to mention other literary contemporaries like Kipling, Tennyson, and Mary Ann Evans (aka George Eliot).

v) In his evangelical youth, Ruskin was friend of Spurgeon, but he fails to mention him in his autobiography. That may be because Ruskin lost his evangelical faith and preferred not to mention that part of his life.

vi) Ruskin fails to mention John Everett Millais in his autobiography, even though he mentions two other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: Dante Rossetti and Holman Hunt. As an art critic who championed the Pre-Raphaelites, how could he fail to mention Millais?

The obvious explanation is that Ruskin's wife (Effie Gray) had an affair with Millais. And the reason for the affair was Ruskin's failure to consummate the marriage, which gave rise to a sordid divorce settlement. Ruskin passes over this episode in silence, not because it was unimportant, but because it was such painful and humiliating experience. He didn't want posterity to remember him for *that!*

But all these people existed. All these incidents happened. And even when Ruskin is being discreet, he's not redacting a source. *He's* the source!

2. COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES (conflation)

Michael Licona has classified a number of (alleged) compositional devices in Plutarch, including expansion,

conflation, and displacement. Compare that to the following description in Ruskin's autobiography:

I had with me, besides Couttet, a young servant who became of great use to me in succeeding years...But in 1842 another young housemaid came, Anne Hobbs,² whose brother John Hobbs, called always at Denmark Hill, George, to distinguish him, in vocal summons, from my father and me, became my body servant in the same year, and only left me to push his higher fortune in 1854.³ I could not say before, without interrupting graver matters, that the idea of my not being able to dress myself began at Oxford, where it was thought becoming in a gentleman-commoner to have a squire to manage his scout. My good, honest, uninteresting Thomas Hughes, being vigilant that I put my waistcoat on right side outwards, went abroad with us, instead of Salvador; my father, after the first two journeys, being quite able to do his courier's work himself. When we came home in '42, Hughes wanted to promote himself to some honour or other in the public-house line, and George Hobbs, a sensible and merry-minded youth of eighteen, came in his stead.

Couttet and he sat in the back seat of the light-hooded barouche which I took for this Italian journey; the hood seldom raised, as I never travelled in bad weather unless surprised by it; and the three of us walked that April morning up the 1

In these, and other such favorite verses, George Herbert, as aforesaid, was to me at this time, had has been since, useful beyond every other teacher, not that I ever attained to any likeness of feeling, but at least knew where I was myself wrong, or cold, in comparison.

A little more force was also put on Bible study at this time, because I held myself responsible for George's¹ tenets as well as my own, and wished to set him a discreet example; he being well-disposed, and given to my guidance, with no harm as yet in any of his ways. So I read my chapter with him morning and evening; and if there were no English church on Sundays, the Morning Service, Litany and all, very reverently;² after which we enjoyed ourselves, each in our own way, in the afternoons, George being always free, and Couttet, if he chose; but he had little taste for the Sunday promenades in a town, and was glad if I would take him with me to

*gather flowers, or carry stones. I never, until this time, had thought of travelling, climbing, or sketching on the Sunday: the first infringement of this rule by climbing the isolated peak above Gap, with both Couttet and George, after our morning service, remains a weight on my conscience to this day. But it was thirteen years later before I made a sketch on Sunday.*³

[It was Harriet and Lucy Tovey whom Ruskin installed in the management of his model tea-shop: see Vol. XXVIII. pp. xviii., 204, 661.] ² *[Daughter of Anne Stone (Mrs. Hobbes, as the name should be spelt), who had been with the family from 1821 to 1824. Anne Hobbes became maid to Ruskin's mother, and married Mr. George Allen in 1856.]* ³ *[He went to Australia, became a J.P., a Police Magistrate, and member of the Lands Department in New South Wales. He died in 1892.]*

d ¹ *["Hobbs, not Herbert," as Ruskin noted in his copy.]* ² *[See the Epilogue to Letters to the Clergy, where Ruskin says that for thirty years of his life he used to read the Service through to his servant and himself (Vol. XXXIV. pp. 217-218).]* ³

i) If we didn't have the background information, some NT critics would conclude that John Hobbs and "George" Hobbs were two different people, maybe brothers, whom the narrator conflated. But as Ruskin explains, there were, at that time, three different "Johns" living under the same roof: John Ruskin, John James Ruskin (père), and John Hobbs. so they dubbed the new manservant (who became Ruskin's valet) "George" to avoid confusion.

ii) In addition, notice how Ruskin begins by referring to "George" Hobbs, then abruptly shifts to George Herbert, then abruptly reverts to "George" Hobbs. If we didn't have the full context, some NT critics would conclude that the narrator confounded two different people.

3. COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES (expansion, displacement)

Consider the following descriptions of fireflies, which Ruskin witnessed in Italy:

I have just come in from an evening walk among the stars and fireflies. One hardly knows where one has got to between them, for the flies flash, as you know, exactly like stars on the sea, and the impression to the eye is as if one was walking on water. I was not the least prepared for their intense brilliancy. They dazzled me like fireworks, and it was very heavenly to see them floating field beyond field, under the shadowy vines (1845).

One evening, as I came late into Siena, the fireflies were flying high on a stormy sirocco wind,--the stars themselves no brighter, and all their host seeming, at moments, to fade as the insects faded (1866).

Last night the air was quite calm, the stars burning like torches all over the sky, the fireflies flying all about, literally brighter than the stars. One came into the railroad carriage and shone clear in full lamplight, settling above my head, but the look of them on the mid-sky above the stars was marvelous, all the while bright sheet-lightning playing on the Florentine mountains. We got here soon after ten, and found it cool and delicious (1870).

The fireflies are almost awful in the twilight, as bright as candles, flying in and out of the dark cypresses (1870).

...while 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, make the whole scene look anything rather than celestial (1870).

I last saw Charles Norton, under the same arches where Dante saw it [the Fountain of Trevi]. 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 before the Gate of Siena's heart, with its golden words, "Cor magis tibia Sena pandit," and the fireflies everywhere in the sky and cloud rising and falling mixed with the lightning, and more intense than the stars (1889).

i) If we didn't have dated sources, it would be natural to infer that these were all describing the same event, yet he hadn't met Charles Norton in 1845—while some others describe a meeting in 1870. If you return to the same place during the same season, you may witness repeatable natural scenes.

ii) Notice how Ruskin varies the language, imagery, and details in his four different descriptions of the same event. Some NT critics would infer these reflect different underlying sources, or narrators redacting a common source.

iii) In addition, there's a fair amount of backtracking in his autobiography. That's because memory is associative rather than chronological. He begins by writing about his boyhood, then adulthood. But the very process of writing about his life jogs his memory, triggering afterthoughts. After writing about adulthood, he adds stuff from his boyhood. There were no word processors back then, making it too cumbersome to rewrite everything so that all the addenda are in the right chronological order. The anachronisms aren't compositional device, but reflect the order in which events are recollected.

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.

Illeism

According to traditional attribution, at least two (Matthew, John) and arguably three (plus Mark) of the four Gospels were written by eyewitnesses. (I'd say Mark was probably a partial eyewitness.) Yet all four Gospels were written in the third-person, which is often taken to be evidence that they were not by eyewitnesses. John is a partial exception: at a few strategic points in the account, the narrator explicitly identifies himself as a participant.

Yet there's a literary convention in ancient historiography where an authorial observer adopts the voice of a third-person narrator even when—or *especially* when—describing events of which he has firsthand knowledge. The technical term for this historiographical convention is illeism.

Therefore, the use of third-person narration carries no presumption that it wasn't written by an eyewitness. Illeism has certain motivations (see below).

Hecataeus of Miletus (ca. 550-476 BC) begins his work by identifying himself in the third person... Herodotus (484-425) also conveys his representation of history in the third person...Mole writes that "the effect is double: the naming suggests that Herodotus himself will be in an important figure in his History (as indeed he is); the use of the third person suggests objectivity and detachment.

Thudycides (ca. 460-398 BC) begins his work *The Peloponnesian War* with the third-person self-reference...Thucydides also presents himself in the third person in order to present himself as a character within the history in which he was a participant...Grant writes that Thucydides "seeks to emphasize his objectivity by writing of himself in the third person, like Julius Caesar".

Xenophon (ca 430-350 BC), a student of Socrates, records in the *Anabasis* his march with the Ten Thousand as they travel into and back from Persia in an effort to aid Cyrus. Like Thucydides he refers to himself in the third person when referring to his own participation in events.

In the Hellenistic period, Polybius (ca. 200-118 BC) prefers the use of the third person for self-reference when describing events in which he is a participant. Campbell notes that "as with Thucydides, the effect of narrating Polybius's participation in events in the third person is to distance the author/actor from the narrator and, in so doing, to increase the sense of historical objectivity".

Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) refers to himself in the third person throughout his work Gallic War... Josephus (AD 37 to ca. 100), in War of the Jews, presents himself as a participant in the historical events conveyed by referring to himself in the third person. **R. Elledge, Use of the Third Person for Self-Reference by Jesus and Yahweh: A Study of Illeism in the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Its Implications (T&T Clark 2017), 17-21.**

The Gospels and the Gettysburg Address

Bart Ehrman harps on how we should read the Gospels horizontally as well as vertically. We should compare parallel accounts. When we do, we notice differences. Of course, that's hardly a novel observation.

Redaction criticism typically attributes variations to theologically motivated editorial changes. That may *occasionally* be true, but that's a problem when it's treated as the default explanation.

To take a comparison, the Gettysburg Address is one of the most famous speeches in American history. And it's multiply-attested in contemporary sources. We have copies in Lincoln's own hand, as well as transcriptions by newspaper stenographers who heard the speech live. Yet there are variations in our sources:

Abraham Lincoln gave his famous Gettysburg Address at a public cemetery dedication 151 years ago today. But was the mention of God really taken out of the famous speech by the president himself?

No one will really know for sure, since audio of the event wasn't recorded. That technology was another two score years away in the future.

But there are at least nine versions of the Gettysburg Address from the time period, with

some in Lincoln's handwriting. All are slightly different, and not all accounts agree that Lincoln mentioned God during the 270-word, two-minute speech.

Lincoln was invited as guest speaker at the Gettysburg cemetery event as a courtesy, and it wasn't entirely expected he would attend. The famed orator Edward Everett was the featured speaker.

Lincoln and his staff arrived on the day before the event, and Lincoln compared notes with Everett. The president also worked on his speech that night.

The Gettysburg Address itself is not in question. The Associated Press and three newspapers transcribed the remarks for publication. Lincoln gave his draft copy and a copy written right after the speech to his secretaries.

In later days, Lincoln wrote out three other copies as mementos, giving us a total of nine versions of the speech. All nine are different.

The gist of all the versions is the same, and all the versions contain the quotes widely taught in history

class.

However, the first two versions, in Lincoln's own handwriting, omit the mention of God in the conclusion.

"The nation, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people by the people for the people, shall not perish from the earth," Lincoln wrote in his first two versions. Later versions added the word "under God" so that the sentence reads, "the nation, under God, shall ..."

The inclusion of God in the speech is perhaps the most significant difference among the versions. The fifth version of the speech, which was signed and dated by Lincoln, was considered the "final" version and included "under God" in its last sentence.

But is that what Lincoln actually said on the battlefield?

In "The Collected Works Of Abraham Lincoln: Volume 7," the dispute seems to be settled.

The Associated Press report of the speech, written by Joseph Gilbert, along with reports from newspapers in Philadelphia and Chicago, all agree

that Lincoln said “under God” as his speech concluded.

In that book’s footnotes, it’s explained that the Philadelphia Inquirer and Chicago Tribune had the words in its independent accounts.

“These papers corroborate Gilbert's version, however, in having the phrase ‘under God,’ which Lincoln must have used for the first time as he spoke,” the book says.

It also appears that Lincoln used the Associated Press version as a reference point when he wrote out the third, fourth, and fifth versions.

A fourth printed version, from the Boston Advertiser, shows that Lincoln used the words “under God” as the address concluded.

<https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/did-abraham-lincoln-omit-god-from-the-gettysburg-address>

How is that possible? One explanation is the difference between the spoken word and the written word. Some speakers write out their speech in advance. That's their script.

But when they speak before a live audience, they may depart from their prepared remarks. In addition, if they make copies from memory, they may introduce further variations, in part because they don't recall exactly how they worded it the first time, and because they're not even attempting to reproduce the original wording verbatim. They reserve the right to paraphrase their own statements. What matters isn't the precise phraseology, but communicating the same ideas.

In principle, all the variant accounts of Lincoln's speech could be authentic. They could all be his own words. He casually reworded what he said, when he delivered the speech and when he made copies of his own speech.

The eyewitness pool

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, **2** just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, **3** it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, **4** that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Lk 1:1-4).

6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:6).

What was the total eyewitness pool? Here's an estimate:

Assuming the Gospel of Mark (our earliest Gospel) was composed around thirty years or so after Jesus' life and ministry (ca. AD 65), how many eyewitnesses would have been alive to consult during the research and writing process? And beyond this, how many would have been alive when the last Gospel (John=AD 90?) was written?

Mclver brilliantly looked at the latest research in population size around Galilee, Jerusalem, and the other villages and cities Jesus visited during his ministry in antiquity, and what life expectancy was in the first century in Roman-Palestine. He concluded there would have been approximately 60,000 potential eyewitnesses who saw or experienced Jesus in person. Mclver claims that “[o]f the 60,000 or so potential eyewitnesses, between 18,000 and 20,000 would be still alive after thirty years, and between 600 and 1,100 after sixty years.” (4) He concludes the book by stating that “...as is evident from the life tables, some surviving eyewitnesses would have been available to the Evangelists to consult had they so wished.” (5) This is very important information for anyone interested in the possibility that the Gospels were either composed by eyewitnesses or depended on the tradition of eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry. Assuming the standard dating for the composition of the Gospels (Mark=AD 65, John=AD 90) it would appear there were in fact many eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry to consult if the Gospel writers desired.

We actually have a quotation from the work of an early Christian apologist named Quadratus (ca. 70-130 AD) (6) who claimed that eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry (people who were healed by Jesus) actually lived well into the later part of the first century:

"But the works of our Savior were always present, for they were true; those who were healed and those who rose from the dead were seen not only when they were healed and when they were raised, but were constantly present, and not only while the Savior was living, but even after he had gone they were alive for a long time, so that some of them survived to our own time." Greg Monette,
"Question: Were Eyewitnesses Alive for Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to Consult?"

Judas and Jesus

In my experience, Judas is a neglected evidence for the historical Jesus. He figures in all four Gospels as the betrayer of Jesus. But why would the Gospel writers invent such a character? Or why would primitive Christian tradition invent such a character, whom the Gospel writers then incorporate into their narratives?

Sure, betrayal is a common theme in fiction. A classic example is the consigliere who has the goods on the crime boss, and turns state's evidence.

Even if, for argument's sake, Gospel writers might invent a fall-guy as a plot device, what would motivate them to make the him a member of Christ's inner circle? Wouldn't that invite the suspicion that Judas knew something damaging about Jesus?

So Judas is the ultimate example of hostile testimony. He's not somebody the Gospel writers have any incentive to fabricate. Not a fictional character. It satisfies the criterion of embarrassment.

Memoirs and memories

1. One objection to the historicity of the Gospels is the argument from silence. Here's an example:

<https://www.michaeljkruger.com/gospel-critics-and-the-argument-from-silence/>

The argument from silence can be a legitimate and powerful argument. It all depends on whether there's a reasonable expectation that if something happened, we'd have a record of that, or multiple records. There are different explanations for a writer's failure to mention a significant event he knew about, even if it's relevant to his writing.

2. Paradoxically, a writer might not mention something, not because he's ignorant, or because it didn't happen, but because it did happen and he's knows all about it. For instance, no one knew Dante Rossetti better than his brother Michael. Yet, as I recall, Michael said that being his brother disqualified him from writing an autobiography of Dante. That's not because Michael didn't know enough about his brother, but because he knew too much, and he was protecting Dante's posthumous reputation. Likewise, Warnie Lewis is in invaluable source of information about his brother, but there are lots of sensitive details he left out of the public eye.

3. Here's another reason a writer might fail to mention something significant. When I was about 40, I wrote a memoir. It was a way to take stock of my life up to that point. Paradoxically, it's quite possible, when writing an autobiography, to inadvertently leave out significant incidents, not because you forgot, but because you remember too much. Our memories are stored in the

subconscious. Although we can summon memories to conscious awareness, it's impossible to be conscious of more than a tiny fraction of what we remember. So when you're writing a memoir, it can be difficult to screen out the plethora of memories you don't want to write about in order to focus on the memories you do want to write about. There's no direct way to filter the search parameters so that you just pull up the memories you want to write about. There's a huge amount of mental sifting and sorting required to write an autobiography. It's very easy for significant incidents to slip your mind in the writing process, because human powers of concentration are so limited.

4. In addition, some memories aren't just a matter of direct recollection, but inferential reconstruction. I'll take an example from my own life. As a boy, I had a dog I was very fond of. I vividly remember the day I got her, and I vividly remember the day I had her euthanized. I have no direct recollection of the date, month, or year for either event.

Because memory is associative, the trick is to link a memory with another memory that has some datable or broadly datable information. I have a rough idea of when I euthanized my dog, because that was after a trip to Europe.

I remember that I got my dog on a summer day. My parents drove to a residential neighborhood in Seattle. My dog was in the front yard. As I recall, this was near Cornish.

And that makes sense because my mother may well have gotten the dog from one of her teaching colleagues. She founded a school for the fine and performing arts on the Eastside, and the teachers she hired would naturally be drawn from Cornish and the UDub.

But what about the year? I still don't know for sure, but I have a ballpark idea. It took me years to get a bead on that.

Recently, I remembered that even though my grandmother was not a dog person, she appreciated my dog because my dog was very protective. That's back when my grandmother was living in town and came to visit us every so often.

But around the time I started junior high, she moved across the mountains to Yakima. And how do I know when that happened? Because I later read some dated correspondence between my mother and my grandmother that mentioned a time when we went to visit her. That means I must have gotten my dog at least a couple of years before I started junior high.

Yet it's just a fluke that I have enough random, contextual bits of information to piece it together. That illustrates how hard it can be to nail down the chronology of naturally memorable events we know from firsthand experience.

5. I'd add that the Internet has made it easier to pin down or flesh out certain details in our recollection. But, of course, biographers and autobiographers didn't have that supplementary source of information for most of human history.

6. The historicity of the Gospels is frequently defended on the grounds that the writers were deliberately selective. And that's no doubt true to some degree. But for reasons I've just given, eyewitness testimony can be inadvertently selective as well. Silence, per se, carries no presumption that the writer wasn't a firsthand observer. Ironically, he may unintentionally omit significant incidents because recollection is so indiscriminate.

The art of the autobiography

The canonical Gospels are often classified as Greco-Roman bio. How the Gospels are classified goes to the question of their historicity. And that can go either way. If you classify them as historical by literary genre, then by definition they're historical. Or you might classify them as historical based on the contents and corroboration.

There are, however, many different kinds of biographical and autobiographical writing. To my knowledge, this is a severely neglected topic in Gospel criticism. This is my off-the-cuff taxonomy. There may be other examples I've overlooked since I haven't done in-depth research on the issue. My immediate purpose isn't to peg the Gospels according to this taxonomy, but to briefly explore how Gospel criticism typically oversimplifies the range of genre.

1. Critical biography

An academic tome intended to be excruciatingly exhaustive. Usually about a public figure. Documents every detail as equally important. Nothing too trivial to escape notice. A reference work for fellow historians or diehard fans.

2. Official propaganda

Stuff churned out by court historians to embellish the image of the glorious leader.

3. Hagiography

An image-conscious autobiography designed to control how he will be remembered by posterity. A crafted reputation.

4. Hatchet-job

An anti-hagiography. Tries to debunk someone's reputation. Dig up dirt. Peddle rumor, gossip, and innuendo. A. N. Wilson's biography of C. S. Lewis is a case in point.

5. Nice guys finish last

In the entertainment industry, polishing your bad boy/bad girl credentials is a career booster. The star goes out of their way to be sensational and scandalous.

6. Exposé

Designed to settle old scores with political enemies or professional rivals.

7. Apologetic

Defending one's reputation and the pristine purity of one's motives. Examples include Josephus and Newman's **APOLOGIA**.

8. The Wit and Wisdom

A subdivision of hagiography, with catchy quips and one-liners

8. Confessional

Often documents the before and after of a dramatic conversion experience. Classic examples include Augustine

and Bunyan.

However, it can also be by infidels who aspire to authenticity and transparency (e.g. Sartre).

9. Underdog

Heroic tale of somebody who overcomes adversity. Booker T. Washington is a classic example.

10. Witness

The testament of an eyewitness to institutional evil. Examples include Elie Wiesel and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

11. Self-promotional propaganda

MEIN KAMPF

12. Memoir

A selective autobiography. Not selective based on some agenda, but simply what the writer finds personally significant. Defining incidents in his life. Not so much about himself, but using his experience and observation to comment on the world. Heavy on interpretation. The reader views a particular time and place through the eyes of the autobiographer. An extreme example is Proust.

13. Diaries

In cases where the diarist is famous, he may write self-consciously in anticipation that his "private" diaries will

someday come to light—in which case the diary may be less forthcoming. If the diarist is not a public figure, the entries are more likely to be candid, unguarded, and revealing.

14. Intellectual autobiography

Typically in a festschrift for a philosopher, with a focus on his intellectual development. Thinkers who influenced his outlook. Sparring partners.

15. Travelogue

By explorers who travel the world or discover the world. Their life is defined where they've been. The places make their lives interesting to read about.

16. Pioneers

By desperate or adventurous people who settle an area, then write about their risky, arduous experience bringing civilization to the wilderness.

17. War journals

Some folks live in exciting, harrowing, hazardous times. The circumstances make their lives gripping to read about.

18. Autobiographical fiction

Mark Twain, Larry McMurtry, Giorgio Bassani, Thomas Hughes (**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOL DAYS**).

Dating the Gospels

I. CONVENTIONAL REASONS TO DATE THE GOSPELS AFTER 70 AD:

1. FORM CRITICISM

According to this theory, the sources of the gospels underwent extensive creative oral development before commitment to writing. Other issues aside, many NT scholars date the Pauline letters much earlier than the Gospels, yet if Christians could write letters in the 40s-60s, there's nothing to inhibit them from writing Gospels in the 40s-60s. So the form critical stipulation is arbitrary.

2. OLIVET DISCOURSE

i) Liberal scholars don't think Jesus could foresee the fall of Jerusalem. Therefore, the Synoptic Gospels had to be written post-70 AD. Given Markan priority, that pushes Matthew and Luke further out. If, however, you accept the supernatural phenomenon of precognition, not to mention the deity of Christ, then that objection reflects unjustified naturalistic prejudice.

ii) A more specific objection is that Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse (Lk 21:20-24) reflects knowledge after the fact. Luke allegedly rewrote the oracle with the benefit of hindsight. By way of response:

iii) Even on naturalistic grounds, the account uses stock siege warfare imagery from the LXX.

iv) Jerusalem was a fortified city, so siege warfare would be the standard tactic.

v) This wasn't the first time Jerusalem had been surrounded by foreign armies (e.g. Babylonians, Assyrians, Romans).

vi) Luke has his own sources, independent of Matthew and Mark. All of them may well be quoting what Jesus said, but excerpting different statements. Cf. D. Wenham, **THE REDISCOVERY OF JESUS' ESCHATOLOGICAL DISCOURSE** (Wipf & Stock 2003). What Luke records is more germane to his Gentile target audience while what Matthew records is more germane to his Jewish target audience.

3. JOHN'S GOSPEL IS MORE THEOLOGICAL ADVANCED THAN THE SYNOPTICS

In a sense that may be true. However, this doesn't imply that his Gospel is later than the Synoptics—although it may be. For example, you can have two contemporaries who write about a war they lived through. One account may be more insightful than another. That has nothing to do with relative chronology. Moreover, John's Gospel uses Jewish categories and OT paradigms to express theology.

II. REASONS TO DATE THE GOSPELS BEFORE 70 AD:

1. AUTHORSHIP

i) If traditional authorship is correct, then that sets an outer limit for the composition of the Gospels inasmuch as they had to be written within the lifetime of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Minimally, that rules out the 2C.

So that depends on evidence for traditional authorship, which is varied, including both internal and external evidence. One argument is the titles of the Gospels. Our Greek manuscripts are remarkably consistent in their authorial ascriptions. But it's hard to account for that uniformity if the titles are late editorial additions, considering the fact that ancient Christian scribes worked independently of each other. So that implies the originality of the titles. Detailed arguments are provided by scholars like Hengel and Bauckham. Cf. R. Bauckham, **JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES** (Eerdmans, 2nd. ed., 2017); M. Hengel, **THE FOUR GOSPELS AND THE ONE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST** (Trinity Press 2000). (Not that they affirm traditional authorship, which is ironic, and reflects a failure to follow through with the logic of their own arguments.)

ii) There's a sense in which authorship is more important than date. So long as the Gospels reflect living memory. So long as they were written by people who knew Jesus or knew people who knew Jesus.

2. HISTORICAL ACCURACY

If the Gospels were written by people who were not eyewitnesses or didn't have access to eyewitness sources, then it's very hard to explain the historical accuracy of the Gospels. Cf. Peter Williams, **CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?** (Crossway 2010). So that implies authors with firsthand knowledge.

3. THE DATE OF ACTS

The Book of Acts ends abruptly, without informing the reader about the fate of Paul. There's a steady buildup to Paul's impending trial before Caesar, only to leave that hanging in midair. The most natural explanation for lack of resolution is that Acts was written before the final disposition of Paul's case. For a classic exposition and defense, cf. C. Hemer, **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN THE SETTING OF HELLENISTIC HISTORY** (Eisenbrauns 1990), chap. 9. Readers are bound to be curious about Paul's fate. Although that argument is less popular among scholars than it used to be, it's still the most plausible, straightforward explanation. In addition, Acts lacks any reference to the demise of Peter and James (brother of Jesus), even though it records the demise of other church leaders (Stephen, James bar Zebedee). Assuming that Acts was written before Paul's execution, that pushes Luke's Gospel further back.

4. THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

i) On a conventional solution to the Synoptic Problem, Matthew and Luke made use of Mark. That entails Markan priority. The basic argument is that if a teacher read three student papers as similar to each other as the Synoptics, he'd logically conclude that there was collaboration or literary dependence. This doesn't mean Matthew and Luke are necessarily dependent on Mark for on their information, even in parallel accounts. There is evidence that they had their own sources of information, even in parallel accounts. Cf. L. McGrew, **HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW: UNDESIGNED COINCIDENCES IN THE GOSPELS AND ACTS** (DeWard 2017).

ii) Even if that yields a relative chronology, it doesn't give an absolute chronology. But it provides a rough terminus ad

quo and terminus ad quem. At one end, Mark could be as early as the 40s. Cf.

https://legacy.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/Library/TynBull_1972_23_04_Wenham_PeterInRome.pdf

At another end, if Acts was written before Paul's execution, then Luke was probably written around the late 50s, give or take. I have no opinion as to whether Matthew was written before or after Luke. It could date from the 50s-60s.

5. JOHN'S GOSPEL

i) Patristic evidence may indicate that it was written in the 90s, during the reign of Domitian. However, that interpretation may be dubious. Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, **REDATING THE NEW TESTAMENT** (Westminster 1976), 256-58.

ii) The epilogue to John's Gospel (Jn 21) supplies a terminus ad quem for the composition of the Gospel. It was either occasioned by the death of Peter or John (the "Beloved Disciple"). Scholars typically opt for John's death (or the "Beloved Disciple"), but if we accept the internal and external evidence for Johannine authorship, then by process of elimination, Peter's death is a better candidate. That's challenged on the grounds of third-person narration. However, illeism, as well as alternation between first-person and third-person narration, is a stock convention in ancient historiography. Cf. Rod Elledge, "Illeism in Classical Antiquity", **USE OF THE THIRD PERSON FOR SELF-REFERENCE BY JESUS AND YAHWEH: A STUDY OF ILLEISM IN THE BIBLE AND ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TEXTS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTOLOGY** (T&T Clark 2017), chap. 2.

Mind you, so long as the Fourth Gospel was authored by the apostle John, or even an eyewitness other than John (assuming the Beloved Disciple and the apostle John are distinct), then the date of the Fourth Gospel is inconsequential.

In sum, I think all four Gospels were probably written between the 40s-60s. I don't have a bulletproof argument, but historical reconstructions are rarely bulletproof. It's a matter of choosing the best explanation.

Dating Mark

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/05/dating-gospels.html>

Due to Markan priority, which is the mainstream view in NT scholarship across the theological spectrum (liberal, moderate, conservative), the date of Mark is a lynchpin for dating Matthew and Luke. Liberals usually assign Mark a post-70 AD date. Moderates and conservatives usually date Mark to the 60s, although some date it to the 50s, and a handful to the 40s. NT introductions by Guthrie (81-86) and Carson/Moo (172-82) have a useful overview of the patristic evidence and respective positions on dating and provenance.

Among conservative and some moderate scholars, a key factor in dating Mark is the way patristic testimony tethers Mark to Peter. This goes back to the testimony of Papias, who says Mark was Peter's "interpreter". Variations on this testimony are found in other early church fathers. However, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria apparently disagree on whether Mark's Gospel was written during or after Peter's lifetime. This raises a number of methodological issues:

- 1.** If Peter is Mark's sole informant, the question is when and where Mark and Peter cross paths. Rome? Caesarea? That affects dating schemes.
- 2.** Even if Peter is Mark's informant, it doesn't ipso facto follow that he wrote his Gospel at the time he met with Peter—although he might take notes.

3. To what extent is subsequent patristic testimony independent of Papias? Do they have their own sources of information, or are these secondary notices, dependent on Papias? Are they simply repeating and passing along the tradition of Papias? Or does it dovetail with other available information?

4. How early in church history would there be a constituency for a biography about Jesus? Seems to me people would be interested in the life of Jesus from the outset. And as the Christian movement rapidly radiated out across the far-flung Roman Empire, there'd be a need for a written life of Jesus.

5. I'm struck by the neglect of Acts 12:12 in discussions of Mark's Gospel. There's an entrenched scholarly tradition that takes patristic testimony as the starting-point, but while that's important, evidence gleaned from the Book of Acts is more important. That should be the point of departure.

Scholarship often gets stuck in a rut. Scholars influence other scholars, so that has a conditioning effect with how the issues are framed—which in turn, selects for the range of answers.

But according to Acts 12:12, Mark's mother hosted a house-church in Jerusalem, which was known to Peter. That carries a number of highly suggestive implications:

Jerusalem was Mark's hometown. Presumably, he was living in Jerusalem during the public ministry of Christ. In addition, he had access to apostles living in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was a polyglot city, and Mark himself came from a Greek-speaking family (immigrants from Cypress).

6. If we run with Acts 12:12, Peter might well be one of Mark's informants, but Mark would have access to other informants.

7. It's quite likely that Mark first met Peter in Jerusalem, early on.

8. In addition, it stands to reason that Mark was an eyewitness to some events involving the public ministry of Christ.

9. Therefore, I see no good reason to tether the date of Mark's Gospel to the whereabouts of Peter. And even if Peter was his primary informant, Mark could have gotten his information from Peter when they were both living in Jerusalem—back in the 30s. But the inertia of mainstream scholarship makes it hard to turn the ship.

Right setting, wrong story

I'd like to revisit one issue in the recent Ehrman/Williams debate:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

Ehrman dismissed the copious evidence provided by Williams on the grounds that even if the background information in the Gospels is accurate, that has no bearing on whether the accounts of Jesus are accurate. For instance, a columnist can get the background details right on a story but get the story wrong.

But there are some basic problems with that objection:

i) For many years, Ehrman's schtick has been to claim that the Gospels are unreliable because they were written by anonymous authors decades after the fact who never lived in Palestine, weren't eyewitnesses to the life of Christ, and knew no eyewitnesses to the life of Christ.

Now, however, Ehrman does an about-face. Williams marshals multiple lines of evidence to demonstrate that the Gospel authors either lived in Palestine or interviewed people who did.

So where does that leave Ehrman's original argument that the Gospel authors were out of touch with the facts on the ground? That they were too far-removed from the time and place to be in a position to accurately report what happened? Having lost the first football game, he moves the goalpost under cover of darkness to help his team for the rematch.

ii) Sure, it's possible for an eyewitness to willfully misrepresent what happened. But that's a drastic shift from the argument Ehrman has been hawking for years.

And there are problems with the new argument. If the Gospel authors were in a position to know what happened, why would they misrepresent events when they had so much on the line? It was very risky to be a Christian back then.

iii) In addition, Jesus has a polarizing effect on people. If, say, you witnessed him perform exorcisms or nature miracles, you're forced to draw some conclusions. You're forced to take sides. On the one hand, his enemies admitted that he did those things. They heard what he said and saw what he did, right before their eyes. So they couldn't remain neutral. They attributed his supernatural abilities to witchcraft.

But what would motivate the Gospel authors to misrepresent Jesus favorably if they knew what he did, even from their own firsthand observation or the eyewitness testimony of their informants?

iv) 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.

Verisimilitude

I'd like to expand on something I said about the recent debate between Bart Ehrman and Peter Williams:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

- 1.** For many years, Ehrman's stock argument against the reliability of the Gospels has been his contention that they were authored by anonymous writers decades after the events who never lived in Palestine. But in the debate he suddenly shifted grounds. He said that even if they had accurate background knowledge of 1C Palestine, that creates no presumption that the accounts of Jesus are accurate.
- 2.** To begin with, I don't know what Ehrman is claiming. Is he claiming that the Gospels are intentionally historical, but the writers are simply clueless about the historical Jesus, despite their intentions to write an accurate biography? If so, why would their sources be accurate about little background details but wrong about the main events? Why would their sources preserve accurate background information but be unreliable about the main events?
- 3.** Apropos (3), it's unclear on Ehrman's reckoning how we could ever credit any ancient historical account. If incidental accuracy in details doesn't count as evidence for the general accuracy of the stories, then how, if at all, does Ehrman distinguish between legend and history? Doesn't his skepticism apply with equal force to Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Tacitus, and Josephus (to name a few)? Isn't the kind of corroborative evidence Williams marshals in **CAN WE**

TRUST THE GOSPELS the same kind of evidence historians use to verify ancient accounts generally?

4. For that matter, if he's that skeptical about ancient records, then he can't say the chronology in Lk 2 is mistaken, since he'd have to have confidence in other historical sources to use them as a standard of comparison.

5. Or is he claiming that the Gospels are intentionally fictional, but the Gospel writers sprinkled their stories with accurate background information to lend the stories verisimilitude? If that's what he's angling at, then one problem with his objection is that what he says about the authors is applicable to the audience. Verisimilitude is only effective if the reader is in a position to recognize the accuracy of the details. If, however, the Gospels were written decades after the fact by authors who never lived in Palestine, or knew people who did, then wouldn't the target audience for the Gospels be in the same boat? The audience would be just as uninformed as the authors. So how would they be in a position to appreciate verisimilitude? Wouldn't accurate background information be lost on them?

6. As I mentioned before, it would be dangerous to be a Christian back then. Why would the Gospel authors risk writing fiction that was so hazardous to their life and livelihood? If, on the other hand, they were writing historical biographies, then it would be worth the risk, given who Jesus is.

7. Ehrman kept defaulting to memory studies. But in his recent book, **CHRISTOBIOGRAPHY**, Craig Keener devotes a whole chapter to that issue (chap. 14). Likewise, Richard Bauckham's article: "The Psychology of Memory and the

Study of the Gospels. "JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE
HISTORICAL JESUS 16 (2018) 1-21.

II. Nativity 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

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.

The virgin shall conceive and bear a son

Isa 7:14 is a traditional Messianic proof-text. In modern times, however, Matthew's citation is often treated as an embarrassment. Supposedly, Matthew ripped the passage out of context. A few observations:

i) *Parthenos* isn't Matthew's rendering. Rather, that's the LXX. So that's a pre-Christian Jewish rendering of the passage.

ii) It's often said that if Isaiah wanted to stress the virginity of the woman, he'd use *betulah* rather than *almah*. But based on comparative usage, there's no evidence that *betulah* is more virginal than *almah*—and possibly less so. (cf. Alec Motyer, E. J. Young, Gordon Wenham, Brevard Childs). Every occurrence of *almah* arguably refers to a virgin.

(Mind you, there's a difference between what a word means, and what it refers to. But the meaning of a word is established by occurrences of the word. So that's not always so easy to distinguish in practice.)

The real contrast is between *almah* and *ishshah*—the customary word for "wife". Some commentators think the text is alluding to the wife of Isaiah or the wife of Ahaz. But in that case we'd expect the text to use *ishshah*.

In fact, it's striking that the text never identifies the woman. If she was Isaiah's contemporary, why be so reticent?

iii) I think both liberals and conservatives overemphasize the importance of what word is used. Even if Hebrew had a technical term for "virgin," which Isaiah used in this passage, merely using the word "virgin" wouldn't imply parthenogenesis. After all, it's quite possible for a virgin to become pregnant when she has sexual intercourse for the first time. Also, in theory, it would refer to a virgin who will become pregnant subsequent to marriage. The word is consistent with a virginal conception, but doesn't entail that.

iv) In Matthew and Luke, the virgin birth isn't based on a particular word, but on the narrative context, where Mary conceives a child apart from sexual intercourse.

v) In Isaiah, the miraculous connotations of the event aren't confined to how the woman is classified. In addition, this is said to be a "sign" (v10).

In theory, a sign needn't be miraculous. However, the sign is cast in terms that suggest a supernatural event ("Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven"). It might be as spectacular as raising the dead from Sheol. Yahweh gives Ahaz carte blanche.

And that's reinforced by the similar passage in Isa 38:7-8, where God reverses the sundial.

In addition, as R. T. France has noted, the language in Isa 7:14 evokes Gen 17:19, which foretells another miraculous conception.

vi) John Walton thinks the sign is the name of the child. Yet the sign is evidentiary. But merely naming a child isn't evidential confirmation of the oracle. That would be self-

fulfilling. To function as confirmatory evidence, the sign must be something special.

vii) In addition, signs can be future confirmations ("fulfillment signs"), subsequent to the event in question (e.g. Isa 37:30ff.; 44:28-45:1; Exod 3:12; 1 Kgs 13; 2 Kgs 19). So the passage can be an oracle about the distant future rather than the near future.

viii) In addition to the mysterious woman, you have the even more mysterious child. As scholars like Alec Motyer and Joseph Jensen have documented, the career of this child extends through the events of Isa 11. Projected into a hazy future.

Not coincidentally, having quoted Isa 7 in Mt 2, the evangelist quotes Isa 9 in Mt 4. Matthew perceives the prophetic narrative unity of Isa 7-12. He has a good grasp of narrative theology, and picks up where he left off. Indeed, his discernment is more penetrating than many commentators.

So what we have in Isaiah 7 is a very intriguing prophecy. It would leave the original reader scratching his head. Who is this woman? Who is this child? What is the sign? When will this happen?

The passage raises more questions than it answers. And that's what we'd expect in the case of long-range prophecy, which raises questions that can only be answered centuries later, at the time of fulfillment. The passage is more complex than traditional prooftexting suggests. However, the complications reinforce the propriety of Matthew's citation.

John's Gospel and the Virgin Birth

You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of fornication. We have one Father—even God” (Jn 8:41).

i) Critics of the virgin birth complain that this event is only reported in two sources: Matthew and Luke. Actually, the fact that we have two independent records of this event is impressive.

But now I'd like to consider a neglected source. It's possible or probable that Jn 8:41 is an indirect allusion to the virgin birth. If so, that's even more impressive because it represents hostile testimony.

ii) Of course, Jesus' Jewish opponents didn't believe in the virgin birth. The question, rather, is whether, in Jn 8:41, they are alluding to his out-of-wedlock conception. They don't construe that as a virginal conception, but a virginal conception would underlie and account for his out-of-wedlock conception.

iii) Scholars are divided on whether his opponents are questioning his legitimacy. For instance, Keener says:

Because Jesus' interlocutors in the story would here, like most of his interlocutors in the Gospel, interpret him too literally, they may take his charge as implying that they do in fact stem from an

adulterous union. Alternatively, they could understand "fornication" in its spiritual sense referring to idolatry. C. Keener, The Gospel of John: A Commentary (Hendrickson 2003), 1:759.

But if they took him literally, then, by parity of argument, we'd expect the charge of illegitimacy to be literal. So it's unclear why Keener raises that in objection to the interpretation in question.

And, of course, the figurative interpretation is incompatible with the literal interpretation, so we need to decide which is preferable. he can't list both options as a cumulative objection to the interpretation in question. Keener also says his opponents are on the defensive at this point, and only go on the offensive in v48. But it's not clear what that means. They seem to be responding to Jesus with a counter-allegation. "We are not bastards"—which carries the implicitly invidious comparison to Jesus.

Indeed, it's a rhetorical trap. By using suggestive language that leaves the comparison implicit, it attempts to create a dilemma for Jesus. If he declines to respond, the slur does its damage by default. It's out there, to injure his reputation.

If, however, he does respond, he must acknowledge the rumor to refute it. In a way, that confirms the rumor—though not the defamatory interpretation. Finally, Keener says:

It is not clear that such charges were sufficiently widespread by the end of the first century to be assumed by John's audience or that of his tradition (although this is possible). Ibid. 1:759.

But there are problems with that objection:

i) We need to distinguish between John's audience and the historical audience. Jesus is addressing some Jews, in the early thirties. John repeats this because that's what they said. He's recording this exchange because the larger dialogue is important to establish the person and work of Christ. Even if this particular allusion would escape their ken, that's embedded in a crucial dialogue.

ii) John may well expect his readers to have background information from prior Gospels. He can take for granted their awareness of the virgin birth. Even if every reader didn't know that, it's not his responsibility. The supplementary information is available.

Meier thinks the reference is figurative, like the reference to Samaritan pedigree in v48. Cf. J. Meier, **A MARGINAL JEW** (Doubleday 1991), 1:228-29.

However, the Samaritan comparison is obscure. Commentators struggle with what his accusers had in mind. Moreover, that allegation is combined with the allegation of demonic possession, which may well be literal.

If 7:41 is a literal slur, that that generates a dilemma for the liberal view of John's Gospel. Liberals date this Gospel to the first quarter of the 2C. They think the author had no firsthand knowledge of the historical Jesus. They think he invented speeches whole cloth.

But in that event, why in the world would the narrator fabricate that defamatory innuendo? Why would he plant that idea in the mind of the reader? Why introduce that stigmatizing characterization into his narrative if it had no historical precedent? Why invent a weapon that critics would use against Jesus?

If, however, this is a historically accurate transcript (or summary) of an actual exchange, then it's plausible that Jesus' Jewish opponents would attempt to discredit him by calling him a (literal) bastard. If they had malicious gossip to that effect, they would surely use it at some point or another. And they'd place the least flattering interpretation on rumors that Mary was an unwed mother. I think many scholars are too high-minded to appreciate what enemies will resort to.

Indeed, the illegitimacy of Jesus became a standard element of the Jewish polemic. Origen responds to that. We find it in the **TOLEDOT YESHUA**. In fact, that is still a part of the Jewish polemic, right down to our very own day:

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Jerusalem-church-vandalized-with-crude-anti-Christian-slogans-441762>

My point is not that that these later sources reflect independent traditions. Rather, they represent a hostile interpretation of the virgin birth.

By the same token, it's easy to see how the virgin birth would give rise to similar allegations by spiteful neighbors—who'd be more than happy to share that with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem.

Attesting the Virgin Birth

One popular objection to the Virgin Birth is that only two Gospels mention it. By way of reply:

i) Not only do only two Gospels record the Virgin Birth, but only two Gospels even have nativity accounts. And it's not coincidental that the only two Gospels which record the Virgin Birth are the only two Gospels with nativity accounts. Since Mark and John don't even have nativity accounts, it's hard to see how they'd fit the Virgin Birth into their narratives. Conversely, since Matthew and Luke have nativity accounts, it's not surprising in that connection that they mention the Virgin Birth. But if a Gospel doesn't even have a general account regarding the childhood of Christ, why would we expect a it to have an account of the Virgin Birth in particular?

Therefore, I think the presence of that specific detail in Matthew and Luke, as well as its absence in Mark and John, is hardly suspect.

ii) In addition, both Matthew and Luke have special reasons to include the Virgin Birth. In the case of Matthew, this would be of interest to his Jewish readers, not just because of the Isa 7:14 oracle, but more generally because of other OT figures whose conception was supernaturally mediated.

In the case of Luke, it's often thought that Mary was one of his sources. If so, it's only natural that he mentions the Virgin Birth.

Luke is also interested in parallels between Jesus and John the Baptist, including divine intervention regarding their respective conceptions.

iii) Christians know about the Virgin Birth because we've read Matthew and Luke. But why think that would have been widely known absent Matthew and Luke? Mary and Joseph are the only two individuals with direct knowledge of Virgin Birth.

iv) Even if Mark and John recorded the Virgin Birth, skeptics of the Virgin Birth are skeptical of Mark and John. They think Mark's fascination with miracles and exorcisms reflects legendary embellishment, and they think John's high Christology reflects legendary embellishment.

v) If Paul mentioned the Virgin Birth, they'd discount that because they don't think Paul had any firsthand knowledge of the historical Jesus. And even if he did, that would be towards the end of Christ's life. His public ministry. Not the beginning of his life.

vi) In principle, if James and Jude mentioned the Virgin Birth, that would be significant, coming from close relatives of Jesus. But skeptics of the Virgin Birth typically think the letters of James and Jude are pseudonymous. So even if they mentioned the Virgin Birth, that would be discounted.

Indeed, skeptics of the Virgin Birth generally use reported miracles as evidence for dating the Gospels late. So the argument is circular.

The virgin birth prophecy

I'm going to comment on Richard Carrier's discussion of the virgin birth prophecy:

http://infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/virginprophecy.html

i) It's striking that an unbeliever would imagine that Carrier a good person to ask about Isaiah 7:14. To begin with, since Carrier is an atheist, his naturalistic interpretation is a foregone conclusion.

ii) In addition, Carrier is a Classicist, not a Hebraist or OT scholar. He has no expertise on Isa 7:14.

iii) One problem with a naturalistic interpretation of Isa 7:14 is that, even though an atheist denies inspired foresight, Bible writers, and ancient Near Easterners generally, did believe the future could be foreknown by supernatural means. When secular interpreters come to a passage like this, they confuse what they think is possible with what Isaiah believed. But when you interpret Isaiah, even if you don't believe Isaiah, you need to interpret his oracles as he understood them, consistent with his worldview. Even if you don't think his oracle could be genuinely prophetic, you must respect what he intended. That's what exegesis is all about. Ascertaining what the original author had in mind.

I'll bet we have dozens if not hundreds of occasions where almah is used, in and

out of the OT, where we can't know if the denoted girl was a virgin or not.

In other words, he hasn't actually studied the frequency of OT occurrences. This is just his seat-of-the-pants hunch.

*Moreover, the fact that the Hebrews saw a need to coin a word more definitely meaning 'virgin' (bethulah) implies that *almah* did not definitely mean virgin.*

i) Carrier offers no evidence for that claim. Even a liberal scholar like Brevard Childs, in his commentary on Isaiah, says "it is very unlikely that a married woman would still be referred to as an *almah*...the preferred modern translation of 'young woman' (NRSV) is too broad a rendering since it wrongly includes young wives" (66).

ii) Moreover, the exact rendering of *almah* is something of a red herring, for that fails to draw a rudimentary distinction between sense and reference. Even if *almah* doesn't mean "virgin," a virgin can be the *referent*.

For instance, Secretariat doesn't mean "horse," yet Secretariat refers to a horse. A horse is the designatum or denotatum of Secretariat. By the same token, a virgin can be the denotatum of *almah* even if that's not what the word means.

iii) In addition, we need to distinguish between denotation and connotation. Even if *almah* isn't a synonym for "virgin," it can have presumptive virginal connotations in a culture where premarital sex was punishable.

iv) Moreover, Carrier fails to take the larger context into account. The oracle is introduced as a "sign" or prodigy (v11). Compare that to the healing of Hezekiah—a promise attested by the prodigy of the sundial (Isa 38). A miraculous sign to portend a miraculous healing. That's the thought-world in which Isa 7 is moving.

v) Furthermore, it doesn't end with Isa 7. The career of this mysterious child continues to be charted in chaps 8-9, & 11. This is no ordinary child. His career extends generations beyond the exigent circumstances of Isa 7.

...since Isaiah can be interpreted non-supernaturally even if he did mean virgin. After all, is it really unusual for a virgin to conceive? Say, on her wedding night? True, then she isn't a virgin anymore. But she was until she conceived (literally, not at that very moment, but the Bible is rarely so precise). Since conception does not always occur the first time it would still be significant to say that a virgin conceived, meaning only that she

conceived the first time she was with a man.

In reference to the virgin birth of Christ, which is Carrier's real target, that's confused:

i) In principle, there's an asymmetrical relation between the virginity of the mother and the virginal conception of the child:

The virginity of the mother entails the virginal conception of the child;

However, the virginal conception of the child does not entail the virginity of the mother.

Even if the mother was not a virgin at the time, you could still have a virginal conception so long as that took place apart from sexual reproduction.

A virginal conception doesn't require a virginal mother. It only requires that in that particular instance, the conception was not the natural result of a man impregnating a woman. In principle, you could have a virginal conception even if Mary was not a virgin. These are not mutual entailments.

ii) The primary function of Mary's virginity is to safeguard the fact that Jesus was conceived without a father. Although that's metaphysically possible even if Mary had had previous children by sexual reproduction, her virginity ensures that Christ's conception was virginal. Even though her virginity isn't a necessary precondition for the virgin birth, it renders certain the fact that Christ had a mother, but no (human) father.

In the providence of God, these separable elements (virgin mother, virginal conception) were combined to remove any ambiguity regarding the virginal conception of Christ.

iii) In context, the virginity of Mary refers, not simply to the fact that she hadn't had sexual relations before then, but that she didn't conceive by means of sexual relations.

"Child marriage"

On Christmas Eve, Randal Rauser did a post on whether Mary was too young to get married:

<http://randalrauser.com/2015/12/how-young-was-the-virgin-mary-and-was-that-too-young/>

The post, as well as feedback in the combox, raises ethical issues regarding "child marriage," pedophilia, statutory rape, age of consent, &c. I'd add that these issues also come into play with respect to Islam generally, and Muhammad in particular.

i) It wouldn't surprise me if Rauser denies the virgin birth. But I wouldn't expect him to tip his hand on that if it jeopardized his job security.

ii) I think "child marriage" is ambiguous. A child marriage could refer to a marriage that's arranged by their respective parents when the couple are prepubescent, but that doesn't entail that they live as husband and wife at that time. It just means the boy and girl are betrothed to each other. The actual marriage ceremony, and consummation, may be years later, when both are teenagers. "Child marriage" in that sense needs to be distinguished from child marriage in the sense of prepubescent conjugal relations.

In addition, we need to distinguish between cases where both parties are "children" or marriage between a "child" and an adult.

iii) In the 1C, mortality rates were much higher. In that regard, it was pragmatic to marry younger since you might

not get the chance if you waited. You couldn't count on having a normal lifespan. That wasn't even probable.

iv) To say adolescents are psychologically immature for marriage is anachronistic in the context of 1C Judaism. This isn't like a modern nuclear marriage. Rather, child-rearing generally took place in the context of an extended family, in which there were lots of helping hands and seasoned advice.

Likewise, in cultures with a rigid social structure, your roles and duties are preassigned. You don't have to make as many personal decisions as the couple in a nuclear family, because the social blueprint makes many of those decisions for you. I'm not saying that's necessarily a good thing. It depends, in part, on the social blueprint.

v) Rauser's treatment is oddly one-sided, with its sustained emphasis on girls rather than boys. There's a common bias in cases like that. If the adult is male and the teenager is female, that's rape—but if the adult is female and the teenager is male, "the boy got lucky."

vi) I think a bigger problem with early adolescent motherhood is less about psychology than physiology. Because her body is smaller and underdeveloped at that age, I believe that raises the risk of medical complications in gestation and childbirth.

In the case of Mary, she'd enjoy special providential protection. And in any event, we don't know how old she was.

vii) Statutory rape laws and age of consent laws can be technicalities. The threshold is somewhat arbitrary. That generates borderline cases. If an 18-year-old girl has

premarital sex with a 17-year-old boy, that's technically statutory rape, yet the transaction is clearly consensual.

Any legal age will be somewhat arbitrary, but you can't have these laws without a stipulated age, so that's a necessary and justifiable consequence of having such laws in the first place. We ought to have such laws. But enforcement of the law should make allowance for the arbitrary cutoff, and focus on clear-cut examples rather than marginal cases.

vii) A natural threshold is puberty. That's when the libido kicks in. That's when both parties may find sexual activity appealing. That's very different than forcing sexual relations onto a prepubescent boy or girl.

Indeed, adolescent sexuality is a common problem precisely because many adolescents initiate sexual encounters. The sex drive makes that consensual.

That doesn't make it an optimal age for marriage. And you can have medical conditions like precocious puberty where sexual activity would be premature. But pathological conditions don't set the bar.

ix) Because Joseph is out of the picture during the public ministry of Christ, it's common to speculate that he had died by then, which leads to the further speculation that he was much older than Mary. That, however, is a very dubious postulate. In the 1C, in the absence of modern medical science, it was far more common for people to die young from accidents or disease.

Likewise, it may simply be the case that Mary was more involved in her son's life than Joseph. He was just the step-dad.

x) As a rule, I'd say marriage in early adolescence is inadvisable.

Keep in mind that nowadays, in the West, we don't have arranged marriage, and couples often marry in their twenties or later, yet the divorce rate is very high.

Conversely, I have an older cousin who married at 15. She's now about 80, and still married to her first husband.

Why the Virgin Birth?

Why was Jesus virginally conceived? Admittedly, the question is somewhat speculative. However, I think the Bible expects Christians to reflect on the theological significance of the virgin birth, so this is more than idle speculation.

1. Let's begin with secular explanations. On one version, the virgin birth is based on pagan exemplars. But there are familiar problems with that allegation:

i) The alleged parallels aren't comparable upon closer scrutiny. For instance, the women may not be virgins. Or conception involves copulation between male gods and human women.

ii) The pagan stories are too far removed in time, place, and genre to be exemplars.

iii) It would be repugnant to Matthew's Jewish audience. That would be counterproductive to his aim.

2. On another secular explanation, the virgin birth is a cover story of a prenuptial scandal. On one version, Mary and Joseph jumped the gun. But there are problems with that explanation:

i) According to Mosaic Law, premarital sex was not a capital offense. The punishment was a shotgun wedding.

ii) If, moreover, Mary and Joseph were already betrothed, then fornication is a technicality. After all, it took a formal "divorce" to dissolve a betrothal. From what I've read, there

was no consensus on whether it was illicit for betrothed couples to exercise that privilege.

iii) Although there was no legal double standard, I suspect there was a cultural double standard. How much stigma, if any, would attach to Joseph? Surely a fair number of single Jewish men were sexually active. That's why Proverbs warns against young men frequently with prostitutes. Likewise, what got David into hot water wasn't promiscuity, but adultery, and betrayal (of a soldier under his command). If this was a prenuptial scandal, it would only be scandalous for Mary, not Joseph.

iv) Since there'd been no scientific way to prove paternity, Joseph could simply accuse Mary of sleeping with another man and wash his hands of the matter.

v) Unwed motherhood was hardly a unique occurrence in 1C Judaism. Why would anyone find the Virgin Birth a plausible cover story?

vi) A variation on the secular explanation is that Mary was pregnant by a man other than Joseph. If so, it's inexplicable why Joseph would consent to marry her. That would be culturally demeaning to Joseph.

vii) Since the secular explanation regards the account as fictional, it would be simpler for Matthew to deny Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy by narrating that she became pregnant after Mary and Joseph tied the knot. If, according to the secular explanation, Matthew is guilty of fabrication, why not a fabrication that eliminates any grounds for suspicion?

A possible objection is that Matthew couldn't get away with that because there were witnesses who knew Mary was an

unwed mother. If so, that generates a dilemma for the secular explanation. Those who treat the virgin birth narrative as fictional or mythological date Matthew to c. 80-100. They think it was written by an anonymous author with no historical connection to Jesus or his relatives. But in that event, how would anyone in Matthew's audience be in a position to correct his account if he denied her prenuptial pregnancy? Mary and Joseph weren't famous at the time of her pregnancy. Only a handful of people would know when she became pregnant. And on liberal dating, that was about a century (give or take) before the Gospel was written.

vii) Finally, this isn't the only Biblical example of a miraculous conception. Unless all other examples are cover stories for prenuptial scandals, why assume that must be the explanation in this case? Why single out a prenuptial scandal in this particular instance?

2. Let's shift to theological explanations. One rationale is that if Jesus had a biological father, then he'd inherit original sin.

One problem with that rationale is that mainstream Reformed theology affirms the immediate rather than mediate imputation of Adam's sin. It's something everyone gets direct from Adam, by divine imputation, and not from your parents, or your father in particular.

3. On the face of it, a divine Incarnation doesn't necessitate a virginal conception. On the one hand, Jesus doesn't require a human father to have a divine father. Those are separable. They operate on different levels.

On the other hand, if he can be human without a biological father, he can be human without a biological mother. After all, Adam and Eve were human sans parentage. He could be

human with two parents, one parent, or no parent. Different miracles.

4. Another rationale is that a miraculous conception is a divine sign that there's something very special about this person. And that's undoubtedly true as far as it goes.

5. In addition, although his divine sonship doesn't automatically preclude a biological father, that omission draws attention to his divine sonship. Even though these operate at different levels, yet because it's normally necessary for humans to have biological fathers, if someone doesn't, the follow-up question is to ask who takes up the slack? Who fills that role?

6. Finally, it might seem initially odd that Christ's claim to Davidic ancestry is merely legal rather than biological. Isn't that rather roundabout? Doesn't that seem to weaken the connection? The claim would appear to be stronger if Joseph was his biological father rather than stepfather.

But if you think about it, the way God actually arranged it is more subtle and powerful. How does one become a king? One way is through inheritance. Passed down from father to son.

Yet that's not how David became king of Israel. Jesse was not a king. David was a commoner.

Rather, God directly elevated David to the throne. And David's coronation employs adoptive language: **"I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son" (2 Sam 7:14)**. God is like David's stepfather.

By the same token, Jesus isn't the rightful heir due to his human paternity. Rather, he's enthroned by God himself.

In bypassing genetic lineage, the virgin birth creates a partial parallel between the kingship of David and the Davidic kingship of Christ. Jesus is heir to the Davidic throne, not in virtue of his physical pedigree; rather, God directly installs him as king just as God did in David's case. So there's a type/antitype parallel.

7. Moreover, in typological escalation, Jesus is God's Son in a way that David is not. Jesus is God's Son by nature, and not adoption.

In fact it creates a chiasmic relation:

A. Jesse is David's ontological father

B. God is David's stepfather

B. Joseph is Jesus' stepfather

A. God is Jesus' ontological Father

One way to contrast two things is by comparing two things. Their similarities make the dissimilarities stick out.

Attesting the virgin birth

Unbelievers sometimes say they reject the virgin birth because it's only attested in two Gospels.

i) Since unbelievers typically reject miracles a priori—since, indeed, unbelievers regard an account containing miracles as automatically discrediting the historical reliability of the account—this objection is duplicitous.

ii) We wouldn't expect the virgin birth to be attested outside the Gospels. The NT letters aren't histories or biographies. They contain only occasional references to the life of Christ. Same thing with Revelation. Acts is a history of the establishment of the NT church.

iii) Because John's Gospel is generally considered to be the latest Gospel and the most theologically "advanced," unbelievers regard it as the least historical. If, therefore, it reported the virgin birth, they'd discount that in the same way they discount John's high Christology, the miracles of Christ in his Gospel, as well as the speeches and dialogues of Christ in his Gospel.

Indeed, Andrew Lincoln, who's penned a critique of the virgin birth, also penned a commentary on John's Gospel, and he doesn't put much stock in the historicity of John's Gospel. So, for critics like him, it wouldn't matter if John recorded the virgin birth.

iv) Finally, if all three Synoptic gospels attested the virgin birth, unbelievers would regard that as even less impressive than if only Matthew and Luke attest the virgin birth.

Assuming Markan priority, if all three Synoptic Gospels attested the virgin birth, unbelievers would discount the testimony of Matthew and Luke because they'd say Matthew and Luke simply copied that from Mark. Rather than multiple-attestation, they'd say that boils down to just one Gospel.

Conversely, since Mark doesn't record the virgin birth, that means the witness of Matthew and Luke does constitute independent corroboration. Since, in this case, Mark is not the lynchpin connecting Matthew and Luke (vis-à-vis the virgin birth), they didn't get that information from Mark, or from each other.

So we have two Gospel authors, writing independently of each other, bearing historical witness to the virgin birth.

Informed consent and the Virgin Birth

On Facebook, I got into a debate with John Mark Reynolds on the Virgin Birth. Reynolds is Eastern Orthodox, and I take it he's a freewill theist.

REYNOLDS

God is not a rapist and came with consent.

HAYS

Do Biblical prophets consent to be prophets? Did Moses consent to that? Or Jeremiah? Or Ezekiel? Or St. Paul. They had pretty grueling lives. Let's drop the demagogical "rapist" label, shall we?

REYNOLDS

"Demagogical" is the old ethical. No. The prophets did indeed consent to be prophets. As did Saint Paul . . .

Let me suggest: to conceive a child without full consent (knowing what one is getting into) is rape. It is bad.

HAYS

Really? Did Jeremiah know what he was getting into? **"You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me"** (Jer 20:7). Is that your notion of informed consent?

Moses is a paradigm of the reluctant prophet. So is Jonah. It's a real stretch for you to claim that consented to be

prophets.

You think parents know what they are getting into? Did the parents of Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer know what they were getting into?

What about the parents of a boy who becomes a hopeless drug addict and commits suicide?

There's a continuum. At one extreme there's having no idea what you're getting into. At the other extreme is exhaustive foreknowledge or counterfactual knowledge. Only God has that. In-between those two extremes are many gradations of knowing and not knowing.

Hasn't John Mark Reynolds made decisions which, with the benefit of hindsight, he would not have made? Events often turn out differently than we expected, going in.

What about a man who marries a woman who later develops a degenerative illness like MS or Huntington's disease. He didn't know what he was getting into. In some cases, if he had the benefit of foresight, some men would have married a different woman.

Given JMR's strictures, does he think a man in that situation has grounds to divorce his wife since he lacked informed consent when he said "I do"?

If not, then where does that leave his original argument?

i) If you're mistaken, you called God a rapist. Don't you think you ought to be more circumspect? You're prepared to call God a rapist based on your a priori stipulation that to conceive a child without "full consent," which you define as "knowing what one is getting into," is "rape". I'm curious

about people who are so utterly confident in their intuitions that they have no hesitation about making potentially defamatory statements about God. How is that distinguishable from hubris or impudence?

ii) But let's play along with your stipulation. Since Jesus only had one biological parent, in principle, God could have made Joseph the biological parent rather than Mary. Suppose he miraculously created a temporary womb in Joseph and made Joseph the surrogate "mother" or incubator of Jesus. If he did so without securing Joseph's "full consent," would he be guilty of "raping" Joseph?

iii) Actually, there's nothing about consent in the account of the Annunciation. Gabriel simply gives Mary advance notice of what's going to happen. He doesn't come to Mary with a proposal from God and ask for her to vote it up or down. It's not a request, but a prediction. It gives her an opportunity to prepare for what awaits her.

iv) Suppose, for argument's sake, that Mary had no warning. Suppose she simply become pregnant by direct divine agency. She'd be unaware of the process by which she became pregnant. The agency of the God in effecting that result would be undetectable. How is that equivalent to rape?

Lots of things happen to us without our consent to, including bad things. Take cancer or degenerative illnesses. Is that equivalent to divine rape?

"I do think you need informed consent to have sex and make a baby."

Since the virginal conception didn't involve sex—which is what makes it virginal—your comparison is already

disanalogous.

"I do think a lack of consent is rape"

That's so simplistic. Although it's true that rape is nonconsensual, that's hardly a sufficient criterion. As we know, rape involves a man physically forcing himself on an unwilling woman. That, in turn, generates psychological trauma.

Suppose Gabriel hadn't given Mary advance notice. Even though she didn't consent, none of the other elements would be present. It trades on the odious connotations of rape without most of the elements we normally associate with rape.

"We marry for better or worse or in sickness or in health to having considered the weight of our decision."

But that's an abstraction. How is massive ignorance of the future compatible with informed consent? You have two principles that tug in opposing directions: risky commitment and informed consent.

You duck the point that we often make decisions we later regret because we had to act on the information which we had at the time, which turned out to be inadequate to make an informed decision. That's a commonplace of human experience.

"This is why modern vows are so risky...As for having a child, when I have a child I choose the risk."

What makes it risky is ignorance of the consequences. Informed consent and risk pull in opposing directions. Risky

because we don't know the future. You need to come down on one side or the other of your conflicting principles.

"Second, God isn't the proximate cause of evils like cancer."

That's getting a bit offtrack, but since you bring it up, although God is not the proximate cause of natural evils like cancer, he's the remote cause. Or, to put it differently, his prior action is a necessary condition. How that distinction is supposed to help your overall position is unclear.

"Third, a prophet has a choice. None of your examples contradict that."

I don't see where you're getting that from examples like Moses, Jonah, Jeremiah, and St. Paul. Rather, you appear to have an a priori commitment to choice, which you impose on these examples. They **must** have had a choice.

Unclear what you mean by choice in that context. Even if you put a gun to a man's head, there's a sense in which he still has a choice. He can choose to be shot in the head. But he's acting under duress.

"Fourth, men do get raped, so "yes" the situation you describe would be rape of Joseph."

Equivocal. That's typically in the case of, say, men sodomized in prison. But that's hardly comparable to the situation I described.

"If you insist on not seeing consent in 'the let it be done into me...' Because of foreknowledge, I would suggest John Martin Fischer."

i) I didn't bring up the issue of freedom and foreknowledge. However, John Martin Fischer rejects libertarian freedom, so citing him is counterproductive to your position. He takes the position that freedom and foreknowledge are consistent in a compatibilist (or "semicompatibilist") sense of freedom, not the libertarian sense.

ii) More to the point, there's a distinction between willing and unwilling submission. Mary willingly submits to God's resolve to make her the mother of the messiah. That doesn't imply that she had a veto. Scripture contains many examples of unwilling submission to God's inexorable resolve.

You can't get what you need out of Mary's "be it done until me according to your will," if by that you mean the Incarnation was contingent on her consent.

"I don't think God deceived Jeremiah and you don't either. What we cry out to God in sorrow... Can be immoderate."

Sure, the way Jeremiah expresses himself is emotional and rhetorical. But as one commentator notes:

"Almighty God enlisting an innocent young man (probably just a teenager!) in a lifelong, hapless task, not telling him upfront that he would never be able to marry or have children, nor telling him that he would, in fact, be beaten and imprisoned and publicly humiliated (didn't God promise that he would be

rescued from his enemies?), not fully explaining to him the living hell he would experience," M. Brown, REBC 7:288.

That just doesn't fit into your preconceived grid about the necessity of informed consent. You're not starting with the data.

"Finally, to assume any Gospel account is 'all there is' is belied by the Gospels themselves. The stories are summaries. The Gospels don't have Jesus ever laughing, but I am confident he did."

I haven't assumed that any Gospel account is all there is. But if it's not in the Gospels, and it's not in some reliable extrabiblical source, then you have no evidence for your claim.

"And by the way, if a man signs up to be a prophet and then is shocked..."

Which misses the point. Moses, Jonah, Jeremiah, and St. Paul didn't enlist. Rather, God conscripted them. They were draftees, not volunteers.

"She also knew the prophets, what they experienced, and said. She knew."

We have a pretty good idea of what she knew from the Magnificat, and it's quite triumphal. There's no Suffering Servant in the Magnificat.

REYNOLDS

Just to be know: who was the first person in Church history to adopt your own preferred view of Mary? That date would be helpful.

HAYS

If you're asking me, that would Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. 1C.

REYNOLDS

That is the question, isn't it. The BVM spent 30 years pondering out Lord's birth and unlike most followed him to the Cross. I bet...she knew.

HAYS

You bet she knew what? That she had advance knowledge regarding the Passion of Christ, or did you have something else in mind?

REYNOLDS

The Passion... The sword piercing her heart.

HAYS

How does a generic metaphor like that amount to specific knowledge of the future?

REYNOLDS

"generic"...if I lived through the Annunciation, the birth of the baptist, the shepherds, the Wise men, the Temple incident, knew Isaiah, lived with Jesus...I might suspect his mission wasn't to have a good time.

What was she pondering?

HAYS

Most of that doesn't fit your criterion of informed consent, since it's after the conception of Jesus. Too late for her to know what she's getting into before the die is cast.

So you seem to be shifting ground and changing the subject.

She was pondering Simeon's cryptic comment. Of course, if she knew what he meant, what would there be to ponder?

REYNOLDS

Actually it does fit my previous argument. She was pondering the mystery of the Suffering Servant. I view it as phenomenally implausible that someone who went through what Mary did (even assuming we have an exhaustive account of what was said to her) and lived with Jesus for 30 years did not much gain more than the initial redemption account (required for the initial yes). Did Jesus teach in the Temple and they found out nothing? Did they talk for decades? Much to ponder beyond the basic outline ...

Essentially nobody in church history had your low view of Mary...until the reformation and later then! Why would anyone think the Mother of God "blessed among women" would be ignorant? Nobody did...see images in catacombs, early 3rd century prayers, and the consensus of almost all gospel readers for centuries.

STEVE HAYS

The question isn't whether his mission was to have a good time. That's a straw man. If you can't bring yourself to be serious in how you frame the issue, so be it. What is there in the Annunciation, the birth of the Baptist, the shepherds,

the Wise men, and the Temple incident to suggest that Jesus would encounter vicious and malicious opposition? The Annunciation, for one, describes his career in triumphal terms. And there's nothing in the other items to counter that.

As to Isaiah, it's easy for us to see Jesus in Isa 52-53 because we have the benefit of hindsight. As far as Isaiah goes, the passage that might jump out at her is Isa 7, but there's nothing about a suffering messiah in that passage. To the contrary, he's depicted as a triumphant king who subjugates his enemies on the battlefield.

Moreover, you keep moving the goal post. You're now up to the 30th year of Jesus. That's not foresight.

My "low view" of Mary is that Mary is human, not a goddess. She's not even prophetic. Rather, Simeon and Anna are prophetic.

I'm not ashamed to be Protestant.

Your question is a non sequitur. To be the mother of God incarnate doesn't make the mother omniscient or even prescient. She doesn't share divine attributes.

What do 3C prayers have to do with anything?

"Ignorance" is a matter of degree. Your problem is an all-or-nothing fallacy.

REYNOLDS

The flight to Egypt suggested that things were not going to be easy. Herod acts as a murderous opponent of Jesus and they are forced into exile. Symeon suggested it.

Beyond that, I think informed consent in a relationship requires knowing what you are getting into... And see no reason to think Mary didn't know and good reason (informed consent) to think she did. Why see the Suffering Servant only after Jesus? Is Mary allowed any insight?

My view doesn't require Mary knowing everything ..just what she was agreeing to do. I mention 30 years with Jesus, because she is the only person we know of with that much exposure to Jesus.

Mary is no goddess, but the Magnificat is...amazing...and behold all generations have called her blessed...as she said.

My point is this ... Every text or image we have in the first centuries of the Church has a high view of Mary. Reformers shared this early on...a bizarre minimalism began . Why? Misogyny? Fear of idolatry? Gnostic views? Hard question

We haven't even mentioned John's image of Mary in Revelation

HAYS

"Misogyny". Yeah, that must be it. And if JMR disapproves of homosexual behavior, then he must hate homosexuals.

"Gnostic views". Actually, it's perpetual virginity that betrays a gnostic disdain for physicality and sexuality.

The "bizarre minimalism" is basing one's belief on reliable historical evidence rather than pious fiction and legendary embellishment.

Your appeal begs the question of whether the woman in Rev 12 is reducible to Mary.

MARK DAVIAU

The problem, Steve Hays, is that you seem insistent on making us adopt your view that Mary was simply some poor peasant girl..."

HAYS

You mean like:

"26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:26-29).

Cross-eyed objections to the virgin birth

Unbelievers reject the virgin birth of Christ. Let's consider two theories they propose to account for why Matthew and Luke (allegedly) made up the story of the virgin birth:

i) It's a cover story to conceal a prenuptial scandal. Either Mary and Joseph had premarital sex or else she had premarital sex with someone other than her fiancé. The story of the virgin birth was fabricated to quell damaging rumors. Not only would such rumors sully her own reputation, but more importantly, sully the reputation of her son.

ii) It's just a variation on the conventional heathen motif about gods (or goddesses) who sire demigods by having sex with human mortals. Matthew and Luke adapted this motif to give Jesus instant exalted status.

Now, other issues aside, notice that these two theories are mutually contradictory. According to the first theory, the story of the virgin birth was invented to destigmatize Jesus. At that time and place, his out-of-wedlock conception and birth would tarnish his reputation. He could never live down the disgrace of his illegitimacy.

According to the second theory, the story of the virgin birth was invented to enhance his status. In Greco-Roman mythology, gods often had extramarital affairs, be it with virgins or married women. Children born of such unions were demigods. They enjoyed divine pedigree and superhuman abilities that made them heroes. They were a cut above ordinary mortals.

So these two theories pull in opposing directions. The first theory is based on Jewish social mores, where to be conceived out of wedlock, whether by premarital or extramarital sex, is shameful.

The second theory is based on pagan social mores, where to be conceived out of wedlock can be ennobling, even if that's due to an extramarital liaison, so long as one of the parents is a god (or goddess). That automatically confers both ascribed status (divine paternity) as well as achieved status (superhuman abilities) on the child. To put it bluntly, to be the bastard son of a god (or goddess) put you higher on the pecking order than to be the legitimate son of a human king. Bastard demigods outrank legitimate princes.

But, of course, that entire framework is ethically and theologically anathema to Judaism. So they can't both be right, although both can most certainly be wrong.

Innocent dishonor

Joseph, when he learned that Mary was pregnant, decided to put her away privately, without fanfare (Matthew 1:19). I have wondered, though, how that would have helped Mary to avoid execution. Would not people have still seen her pregnancy and concluded that she was pregnant as a result of adultery?

<http://jamesbradfordpate.blogspot.com/2017/12/church-write-up-mary-escapes-stoning.html>

Interesting question. Presumably, Joseph's motive for divorcing Mary was in part to shield his own reputation. Divorcing her would disassociate himself from the pregnancy. A way of signaling that another man fathered the child.

When, however, God quashes his plan, the inference others will draw is not that Mary committed adultery, but that Joseph and Mary had premarital sex. Not only is Mary stigmatized, but Joseph is stigmatized. He must now share in her dishonor. By going through with the marriage, the community will assume that he was the father, in which case, he like Mary, must bear the stigma. There's shame when caught in wrongdoing. But even more irksome is to labor under the dishonor of a false, defamatory allegation.

The "virgin birth" of Perseus

The Egyptian Neith's literally spontaneous, totally virginal birthing of the God Ra, for example, well known across the Empire at the time the Gospels were written, had already likewise inspired attributing magical insemination by spiritual forces in other virgin goddesses, such as Danaë, inseminated by God's golden rain, or Olympias, inseminated by God's celestial bolts, or Nana, inseminated by touching a magical almond. Which adaptations are not meaningfully different from God's insemination of Mary by a magical fluid called the Holy Spirit. She was "found with child by the Holy Spirit" (ek pneumatos hagiou: Matthew 1:18), as even said by the Lord's angel to Joseph (in Matthew 1:20), or to Mary (in Luke 1:35): "the Holy Spirit shall come on thee" (epeleusetai epi se) "and the power of the Most High shall cover you"

(episkiasei soi) and that's why "the Holy Thing you give birth to" will be "called the Son of God." The obsessive removal of any literal implication of sex is the Jewish addition to the adopted mytheme. Yet even that had precedent—in Egypt's Ra, most clearly, a culture neighboring Judea's; but even in Olympias, where a bolt of lightning is not in ancient religious conception any meaningfully different from a magical dove flying into Jesus. Either way, it's just a manifestation of "the power of the Most High" entering in to transform the blessed. And when the one entered is a virgin, and remains so even unto birth (as with Danaë and Nana), the parallel is sufficiently complete.

<https://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/13890>

But even the absence of sex is attested in pagan mythology. Most famously, in the case of Perseus, a golden shower (drops of gold falling from the ceiling into his mother's vagina) is far closer to

Mary being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit (just as magical a substance, which just as surely went into her womb to impregnate her).

Perseus was most famously conceived by golden rain falling from the ceiling into the womb of the virgin Danaë, who remained a true virgin, never penetrated by any sexual organ anywhere, all the way to the god's birth.

Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, understood in antiquity to be a magical substance, the pneuma, that could enter and fill people, and effect changes in the world. What material element the god used to effect the conception could not be a relevant distinction. The conceptions are otherwise effectively identical.

A better example is Alexander the Great, whose "mythical" conception came either by a snake (in presumably sexual fashion) or in the form of lightning from heaven, striking the virgin mother Olympias as she slept before her groom consummated their marriage, a decidedly sexless conception, and one much closer in model to Justin's idea of Mary being impregnated by "the

Spirit and Power of God,” a description assignable to a thunderbolt, since lightning is an ephemeral substance like the pneuma, and a very manifestation of the power of god. But here, though we have sexless conception, Olympias is not a virgin by the time she gives birth. So we only have half the idea in place. Similarly in the myth of Io’s impregnation by a “light touch and breath” from Zeus (Aeschylus, Suppliants 16-18), a sexless conception, though still of a non-virgin (although curiously this is exactly the same way Jesus impregnated the Disciples with the Holy Spirit: John 20:22, 25, 27).

Ra, Hephaestus, and Perseus thus remain the most secure exemplars. And Perseus was the most familiar, which is why Justin names him as his prime example of a widely known virgin birth before Jesus. Apart from the method being golden raindrops rather than an infusion of pneuma, all the elements are identical: the mother conceives sexlessly and is a virgin still when she gives birth to the god.

So much wrong. Where to begin?

i) Jesus "impregnated" the Disciples with the Holy Spirit? Carrier has a very strange mind.

ii) Carrier admits that Olympias doesn't count since she wasn't a virgin. In addition, wouldn't she be electrocuted rather than impregnated by a thunderbolt?

iii) The dove flew "into" Jesus? Where does Carrier come up with that interpretation? What does it even mean to say the dove flew "into" Jesus? The text never says that.

iv) The Holy Spirit is "magical fluid?" Carrier has such a peculiar mind.

Evidently, the source of Carrier's bizarre identification is his wooden grasp of figurative speech. Scripture uses a variety of metaphors to describe the Holy Spirit and his activity, viz. wind, breath, fire, bird, oil, pouring, filling, washing, new birth, temple, fruit-bearer.

v) Apropos (iv), Carrier's biblical illiteracy blinds him to the fact that when Luke says the Spirit will "overshadow" Mary, he's alluding to the Shekinah (e.g. Lk 9:34-36; Exod 40:34-38; Num 9:18; 10:34; Isa 4:5; Deut 33:12 [LXX]). It resembles an incandescent cloud.

vi) By his own admission, the conception of Perseus is Carrier's closest parallel. That's his best example. But does that stand up to scrutiny?

One of Carrier's deceptive habits is that he so often fails to cite or quote his sources. Instead, readers are treated to Carrier's tendentious summary of what the source(s)

allegedly said. Let's quote from the primary sources. Here are three examples I'm aware of:

The hero Perseus...was the son of Zeus, who descended to Danae in a shower of gold. Aeschylus, with an English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. in two volumes. 1. Persians. Herbert Weir Smyth, Harvard University Press. 1926.

When Acrisios consulted an oracle about fathering male children, the god told him that from his daughter a male child would be for who would kill him. In fear of this, he had a bronze chamber constructed under the earth and put Danae under guard. According to some, Protios seduced her...but others say Zeus transformed himself into gold, flowed down through the ceiling into Danae's lap, and had intercourse with her. Apollodorus, Library, 2.4., in Stephen Trzaskoma, R. Scott Smith, & Stephen Brunet. Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation (Hackett Publishing, 2nd. ed., 2016), 31.

When Acristos consulted the oracle about having male children, the god of Pytho responded that he would have no male child, but his daughter would

have a son by whom he would be killed. Upon his return to Argos, he had constructed in the courtyard of his home an underground bronze chamber and placed Danae in it with a nurse. He had her guarded in this chamber so that no son might be born of her. But Zeus fell in love with the girl and flowed through the thatched roof in a form like gold; she caught him in her lap. Zeus revealed himself and had sex with the girl. Pherecydes, The Histories. Ibid, 313.

i) These say Zeus took the form of liquid gold to seep into the chamber where Danae was held. That's how he got past the barrier.

There is, however, no implication that he remained in that inanimate mode to ravish her. Indeed, the wording indicates that once inside, he resumed corporeal form.

ii) Keep in mind that Zeus's objective wasn't to impregnate Danae. That's a side-effect. Rather, his objective was sexual pleasure. But metal is insensible to physical passion. For the liaison to be physically enjoyable, Zeus would have to revert to corporality, including the stimulus provided by the sex organ. Isn't that how heathen readers envision the sex life of Zeus? Insemination isn't the goal; rather, sexual intercourse is an end in itself, due to the unique intensity of erotic ecstasy. That's what motivates Zeus.

Clustered miracles

Accounts of the virgin birth occur in two of the four Gospels. That's not surprising, considering the fact that only two of the four Gospels even have nativity accounts.

The virgin birth has a litmus test of orthodoxy. Unbelievers regard the virgin birth as a transparent cover story for a prenuptial scandal.

I presume most of Mary's relatives and neighbors were initially skeptical. But the credibility of the virgin birth doesn't occur in isolation. Suppose you were one of Mary's skeptical in-laws. You think she had premarital sex. Indeed, that's what Joseph thought. He intended to divorce her.

But then Joseph abruptly changes his mind. He tells you about a revelatory dream he had.

Then Elizabeth becomes pregnant, even though she's well past childbearing years. After Zechariah recovers his speech, he talks about an angelic apparition.

Then shepherds say angels appeared to them, heralding the birth of Jesus.

Later, the Magi arrive.

Maybe you notice the odd behavior of a "star".

Then Joseph claims to have another revelatory dream, warning him of danger, so he skips town with Mary and the Christchild. Shortly thereafter, soldiers sent by Herod massacre all the young boys.

Maybe you hear rumors about Anna and Simeon in the Temple.

Finally, Jesus grows up to be a renowned exorcist and miracle-worker.

Mary's explanation, which struck you as initially highly implausible, becomes highly plausible in light of so many other miracles clustering around the person of Jesus.

The mechanics of the virgin birth

Jason Engwer has a new post on the virgin birth:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/11/a-virgin-birth-with-biological.html>

Jason has been defending the virgin birth for years. I daresay few Christian apologists have written as much or more than he in defense of the virgin birth.

1. There are two stock objections to the virgin birth:

i) It's scientifically impossible. A Y chromosome is required to make a human male body.

ii) It delegitimizes Jesus as the Davidic heir.

2. In my experience, the standard view of evangelical Christians is that Mary was the biological mother of Jesus while Joseph was his stepfather. God created the Y chromosome ex nihilo.

Jason challenges that model. He proposes that Joseph was the miraculous sperm donor. If true, that kills two birds with one stone. It simultaneously dissolves both objections (1). As such, it's an elegant explanation.

Let's consider some objections to Jason's conjecture or proposal:

3. Some Christians might object that his suggestion is a theological innovation. Of course, that's only a problem if

you suppose theological innovations are inherently objectionable.

However, the objection cuts both ways. Many Bible scholars contend that the standard evangelical model of the virgin birth is a theological innovation. They'd say it's anachronistic to view Mary as the biological mother of Jesus. That's because ancient people didn't think pregnant women made a positive contribution to the physical constitution of the child. It was the father who made that contribution. The mother was essentially an incubator.

So ancient people had a different concept of maternity than we do, with our modern knowledge of genetics. They had no inkling that the mother contributed the X chromosome.

On an ancient paradigm, Mary wasn't naturally related to Jesus in the way we think mothers are naturally related to their biological offspring, not because it was a virginal conception, but because in general, or even normally, mothers didn't have that genetic link. The problem isn't supplementing Mary's contribution, but that fathers alone made the constitutive contribution to the baby's body.

4. As I've explained in the past, I'm skeptical about that narrative. Surely ancient people noticed that children resemble their mothers as well as their fathers. While some observers wouldn't put two and two together, the ancient world had its share of really smart people. So it stands to reason that there were some thoughtful people who understand that both parents must make a constitutive contribution to the formation of the child's body. At the same time, many people probably didn't give it a second thought. They just went along with whatever was the conventional wisdom.

5. This also raises questions about the nature of inspiration. Did Matthew and Luke have prescientific views of procreation? In theory, God could illuminate their minds.

But from the standpoint of inerrancy, what's important isn't so much what they believe about any number of things, but what they aver or verbalize in their Gospels. Presumably, Bible writers held many erroneous beliefs. God didn't protect them from erroneous beliefs. So long as their erroneous beliefs don't figure in what they say, that's not a problem. It would only be inconsistent with inerrancy if they assert certain things based on their erroneous beliefs. If they state as fact something that derives from a false understanding of the world, then that's incompatible with inerrancy.

Even assuming that Matthew and Luke had an inaccurate grasp of procreation, that's irrelevant so long as what they express is true. So long as the background beliefs aren't part of the verbal assertion.

6. Some Christians might object that attempting to explain a miracle is impious. We should confine ourselves to what the Bible says and leave it at that. But there are problems with that objection.

i) To some degree, Christians do postulate a model for the virgin birth (2). And the standard model is a target for skeptics. So Jason is offering an alternative model. Insofar as evangelicals typically make some claims about the mechanics of the virgin birth, Jason offers a counterproposal. It's not as if most evangelicals are entirely silent on the issue.

ii) In addition, critics of the virgin birth also make assumptions about what Matthew and Luke are claiming to

be the case. And it's Jason's contention that critics operate with gratuitous, unexamined assumptions. So he's responding to them on their own grounds.

7. I also think some professing Christians are reticent to explain a miracle because it's easier to believe if you don't give it too much thought. But once you try to explain a miracle, it can't survive scrutiny. It's more believable if you keep things safely vague. The moment you try to understand it, that exposes how ridiculous it is. For that reason, some professing Christians are afraid to explore how such things are possible. They can only maintain their faith by leaving everything mysterious. For them, apologetics threatens to break the spell.

But that's a very fragile faith. Anti-intellectualism is the only thing keeping apostasy at bay. The way to avoid doubt is to avoid thinking.

But to be more credible the less you think about it is a very bad paradigm of faith. If something is true, we can't think about it too much.

8. Some Christians might object that if the virgin birth amounts to artificial insemination, then it ceases to be a miracle. Artificial insemination doesn't take a miracle.

But that's a simplistic view of miracles. Some kinds of miracles are naturally possible. Technology can do some things that used to take a miracle. But the fact that it's not a miracle today doesn't mean it wasn't a miracle back then, precisely because ancient people didn't have the technical means to pull it off. What makes it miraculous isn't that it necessarily requires supernatural power, but that it was naturally impossible *under the circumstances*.

According to the Ascension account, Jesus levitated. If we can levitate using a jet suit, does that mean it wasn't a miracle to levitate without jet packs in the 1C?

9. Finally, some Christians think the Incarnation requires a virgin birth. They think Jesus would contract original sin if he was the product of natural parentage. That, however, presumes a particular theory regarding the transmission of original sin. It isn't obvious to me that God couldn't exempt Jesus from original sin even if (contrary to fact) he was conceived by sexual intercourse.

In Scripture, I think the virgin birth of Christ functions primarily as a sign. It's the symbolism of the virgin birth that's significant. That marks him out for special attention.

I think some Christians feel the need to bolster the virgin birth with additional props, but that's misguided. Contingent truths are just as true as necessary truths. God could do many things differently. The fact of the matter is what matters.

10. I think Jason's proposal is theologically respectable and apologetically helpful. Of course we can't be dogmatic over and beyond what scripture commits us to. Like alternative models, his model is underdetermined by the evidence. But it's an economical solution to two objections.

Hear, O house of David

13 And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isa 7:13-14).

To critics, the Christian interpretation is special pleading. One argument for the 8C identity of the son is the claim that the sign child is something Ahaz must see or will see. There are, however, some basic problems with that argument:

- i)** How does a normal pregnancy constitute a sign? How would Ahaz even know which mother and child embodied the sign? Surely there were lots of candidates. Lots of pregnant women.
- ii)** Actually, the oracle isn't directed at Ahaz but the house of David. That's certainly broader than Ahaz and open to a longitudinal fulfillment. The house of David will witness the sign.
- iii)** By way of reinforcement is the use of the second person plural in vv13-14. So, once again, the oracle isn't addressed to Ahaz but has a collective audience.

How old was Mary?

i) The claim is often made that Mary may have been as young as 12 years old when she got married. It was the custom back then for girls to marry very young.

ii) However, that may be anachronistic. One issue is whether the age of childbearing has changed. This is partly complicated by definitions. From the little I've read, puberty used to be a longer stage in maturation than it is today.

iii) In addition, I've read that a boy's voice used to break later, around 17, than happens today, in the developed world.

iv) In girls, there's the distinction between the onset of puberty and menarche.

v) Since, moreover, Jesus was virginally conceived, the issue of Mary's sexual maturity is moot in that regard.

So there are lots of questions and ambiguities surrounding the issue.

Is the virgin birth a cover story?

Hostile readers assume the account of the virgin birth is a cover story for a prenuptial scandal. That makes sense if you reject miracles out of hand, as well as the larger context of Christ's extraordinary life and ministry.

However, even on naturalistic grounds, why would Mary or early Christian propagandists concoct a story like that? To begin with, no one except Christians is going to believe it. So it will fail to silence suspicion and allegation. The very audience that assumed the worst in the first place will hardly be persuaded by this explanation.

In addition, it's not even the most plausible naturalistic explanation. The Mosaic law has a loophole for rape victims. If a virgin says she was raped when she was out in the field, she can't be prosecuted since there were no witnesses to confirm whether it was consensual or not (Deut 22:25-27). But that would make it harder to enforce the law on adultery, since even if a betrothed virgin (or married woman) became pregnant through consensual sex, she would always claim rape. Say she wasn't within earshot of any witnesses at the time.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Mary was pregnant because she had consensual premarital sex, why make up a story about angelic visitations and a miraculous conception when she could simply say she was a rape victim?

Rape was probably not uncommon back then. So unlike the virgin birth, there'd be no air of unreality to the claim. People who scoffed at the virgin birth wouldn't be in a position to scoff at that explanation.

Given how easy it would be to invoke this loophole, it stands to reason that some women who were guilty of consensual premarital or extramarital sex evaded the allegation by claiming to be rape victims. So long as they weren't caught in the act, there'd be no presumption that their claim was false.

Yet Mary doesn't say that. Matthew and Luke don't represent Mary having said that.

If you're going to invent or circulate a cover story, that would be far more plausible to hostile readers than the virgin birth. So why didn't Mary, Matthew, and Luke resort to that explanation rather than the virgin birth? For the obvious reason that the tradition of the virgin birth was the true explanation, even though it will invite derision in a way that feigning rape would not.

Parsing the virgin birth

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19** And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. **20** But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." **22** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: **23** "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Mt 1:18-23)

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, **27** to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" **29**

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” 35 And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born[e] will be called holy —the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Lk 1:25-37)

I'm going to respond to some "scientific" objections to the virgin birth. I'm piggybacking on Jason Engwer's series:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/11/andrew-lincolns-book-against-virgin.html>

To some extent I'm responding to the Andrew Lincoln's new book **BORN OF A VIRGIN?: RECONCEIVING JESUS IN THE BIBLE, TRADITION, AND THEOLOGY**. However, my comments are more general. I've only read some sections of his book. I'm not attributing any particular argument to him. I'm more concerned with assessing certain types objections, rather than nailing down who said what.

In this post I'll be using the "virgin birth" as a synonym for the virginal conception of Christ. The latter is a more accurate descriptor for the concept I'm defending. However, it's simpler to use the traditional designation.

i) I believe Lincoln used to be a theological conservative, back when he taught at Gordon-Conwell. However, he became an egalitarian. When he wrote his commentary on Ephesians, he rejected Pauline authorship. I think it's been hypothesized that he rejected Pauline authorship to weaken the authority of Ephesians, given its complementarian statement on male/female role relations in chap. 5.

His later commentary on John is theologically insightful, but sits lightly on questions of historicity. That's a problem since theology cut adrift from history is inspirational fiction.

In addition, he wrote a favorable blurb for Robin Parry's *The Evangelical Universalist*. Now his attack on the virgin birth.

Seems like he's been moving steadily to the left, all to justify his egalitarian views.

Here's one of the blurbs for his new book:

Edward Adams-- King's College London "A thorough and far-reaching investigation of the topic of Jesus' conception.

Andrew Lincoln, one of the finest New Testament exegetes of our time...

That's overstated. Lincoln is a fine NT exegete, but the same could be said for dozens of his contemporary NT scholars.

Years ago he wrote a commentary on Ephesians which was, at the time of publication, the best available commentary on Ephesians. There wasn't much competition at the time—basically F. F. Bruce, and Mitton, as well as Robinson's old classic.

But his commentary on Ephesians has since been overtaken by Hoehner, Arnold, O'Brien, and Thielman. It's no longer the leader of the pack.

His more recent commentary on John is good on theology, but even in that respect it's not in the same league as the magnum opus by Ridderbos, much less the magnum opus by Michaels. (In fairness, they have more space to play with than he was allotted.)

And, of course, there are better commentaries on the historical aspects of John, viz. Keener, Blomberg.

He also wrote a fine monograph on the theology of Hebrews.

He's very capable, but he doesn't stand head-and-shoulders above his peers.

ii) One of his problems is that he's one-sided. The NT writers emphasize two truths about the humanity of Jesus rather than one.

On the one hand they stress his solidarity with humanity. He's one of us.

On the other hand, they also set him apart from us. Christ is both like us and unlike us. He has much in common with us, but in some respects he's sui generis.

Lincoln suppresses the distinctives. But that's a reductionistic Christology. And that's apart from the deity of Christ, or the hypostatic union. Christ is a complex person.

iii) Believing the virgin birth because Scripture teaches the virgin birth is sufficient warrant. It doesn't require a defense over and above exegeting the classic prooftexts.

iv) However, Christian philosophers, theologians, and apologists sometimes attempt to explain the virgin birth or offer a scientific model of sorts. Unlike the doctrine itself, a scientific model of the virgin birth is susceptible to rational scrutiny. That has to be internally consistent, as well as consistent with scientific possibilities. Mind you, that's not confined to what's naturally possible. Rather, this is akin to genetic engineering. Artificially manipulating natural possibilities.

v) Biblical miracles are not all of a kind. Some employ natural mechanisms. Take the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was a natural disaster. What makes that miraculous is not the means, but the way that event reflects the divine coordination of natural means.

In principle, miracles of that kind are more open to human inspection, in terms of how it might have happened. We can postulate natural mechanisms.

But other miracles, like the metamorphosis of rods into snakes and vice versa, humans surviving in a furnace, or the multiplication of food, are "contrary" to the ordinary course of nature. These don't involve an obvious "mechanism." They don't involve a linear extension of natural processes. They are discontinuous with natural processes.

The virgin birth is more like the second kind of miracle. To that extent, it's more opaque. We know the result. We know what didn't happen. But the details of "how" God did it elude us. And below a certain level, there's nothing more to explain. No "how" beyond God's sheer fiat.

vi) One objection to the virgin birth is the contention that the virgin birth was predicated on an obsolete understanding of reproductive genetics. Matthew and Luke thought the mother's contribution was sufficient. But now that we know the father's contribution is an essential component, that's no longer tenable. Or so goes the argument.

One problem with that objection is that, to my knowledge, it's got the relationship exactly backwards. In my reading, the usual claim is that ancient people didn't think the mother made any positive contribution to procreation. They thought the father made the positive contribution. The new human was contained in the man's seed or semen. A homunculus. Like an acorn. The mother was basically an incubator. So it's odd to see Lincoln turn that upside down.

vii) Also, it's obvious that Matthew and Luke didn't think Mary's contribution was sufficient. The agency of the Holy Spirit was a necessary component.

viii) To assume the virgin birth was based on an obsolete understanding of reproductive genetics denies the inspiration of Matthew and Luke. Christians don't think Bible writers were limited to what they could naturally know, through observation and education. God corrected their misconceptions. God revealed information to them.

ix) However, let's assume for the sake of argument that Matthew and Luke had inaccurate views of reproductive genetics. Their personal understanding of reproductive genetics is irrelevant to the accuracy of the virgin birth accounts. For Matthew is reporting an event. Luke is reporting an event, as well as reporting a conversation (between Mary and the angel Gabriel). In their reportorial role, they don't have to understand reproductive genetics. They simply transmit revealed truths. They relay historical events. The virgin birth isn't dependent on how they understood the mechanics of the virgin birth. They aren't the source of the concept.

The only thing they have to understand is that Mary wasn't impregnated by a man. She became pregnant apart from sexual intercourse. The creative agent was the Holy Spirit. An incorporeal agent. A physical effect of an immaterial cause.

It doesn't require a scientific mastery of reproductive genetics to grasp that. Primitive people know that making a baby normally requires the conjunction of a man and a woman. That's a presupposition of the virgin birth accounts. They stand in studied contrast to that backdrop.

x) Someone like Lincoln could attempt to evade this by denying that we should take the objective, third-person narrative at face value. He could say that's literary artifice.

But if he takes that tack, then that's a different debate. That becomes a debate about the inspiration of Scripture.

In addition, that's counterproductive. By trying to pit the NT witness to the Incarnation against the NT witness to the virgin birth, he destroys both. If he rejects the inerrancy of Scripture respecting the virgin birth, he might as well reject the inerrancy of Scripture respecting the Incarnation or the humanity of Christ. Attacking the virgin birth in order to defend the Incarnation is suicidal inasmuch as both doctrines depend on the witness of Scripture. If Scripture can't be trusted to attest the virgin birth, it can't be trusted to attest the Incarnation.

xi) One way of modeling the virgin birth is to use a modified reproductive paradigm in which the Holy Spirit miraculously fertilized Mary's ovum. But critics attack it on the grounds that, absent a seminal contribution, the "fertilized" ovum would lack the Y chromosome.

To which we can postulate that the Holy Spirit created ex nihilo sperm to fertilize the ovum. And that supplies the Y chromosome.

xii) A critic might object that that's sheer speculation. However, scientific objections to the virgin birth are no less speculative. Matthew and Luke don't specify the process, just the result. Mary conceives Jesus in the womb through the unilateral action of the Holy Spirit. That's it.

In order to mount a scientific objection to the virgin birth, the critic must first postulate a specific process, then object to it. So the critic is in the same boat as the Christian philosopher or theologian.

The critic begins with normal procreation: sperm meets ovum, sperm fertilizes ovum. The critic then objects that a key component of this transaction is missing in the case of the virgin birth.

But given that conventional procreative framework, a Christian philosopher or theologian is entitled to modify the paradigm. Indeed, since the virgin birth is avowedly miraculous, a Christian philosopher or theologian is compelled to modify the paradigm, for this is not a purely or primarily natural process. Therefore, that's not ad hoc. That's responding to the critic on his own terms. Speculative objections justify speculative rejoinders.

xiii) Perhaps, though, the critic will say it's ad hoc in a different respect. We'd expect God to either be consistently naturalistic or supernaturalistic in his methodology, whereas the virgin birth oscillates between both. Why use a woman at all if you don't use a man?

However, that's easy to parry:

a) There's biblical precedent. God didn't create Adam and Eve entirely from scratch. In the case of Adam, he made use of preexisting inorganic material—and in the case of Eve, preexisting organic material.

b) He made sure Jesus had a biological mother to tie into Gen 3:15.

c) In addition, the virgin birth is an extension and intensification of other miraculous conceptions in Scripture. Same principle. It just takes it a step further, to mark out Jesus as even more special than, say, Isaac or John the Baptist.

xiv) But suppose we use a different paradigm: a modified clone. Although a clone normally shares the sex of the donor, I believe that could be genetically engineered to adjust the sex of the clone.

A critic might object that this is artificial. But that misses the point. The virgin birth is a miracle. Miracles are artificial to one degree or another. They involve the divine manipulation of nature.

Attacking the Virgin Birth

I'm going to quote, then comment on, some arguments by Andrew Lincoln:

It should be apparent, then, that in this area Matthew's and Luke's birth stories also provide the features that would be expected of an ancient biography's depiction of the beginnings of the life of a great figure. In Matthew there are Joseph's dreams, the angel's prediction of the child's future role as Saviour, the fulfillment of earlier predictions from the Scriptures, the magi who are the equivalent of the diviners, the portent of the star, and the accompanying attempt to prevent the birth of male children. In Luke there are again angelic predictions of the future greatness of Mary's child, the omen of Elizabeth's baby leaping in her womb at the appearances of the pregnant Mary and the accompanying explanation, the glory of the Lord shining around the shepherds as the angelic announcement is made to them, and both Simeon and Anna immediately recognizing in Mary's child the one who is to bring salvation to Israel, with Simeon also predicting his destiny.

There are further correspondences with Graeco-Roman biographies. Matthew began his story with a genealogy (cf. also Luke 3:23-38). As might be expected, other biographers also provide material on the family lineage of their subjects...Diogenes Laertius follows Plato's family back through Solon to Neptune...The naming of Jesus and the meaning of his names are particularly important in Matthew's narrative. A similar concern is found in Plutarch about the names of Romulus and Remus and Theseus.

Sometimes such biographies recount something miraculous about the birth of the subject...Plutarch provides three examples. In relating the origins of Romulus...The two boys, Romulus and Remus, are taken away and looked after by a wolf and a woodpecker...Like Romulus, Theseus "got the reputation of descent from gods...that he was begotten by Poseidon."

In Plutarch's biography of Alexander, Philip sees Apollo, under the form of a serpent, lying with his wife...Suetonius has a similar story about Augustus' conception. His mother, Atia, falls asleep in the temple of Apollo. Apollo comes to her in the form of

a snake...Porphyry recounts that Pythagoras was said to be the son of Apollo.

In relation to Tiberius, Suetonius relates how an eagle landed on the roof of his house and underlines that he was confident of his destiny because of the predictions of astrologers...His account of Vespasian lists a number of portents of his future imperial dignity, including a prediction from Josephus and incidents involving a dog, an ox and eagles.

Philostratus relates that Apollonius' mother had an apparition of Proteus, the Egyptian god, in the guise of a demon before the birth of her son...

These examples indicate that major elements in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke bear a remarkable resemblance to what is to be found in Graeco-Roman biographies at the places where they treat the early stages of their subjects' lives before their public arena...In this material ancestry, names, and geographical and political setting may well have support from tradition, but much of the content, whether traditional or not, involves notions about the gods, fate, auguries, portents,

divination and astrology that are legendary but nevertheless illustrate the significance that became attached to the subject's life. Born of a Virgin? (Eerdmans 2013), 60,62-63,65-66.

i) One preliminary observation: Lincoln defends the mutual independence of the Matthean and Lucan nativity accounts (129ff). That, however, would mean we have multiple-attestation for the virgin birth.

ii) It's striking that a NT scholar of Lincoln's distinction would resort to such atrocious comparative methodology. I guess the best explanation is that because he finds the virgin birth incredible, he's forced to justify his infidelity at whatever cost. Lincoln's handling of sources is naive and sloppy. He fails to draw elementary distinctions or make allowance for obvious considerations:

iii) The need to distinguish between historical figures and mythological figures. In the nature of the case, legendary embellishment can only apply to someone who actually existed, not to fictional demigods like Romulus, Remus, and Theseus. In the case of mythological figures, the entire "biography" is invented whole cloth. There are no factual constraints on what can be said about them.

iv) The difference between writing about a contemporary or near contemporary, in contrast to a public figure who lived and died generations before the historian or biographer. In the case of figures who died within living memory, reliable information is still available.

v) We must also take into account the motivations of court historians and royal biographers who make their living by churning out flattering propaganda about their Roman overlords, or ex post facto legitimation of the Roman regime by concocting or elaborating a chauvinistic national mythology. Josephus, Plutarch, and Suetonius are all pandering to their social superiors, to ingratiate themselves with the powers that be. It's a classic client/patron relationship.

vi) Perhaps Lincoln imagines that Luke's relationship to Theophilus is comparable. However, if Luke was so motivated, he'd do for Caesar what he does instead for Jesus and John the Baptist.

vii) All of the examples he gives in Matthew and Luke have OT precedents. So it's anachronistic for Lincoln to attribute that to Greco-Roman biographical conventions.

viii) Even on their own terms, why does Lincoln assume that Greco-Roman biographers and historians simply invented stories about prophetic dreams and celestial portents? The ancients really did believe dreams could be prophetic.

Lincoln fails to distinguish between inventing a prophetic dream, and recounting a real dream to which you ascribe prophetic significance. Oneiromancy isn't about inventing dreams, but interpreting dreams. A dream can be quite real without it being really prophetic.

Likewise, why does Lincoln assume that Greco-Roman biographers and historians simply invented stories about stellar prodigies? Ancient people really did believe certain astronomical phenomena portended the future. Lincoln fails to distinguish between inventing an astronomical sign, and

ascribing prophetic significance to an actual astronomical phenomenon.

Astrologers don't need to invent comets, meteors, eclipses, conjunctions, &c. Astrologers are inventive, but not in that respect. Rather, they offer ingenious interpretations of birthdates in relation to the position of the stars, &c.

Improvising morality

A few years ago, NT scholar Andrew Lincoln published a book attacking the Virgin Birth. Jason did a multipart critical review:

http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/11/andrew-lincolns-book-against-virgin_9.html

And I did some posting:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/11/attacking-virgin-birth.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/11/parsing-virgin-birth.html>

Now, however, I'd like to draw attention to something else. Does Lincoln have an ulterior motive for undermining the historicity of the Virgin Birth? Last year he contributed to a book in which he makes some revealing statements about his theological motivations:

My views about the truth of the Bible and its relation to faith continue to evolve in response to... factors, such as...church life and its mission of social justice, friendships. Times of radical questioning have been precipitated not by academic study of the Bible but more by crises in my personal life and relationships, by my and the church's failure to be loving...

So there was immediately a much greater recognition that the Bible's authority was not to be thought of as timeless in some unqualified sense. That deepening recognition was already preparing me to think about questions that confronted me in the first two settings in which I taught—about women's ordained ministry at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and about homosexuality at St. John's College, Nottingham. Although I started off by thinking that traditionalists had the better exegetical case on these matters and that should be decisive, my pastoral experience with women students, who were highly gifted in teaching and preaching, and with gay ordinands, who had prayed and agonized about their sexuality for years and were placed in the invidious position of hoping their future bishops would be those who deliberately turned a blind eye to official teaching, caused me to rethink what the Bible's authority meant in such cases... This involves, as some put it, "improvising"...

I (Still) Believe: Leading Bible Scholars Share Their Stories of Faith and Scholarship (Zondervan 2015), 148-149.

So Lincoln has a social agenda. He doesn't begin with principles, but people. He adapts and changes his view of Biblical authority based on personal experience and personal relationships.

Given his frank admission, you can see how attacking the historicity of the Virgin Birth (or the historicity of John's Gospel) drives another wedge into the authority of Scripture, thereby making room for his "social justice" concerns.

How Ehrman shot himself in the foot

Whether or not he had this in mind when he began his journey into apostasy, there's a strategy to Ehrman's attack on the historical Jesus. Basically, it goes like this:

i) Because the text of the NT is unreliable, we don't know what Jesus was actually like. We don't know what he really said and did. **MISQUOTING JESUS.**

ii) Even if the text of the NT was reliable, the Jesus traditions which were eventually canonized aren't based on firsthand information. **JESUS INTERRUPTED.**

iii) Even if the Jesus traditions in the Gospels were based on firsthand information, eyewitness memory is unreliable. **JESUS BEFORE THE GOSPELS.**

Now, each step in the argument can be challenged. I've done some of that myself, as have others.

But Ehrman's argument suffers from another problem. One way Ehrman attempts to discredit the Gospels is to alleged that some of their claims can be shown to be historically erroneous. For instance, in **JESUS INTERRUPTED**, he dusts off the chestnut about the census of Quirinius. He says that's falsified by extrabiblical historical sources (pp31-33).

However, a glaring problem with his appeal is that Ehrman is resorting to a double standard. He's exempting the extrabiblical sources from the same skepticism he applies to the Gospels. For instance, he appeals to Tacitus, Josephus,

and inscriptional evidence regarding Quirinius. Yet he fails to apply the same criterion to them:

i) Do we have a reliable textual tradition for Tacitus and Josephus? In **MISQUOTING JESUS**, Ehman hypothesizes:

Suppose that after the original manuscript of a text was produced, two copies were made of it, which we may call A and B. These two copies, of course, will differ from each other in some ways — possibly major and probably minor. Now suppose that A was copied by one other scribe, but B was copied by fifty scribes. Then the original manuscript, along with copies A and B, were lost, so that all that remains in the textual tradition are the fifty-one second-generation copies, one made from A and fifty made from B.

Although he had the NT in mind when he wrote that, the same principle applies to his extrabiblical sources. What if all our MSS of Tacitus or Josephus derive from a mistake-ridden fifth-generation copy?

ii) Even assuming that we have reliable MSS of Tacitus and Josephus, what's the evidence that their statements about

Qurinius are based on firsthand information?

iii) Even assuming that their statements (or the inscriptions) about Qurinius are based on firsthand information, Ehrman has published a new book in which he claims eyewitness recollection is untrustworthy.

So this poses a dilemma for Ehrman: if, on the one hand, he treats his extrabiblical sources with the same skepticism he treats the NT, then he can't use extrabiblical sources as a standard of comparison. By that logic, they are just as dubious as the NT. If, on the other hand, he deems his extrabiblical sources to be prima facie trustworthy, then, in consistency, he must grant the same presumption regarding the canonical Gospels. He can only use extrabiblical sources to impugn the historicity of the Gospels on pain of special pleading. So his trilogy becomes an automated machine that shoots himself in the foot the moment he tries to discredit the historicity of the Gospels by appeal to extrabiblical historical sources.

Revisiting the "genealogies" of Jesus

Are the "genealogies" of Jesus in Matthew and Luke irreconcilable? Are they fictional?

1. A Jewish objection to the messiahship of Jesus is that he lacks impeccable Davidic pedigree. Related to this is the objection that a virginal conception disqualifies his claim to be a Davidic heir.

If, however, Matthew and Luke feel free to create a fictional backstory for Jesus, why would they fabricate a backstory that obscures his Davidic claims? Why invent the virgin birth, or codify a legendary virgin birth, if that delegitimizes the claim that Jesus is the rightful heir of David?

An obvious explanation is that Matthew and Luke were not guilty of confabulation. Rather, they were constrained by facts about the personal history of Jesus, even if it generates prima facie tensions in their theology.

It would be convenient for them to invent a backstory that makes Jesus an unambiguous heir of David. For that matter, it would be convenient for them to invent a backstory that makes him a Levite. But they're stuck with the actual facts about Jesus. It's a mark of their historical fidelity that they don't concoct evidence.

2. There's the risk of creating a nonexistent problem or contradiction by making a preliminary misstep. It may be prejudicial to classify the lists in Mt 1:1-17 and Lk 3:23-38 as genealogies. Although they contain genealogical elements, it may be simplistic to reduce them to a genealogical genre.

You can have two contradictory roadmaps if, indeed, both are maps mapping the same area. If, however, they have a different function, then they can be different without being contradictory.

3. For instance, many scholars regard the phrase in Mt 1:1 as an evocation of Gen 2:4. Yet Gen 2:4 is not a genealogy. At best it's a figurative genealogy. So that in itself is a clue about how we should read Mt 1:1-17. That should caution us against assuming that this list is meant to be a Simon pure genealogy. Based on the programmatic quotation from Gen 2:4, which introduces the list, the list may reflect a different or broader principle.

4. Although "begetting" can be literal, it can also be metaphorical. Ps 2:7 uses that language figuratively for God's regent. And it may not be coincidental that the figurative usage occurs in the context of enthronement.

5. To my knowledge, royal succession doesn't require genetic lineage. A king can designate a successor who's not a blood relation. Although heredity and royal succession often coincide, they are separable.

6. In Lk 3:38, while "son of" can be biological in reference to Seth and Adam, it can't be biological in reference to God. Minimally, this entails a shift in meaning of "sonship" at that juncture. So Luke isn't using "son of" consistently. There's a studied equivocation. And "son of" can have a figurative sense, viz. "sons of thunder" (Mk 3:17), "sons of Belial" (Deut 13:13).

The genealogy of Jesus

7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph [or Asa], 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos [or Amon], and Amos [Amon?] the father of Josiah (Mt 1:7-10).

1. The interrelationship between the "genealogies" of Matthew and Luke poses a long-standing crux. I put "genealogies" in scare quote because that in itself may be part of the problem. In modern English, "genealogy" has a narrow, technical connotation, and it's prejudicial to assume that Matthew and/or Luke were recording "genealogies" in that specialized sense.

2. For instance, is the selection criterion in Matthew strictly and solely ancestral, or does he have other criteria? In vv7-8,10, he seems to use double entendres, where "Asaph" is a pun for "Asa" while "Amos" is a pun for "Amon". Although it's possible that "Asaph" and "Amos" are scribal errors, they represent the stronger manuscript tradition. Cf. B. Metzger, **A TEXTUAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT** (UBS, 2nd. ed., 1994), 1-2.

If "Asaph" and "Amos" are original, then Matthew is substituting a psalmist and a prophet for Hebrew kings. A homophonic wordplay that trades on association with each. If so, then Matthew isn't constructing a pure family tree; rather, his selection criteria include theological kinship as well as lineal ancestry.

But in that event, the question of whether Matthew and Luke have contradictory "genealogies" is confused, since, at least in the case of Matthew, this was never meant to be strictly ancestral in the first place. The genre is more complex. Matthew, writing for a Jewish audience, has subtle puns to indicate that Jesus is not only David's royal heir, but heir to the psalmists and prophets.

Dynasties and genealogies

I'd like to explore some neglected considerations regarding the compatibility of Matthew and Luke's genealogies:

1. Liberals take one of two positions:

i) Matthew and Luke are using independent, divergent traditions. There's no reason to believe either tradition is historically reliable.

ii) Matthew and Luke fabricated the genealogies.

Conservative attempts to harmonize the two genealogies are chalked up to special pleading.

2. Let's begin with a personal anecdote. I have a cousin who has three daughters. By definition, I'm a generation older than her daughters, yet her daughters are older than me! Sounds like a riddle. How is that possible?

My cousin and I share common ancestors in our maternal grandparents. They had 9 children, covering a 14 year spread. She and I are children of their children.

She's about 25 years older than me, and she married at 15. As a result, her daughters were born before I was born.

Even though I belong to the same generation as their mother, they are older than me. Seems contradictory that people who are a generation younger than me can be older than me, but that's one of those wrinkles you run across in real life.

And you can imagine this might be confusing to a reader who didn't have all the information. Indeed, it might seem like a discrepancy!

3. Suppose we compare two lists of people that both terminate with Queen Elizabeth II. They have a few names in common, especially towards the end. But most of the names don't match. On the face of it, these are discrepant, indeed, irreconcilable lists. Although they converge near the end, they are mostly divergent.

But in principle, both could be correct. You see, one could be her family tree while the other could be the royal succession. One list could be genealogical while the other list could be dynastic.

In one sense, the two lists cannot be harmonized. Most of the names don't match. Yet the two lists are indirectly interconnected because both lists are related to Queen Elizabeth. The names aren't related to each other, but to her. They both list predecessors, but two different kinds of predecessors. One list is based on biological descent while the other is based on dynastic descent. One is a list of rulers while the other is a list of ancestors. Both lists could be diagrammed as trees, but they operate on different principles.

They can't be combined because they employ different selection criteria. Yet the two lists are mutually compatible.

There are, of course, stretches during which biological lines and royal lines overlap. But although the royal lineage is continuous, the biological lineage is discontinuous inasmuch as dynasties may die out, or be abruptly supplanted by a rival house. Because the royal families of Europe and Great

Britain intermarried from time to time, the two lists will intersect at random points.

Now, imagine if you had a copy of both lists, but they weren't labeled. One wasn't entitled the rulers of Great Britain and the other wasn't entitled the family tree of Elizabeth II. You just had a sequential list of names. It would be very puzzling to compare the two lists. Puzzling to discern a unifying principle. You have no overarching context. Just two bare lists.

Imagine if these lists were 2000 years old. Your knowledge of that period is full of gaps. Historical records that identify names on the list are quite fragmentary.

It would be easy to conclude that one or both lists are inaccurate, contradictory, legendary, or fabricated. Yet that would be an ignorant conclusion.

4. Apropos (3), does "beget" language (X begat Y) entail a genealogical relationship? Not necessarily. The same language can be figurative to denote a dynastic relationship, viz. 2 Sam 7:14, Ps 2:7. God was not David's literal progenitor.

So when we read the "genealogies" of Christ, are these consistently biological precursors, or might they sometimes be royal precursors? Keep in mind the Davidic emphasis, not only in the Matthean "genealogy," but Matthew's Gospel generally.

5. And here's a final wrinkle. Biblical lists of people aren't necessarily arranged according to a single structuring principle or selection criterion. Take the Table of Nations (Gen 10). Is the linkage genealogical, geographical, or socioeconomic? Seems to be some of each.

That should perhaps forewarn us not to presume that the "genealogies" of Christ in Matthew and Luke are reducible to a single type of affinity.

Biblical astronomy

One objection unbelievers raise to Joshua's Long Day, the Star of Bethlehem, and the Crucifixion darkness, is the (alleged) absence of extrabiblical confirmation. If these were global events, visible worldwide or visible outside the Holy Land, we'd expect extrabiblical records. So goes the argument.

Of course, how global these events really were is, itself, a matter of interpretation. But let's assume, for the sake of argument, that all three events would be visible outside the Holy Land. Does the absence of documentation commensurate with the extent of the phenomena cast doubt on the historicity of the Biblical record? Let's take a comparison:

On July 4, 1054 A.D., Chinese astronomers noted a "guest star" in the constellation Taurus; Simon Mitton lists 5 independent preserved Far-East records of this event (one of 75 authentic guest stars - novae and supernovae, excluding comets - systematically recorded by Chinese astronomers between 532 B.C. and 1064 A.D., according to Simon Mitton). This star became about 4 times brighter than Venus in its brightest light, or about mag -6, and was visible in daylight for 23 days.

Some older sources had speculated that this supernova might have been as bright as the Full Moon (or mag -12). The reason for this assumption was probably the intention to fit its 23-day visibility with older model lightcurves.

It was probably also recorded by Anasazi Indian artists (in present-day Arizona and New Mexico), as findings in Navaho Canyon and White Mesa (both AZ, found 1953-54 by William C. Miller) as well as in the Chaco Canyon National Park (NM) indicate; there's a review of the research on the Chaco Canyon Anasazi art online, including the full-size version of our photo, which was obtained by Ron Lussier. A similar photo of this possible Supernova Pictograph was obtained by Paul Charbonneau of the High Altitude Observatory.

As Simon Mitton points out in his book (Mitton 1978), evidence for the plausibility of this interpretation arises from the fact that on the morning of July 5, 1054 the crescent moon came remarkably close to the supernova, as seen (only) from Western North America.

In 1990, Ralph Robert Robbins of the University of Texas announced the discovery of additional records in pottery of the Mimbres Indians of New Mexico. The plate probably representing the supernova is e.g. shown on page 68 of Robert Garfinkle's book Star Hopping. As the author lines out, the art style of this plate was used only before 1100 A.D., and carbon-14 dating indicates that this plate was created between 1050 and 1070 AD, so that very probably the supernova is depicted, as a 23-rayed star.

Strangely enough, it seems that at least almost no records of European or Arab observations of the supernova have survived to modern times.

http://messier.seds.org/more/m001_sn.html

Either this highly conspicuous, widely observable event wasn't generally reported, or most of the reports were lost. This, despite the fact that ancient observers took a keen interest in celestial prodigies and portents.

Guiding light

Some of the depositions spoke of miraculous sightings, of lights appearing in the sky to guide the Camisards through the dark of night past Catholic troops, and other supernatural phenomena. Claude Arnassan from Montel recounted that he had spent three years in Marseille as a galley slave, the penalty for having fought in Rolland Cavalier's troop. While soldiering, he had witnessed lights like torches in the sky, which appeared fortuitously on occasion: "He was no sooner on his knees, than there appeared in the air a light, like a large star, which advanced, pointing to the place where the assembly was met." As he was leaving, a young inspiré told Arnassan of a vision he had experienced, in which he saw that Arnassan would be imprisoned unless he immediately put himself back under Cavalier's leadership. Shortly after, he was jailed in Nîmes until

1704, Jacques Du Bois, who made his way from Montpellier to Geneva and then to London, witnessed "balls of fire fall from heaven to dazzle the eyes of their enemies" on several occasions. Similarly, Guillaume Bruguier, who had been captured at Uzez, incarcerated for three months, then impressed into the king's service in Spain before deserting near Portugal, was guided in his flight by "Le Ciel": "I saw, as it were, stars directing toward the place, where it was, which I always looked upon as a guide, and never failed to find it true."C.

Randall, *From a Far Country: Camisards and Huguenots in the Atlantic World* (University of Georgia Press 2011), 53.

French Protestants suffering intense persecution and martyrdom for their faith from the Catholic authorities. Although I certainly allow for the possibility that some of these accounts are fanciful or legendary, I think they're plausible. I find it believable that God would perform miracles *like* this to encourage Christians suffering severe persecution for the faith.

These reported miracles are interesting in part because they evoke Biblical parallels. For instance, God using astronomical portents and prodigies to confound enemy troops. Likewise, functional similarities with the Star of Bethlehem.

Liberal Bible scholars dismiss astronomical miracles as mythical or rhetorical, so it's striking to read about prima facie corroborative evidence in the annals of church history.

The star and Shekinah

Scholars debate the identity of the Star of Bethlehem. Some think it's a natural astronomical phenomenon. One problem with that identification is that the "star" doesn't behave like an inanimate object. There's a specificity to its behavior. Its localized appearance. Its intermittent appearance. The "star" acts like a personal agent on a mission. Liberals think it's mythical.

I'd like to conjecture that the "star" might be the Shekinah. The Shekinah seems to be a good candidate for the "star":

- i)** As a visible manifestation of God's presence, the movements of the Shekinah reflect personal discretion, unlike a naturally occurring or naturally intermittent phenomenon.
- ii)** The Shekinah is luminous at night.
- iii)** Matthew refers to the Shekinah in the Transfiguration account.
- iv)** In OT and NT accounts, the Shekinah appears and disappears at will.
- v)** The Shekinah has a guiding function in the OT, leading the Israelites in the wilderness. Guiding the Magi would be another case in kind.
- vi)** The Shekinah positioning itself over the home of the Holy Family would have emblematic theological significance. A divine witness to the person inside.

Herod and the magi

Jason Engwer has been responding to Jonathan Pearce's attacks on Matthew's nativity account. I notice that Pearce is very repetitive. He recites his talking-points, paraphrasing the same stump speech without advancing the argument. With that in mind, I'll comment on a representative example of how he proceeds:

<http://www.skepticink.com/tipling/2014/12/20/response-to-triablogues-jason-engwer-on-nativity-accounts-part-1/>

To set the scene, Herod has been visited by the Magi who inadvertently get lost following a supernatural star (which God is in control of, so this seems by design) and end up in Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. Remember, these are some wise Zoroastrian astrologer/astronomers (probably) who have come together and followed a star that no one else in the known world appears to have seen, thinking it will lead them to something special. What a huge risk!

i) There's no textual evidence that they were following the star at this stage. There's no textual evidence that the star

was visible during their journey. To the contrary, the text indicates that the star was only intermittently visible.

As far as the text goes, the star may have initially appeared for just a few days or less, around the time of Christ's birth. It may have appeared in the direction of Palestine, from their original location. It didn't point to Bethlehem.

The function of the star at this juncture wasn't to continuously guide them from their country of origin to Bethlehem or even Palestine. Rather, the star had an emblematic significance for them, indicating the birth of a Jewish king. And it gave them a compass point (as it were). Head in that general vicinity.

ii) Going to Jerusalem isn't just a detour. In the implicit theology of the narrative, the magi bear witness to the Jewish establishment. Their presence signals the birth of the Messiah. That puts the Jewish establishment on notice.

iii) I don't know why he identifies the magi as Zoroastrians.

iv) Others may have seen the star, but without a frame of reference, it held no particular significance for them. Unless you know what it signifies, seeing the star doesn't lead to a plan of action.

v) Matthew doesn't bother to explain how they were able to interpret the star. If they were from Babylon, there was a major Jewish community in Babylon—a holdover from the Babylonian Exile. They might have gotten some information from that source.

Or, even if they weren't from Babylon, given the role of angels in the nativity account, an angelic apparition might have clued them in.

They end up wandering around Jerusalem, where word of their search gets to the king. Herod finds out that they speak of a prophecy which neither himself, his scribes, or anyone else in Jerusalem appear to have the first clue about. Apparently, it speaks of the Messiah being born in nearby Bethlehem. Who knew?!

i) What is even Pearce talking about? There's nothing in the text to indicate that the magi spoke of a prophecy about the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. To the contrary, that's supplied by Herod's theological consultants.

ii) Moreover, as an impious halfbreed Jew, there's no reason to think Herod was deeply versed in the OT Scriptures.

Littered with these issues, the somewhat trusting (out of character) Herod lets the Magi go and assumes they will report back to him.

i) Matthew doesn't present Herod as trusting, but devious. Herod is used to manipulating people. He doesn't expect the magi to double-cross him. He's the kind of man who prides

himself on outsmarting his enemies. He lives by his wits, and that's served him well over the years. He was very cunning. A political survivor in a cutthroat world.

It's the magi who are trusting. Unsuspecting. They intend to report back to him. It's the angel who warns them. Not something Herod could anticipate. So Herod's behavior is perfectly in character.

ii) But let's assume, for the sake of argument, that it's out of character. So what? In the Bible, God sometimes messes with the minds of wicked kings. God makes them do rash, foolish things. Matthew's God isn't going to let Herod murder the Messiah—who happens to be his Son, no less!

As I have pointed out, Herod is not likely to have troubled himself with the newborn since at the time he was very ill, very old (in his 70s), suicidal and we know he did not care for the future of his kingdom, leaving it not explicitly to any particular son, with no vision of what it should become. In this light, is he likely to care a fig about a child whose challenge will not come to fruition for another 20-30 years, if at all?

That's not what our extrabiblical sources tell us. To the contrary, they say that as he grew older, he become

fanatically possessive and paranoid about his hold on power.

Is it more probable, then, that the Matthean account of Herod did not happen? That the Magi were a literary and theological mechanism, a device for getting Herod involved to play the Pharaoh in a midrashic retelling of the crucial Old Testament story of Moses? That the firstborns dying is repeated in the Massacre of the Innocents at the hands of Herod, which leads Joseph and family to flee to Egypt only to “come out of Egypt” (“fulfilling” a prophecy in the meantime) like Moses to create a new kingdom of God? To believe this actually happened as reported by Matthew, to me, beggars belief.

i) The *firstborn* males aren't singled out in the Massacre of the Innocents. Moreover, the *males* are targeted because the *Messiah* is male.

ii) Critics are conflicted on this point. On the one hand they claim that Matthew began with his OT prooftexts, then invented stories to illustrate his prooftexts. On the other

hand, they claim that the prooftexts don't match the stories.

One would certainly have good right to think that this is bizarre and that Herod would more likely accompany them or send troops with them to find the Messiah at risk of death, and kill him there and then.

*This, of course, assumes that the Magi were real, which, as I point out in my book (and it is worth reading Adair's superb *The Star of Bethlehem: A Skeptical View*). But Jason does have something of a point. However, Herod's affront at the time would lead him, surely, to accompany the Magi by force. This would mean that there was no margin for error. On pain of death, those Magi would have led him to the baby.*

That's a fallacious inference. The fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem doesn't imply that he was still residing there by the time the magi arrived on the scene. That's simply his last known address. Neither Herod nor the magi know in advance if Jesus is still there.

So it would make sense for Herod to let the Magi scout out Bethlehem to confirm his whereabouts. That's the logical

place to start. If he had moved, they could query the neighbors.

Moreover, the Star reappeared, so it would have been trivially easy to go there independently of the Magi. In fact, unless God only magically made the star visible to the Magi, the whole of Jerusalem could have gone to see the newborn Messiah; the entity they had surely been waiting to see for quite some time.

i) The star reappeared for the magi's benefit, not for Herod's henchmen. Why assume the star would compliantly light the way of assassins? It doesn't act like a natural object. It's very discriminating.

ii) In order for the star to be visible to everyone, it would need to be high in the sky. If, however, it was high in the sky, it wouldn't point to Bethlehem in particular. And to position itself right over the house of Mary and Joseph, it has to be very low in the sky. And not on the horizon, but very localized. yet in that event, its visibility is obscured by hills and trees. You can't see it by looking up. Rather, you can only see it by looking in the right direction.

iii) It doesn't occur to Pearce that "all Jerusalem" is hyperbolic. In context, Matthew is probably referring to the religious establishment.

iv) As the text says, Herod conducted his investigation in secret. It was very compartmentalized. He asked his theological consultants where the Messiah was to be born, and he asked the magi when the Messiah was born (assuming the appearance of the star coincided with the birth of Christ). However, he kept his theological consultants in the dark regarding the timing. Moreover, the general public wasn't privy to what either group told Herod behind closed doors. Only Herod and the magi know both the when and where.

At best, it takes two coordinates to locate Jesus: time (his birthdate) and space (his birthplace). Even that's fairly roughhewn—which is why Herod allows himself a generous margin of error (boys two years old and under) to make sure he doesn't miss the target.

v) What does Matthew intend the reader to visualize? What if it's more like ball lightning? It stays ahead of the magi, at about eye-level or a little higher. It illuminates the dark road. It leads them to Bethlehem, then singles out the house of Joseph and Mary.

I'm not saying it *is* ball lightning. I think it's likely the Shekinah. My point is simply to consider what the reader is supposed to imagine.

This concerns the idea that Herod, whilst talking to the Magi, was fortuitous enough to gain the exact information of where the star was at the time, etc etc...

How's that "fortuitous"? He's posing specific questions to pinpoint the time. And they'd be in a position to know when they first saw the star.

...so that, when the Magi failed to return, he was amazingly able to triangulate the position and age of the child and go about killing babies unbeknownst to any contemporary historian or recorder of events.

i) How is that "amazing"? He got the birthdate from one source and the birthplace from another source. Those are two key coordinates. However, that's time-sensitive. Indeed, as it turns out, his information was slightly out-of-date. So he just missed his quarry.

ii) Who says the death of the children was unknown to any contemporary historians? We only have fragments of some ancient historians. And the works of other ancient historians, like Nicolaus of Damascus, are completely lost to posterity.

iii) Moreover, ancient rulers routinely wiped out whole villages. That's so commonplace that we wouldn't expect ancient historians to record it. Ancient historians don't care about the little people.

Was the Star of Bethlehem a comet?

Colin Nicholl has written a testy response to Jason Engwer's review of his book.

<http://www.greatchristcomet.com/amazon-review-response.html>

Not having read Nicholl's book, I don't have an informed opinion to offer on his book. In this post I'm not evaluating his book. Rather, I'm going to comment on some things he said in response to Jason. I don't have a firm opinion on the magi's country of origin, so I won't comment on that. Likewise, I won't comment on the patristic/apocryphal texts. That's just not my bailiwick. Finally, in this post I will refer to the Star of Bethlehem by the neutral term "prodigy".

Let's begin by quoting some of Nicholl's statements that I wish to evaluate:

As I point out in the book, the supernatural view is a last-resort view.

By contrast, Engwer proposes that his woodenly literal reading of Mt 2:9 (the Star went "in close proximity to" the Magi and stood immediately over the place where the child was) is obviously superior.

Jason Engwer insists that the Star disappeared after the "rising" and only reappeared on the final night

of the Magi's journey. However, this is patently absurd.

There is no implication that the Star hadn't been seen since...As regards v9, the recollection of the "rising" most naturally makes the point that the very same Star that had prompted them to set off in search of the baby Messiah was now pinpointing the house where he was located, so that they could complete their mission. Again, there is not implication that the Star had been absent in the meantime.

If an object is present, then absent for a long time, and reappears in another region of the sky, the ancients simply would not have been able to identify it as one and the same item.

The very use of the astronomical word "rising" (see, for example, BDAG, Davies and Allison; and my book) refutes the idea that the Star immediately disappeared in the wake of the rising. After all, an astrological body's "rising" is the start of a new stage of its visibility (not invisibility) in the night sky.

...he also fails to appreciate that the Star at its "rising" had, by definition, to be a very great distance away from the Magi (outside Earth's atmosphere, in outer space, where, incidentally comets orbit).

That the Star is called a "star" (aster) and had "a rising" (an astrological term) and was observed by record-keeping celestial experts, who can tell Herod precisely when the Star first appeared make this point well.

However, his "highly local" Star is hard to reconcile with the word "star" and extremely difficult to reconcile with the "rising" language of v. 2, which, as we have just seen, implies that the Star was beyond Earth's atmosphere, not at all near the Magi.

To base a "highly local" Star on nothing other than a naive, wooden literalistic interpretation of v9 seems unwise. That many Christians some centuries after the event did the same is no excuse for making the same mistake today. We should know better.

If the Star was supernatural, why did the Star "appear" so long before the rising?...One could, I

suppose, deny that the "appearing" and the "rising are distinct.

A "highly local" Star that is akin to "ball lightning" is unconvincing—if such a body was a short distance in front of the Magi and indeed stood immediately over the house, then are we really to accept that no one else saw it at the time?

Ignorance of astronomy no doubt contributed to the origin and popularity of the various supernaturalist opinions.

However, I explain what the Star did to persuade the Magi that someone had been born and to get them to turn to the Hebrews Scriptures in a bid to identify the newborn.

As regards the Star's "standing," Engwer evidently does not envision his Star as having a cometary tail...[but] comets can stand perfectly vertical over the horizon (e.g. the 1680 comet)...Nevertheless, it seems to me that a slightly offset comet streaking up from near the horizon towards the roof of the sky would certainly have been naturally *paradigmed* as "standing."

i) Nicoll's response is deceptive. He misleads the reader by suggesting (more than once) that Jason's "woodenly literal" interpretation is eccentric. I daresay most laymen don't own or have access to major commentaries on Matthew, so they are just taking Nicoll's word for it when he dismisses Jason's interpretation as "woodenly literal" or "naively literal." But let's quote a few major commentators:

In light of this evidence, I conclude that the "star" is a miraculous and mysterious phenomenon whose precise identity cannot be ascertained. Knox Chamblin, Matthew: A Mentor Commentary (CFP 2010), 1:218-19.

For a "star" (i) to disappear at certain times and then suddenly to shine again, and (ii) to lead directly to Bethlehem and then to stand fixed over the house where Christ lay "was not of the order of nature." Ibid. 219n18.

The element in the story which most obviously invites skepticism is the guiding star with its apparently

purposeful movement and stopping to indicate a specific location (see on v9).

...those of us who are not astronomers may find it hard to envisage either of these phenomena first "rising," then "leading on" the magi, and eventually "coming to rest" in such a way as to indicate a specific location, even when due allowance is made for the phenomenal viewpoint of the storyteller's language. Despite the fascination of astronomical explanations, it may in the end be more appropriate to interpret Mt 2:9 as describing not a regular astronomical occurrence but the miraculous provision of what appeared to be a star which uniquely moved and then stopped (or at least which appeared to observers on the ground to do so), though of course there is no improbability in a natural astronomical phenomenon being the basis on which

the magi made their initial deductions and set off on their journey.

...it is hard to explain unless the star somehow indicated the actual house rather than just the village as a whole. It seems, then, that the star's movement gave them the final supernatural direction they needed to the specific house "where the child was." R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew (Eerdmans 2007), 65, 69, 74.

The conditions which the star must satisfy are the following: It must be the kind of star (a) for which the Magi might be considered to be on the lookout; (b) which on some basis or other could be identified as the star of the messiah of the Jews; (c) which can blaze a trail for the Magi to follow from Jerusalem; and (d) which can finally come to rest over a particular dwelling.

While the first two conditions alone would point in the direction of astrological observation of the

natural heavens, the third and fourth point only to a miraculously provided heavenly light. We appear to be dealing with a new light in the heavens which on the basis of location and/or time of emergence pointed in astrological lore to some special ascendancy of the Jews, but which goes away from its location in the heavens to lead the Magi from Jerusalem to the location in Bethlehem. The story itself provides no basis on which the Magi could have determined the identity of the star at its rising with the star which later went ahead to Bethlehem. The reader is left to depend on the superior knowledge (and reliability) of the narrator.

*The need to search or inquiry is preempted by the star, which at this point becomes (for the first time) a guiding star. Presumably the star confirms the correctness of looking for the child in Bethlehem, as well as guiding the Magi to the specific location. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2005), 110, 116.*

While these leading commentators don't necessarily agree with Engwer in every detail, or agree with each other in every detail, they clearly disagree with Nicholl. They interpret the "star" as miraculous or supernatural

phenomenon that appears and disappears when needed, providing very specific direction to the magi.

Nicholl can take issue with that, but it's unethical for him to insinuate that Jason's interpretation on these points is some backwoods reading that no serious modern Bible scholar would countenance.

ii) Comets are visible during the daytime, but the narrative indicates the star of Bethlehem was only visible at night.

iii) In a nativity account that includes the virgin birth, as well as special divine guidance in the form of angelic apparitions and revelatory dreams, I don't see that the supernatural interpretation of the "star" is a last resort-view. Not to mention supernatural events throughout the Gospel of Matthew (e.g. Satan miraculously tempting Jesus, miracles of Christ, angel rolling stone away from tomb, resurrection of Christ).

iv) It doesn't seem that Nicholl has given much thought to distance in relation to "rising." Take moonrise. The horizon which the moon rises above is observer-relative, depending on the landscape. Relative distance. The visible or apparent horizon. If I live on a featureless plain, then it's the distance between the observer and where the curvature of the earth terminates his line of sight. But in other cases, the horizon may be a distant mountain range, or nearby hills. So the apparent distance is highly variable.

Suppose I see the cavalry riding over the hill. They come into view as they "rise" over the local hillside.

Or suppose I'm standing on the beach. The water is choppy. A boat intermittently appears and disappears as it rises on

the crest of a wave, then vanishes behind the wave.
"Rising" is context-sensitive.

v) A lot depends on how we visualize "the sky." How the sky appears, and how objects appear in the sky, is quite variable depending on topography as well as the position of the luminous object. And that's true even for natural astronomical phenomena.

Take "big sky" country. If you have a flat, featureless landscape, then everyone within that radius can see a bright, star-like object rising above the horizon, unless it's behind them. And if it's high in the sky, then everyone within a certain radius can see it on a clear night.

If, on the other hand, you live at the bottom of a hill, then the object may be invisible to most viewers until it clears the hill. Or if you live in a wooded area, it may be invisible until it either clears the trees or is visible between a clearing in the woods. You may be able to see it in-between some trees if you're in the right location.

Recently, I went for a walk just before sundown. As I was returning, I saw the moon rising. But that was in-between trees and houses. The moon was mostly obscured by various objects various blocking the view.

It's easy to imagine scenarios in which the prodigy was only visible to a few observers. That depends on the landscape and the altitude of the phenomenon. To judge by his response, Nicholl hasn't tried to visualize different ways such an object could present itself. He hasn't taken into account differences topography would make, or the altitude.

In the description of the "star" leading them to the house, it's not even in the sky. Rather, it seems to be at eye-level.

Ahead of them rather than overhead. It then assumes a position over the roof of the house. That's just a few feet above ground level.

In addition, visibility involves three interrelated variables: size, proximity, and brightness (or contrast). Something smaller and dimmer can be seen nearby. Usually seen by fewer. Something bigger and brighter can be seen further away. Usually seen by more.

vi) Nicoll lays great emphasis on the terminology: a "rising star." Let's begin with the noun:

a) When we interpret the narrative genre, it's important to identify the viewpoint(s) and distinguish different viewpoints. There's the viewpoint of the narrator. Then there's the viewpoint of characters within the narrative. In this case, Matthew is the narrator while the magi are characters (among others). The designation of the prodigy initially comes from the magi (2:2) rather than the narrator. The fact that characters in the narrative call it a "star" doesn't necessarily or even probably mean the narrator shares their outlook. That's the magi's classification. That's how they introduce the subject.

b) It's true that the narrator picks up and continues their usage, but of course, it would be confusing to the reader if he suddenly switched to a different term. Moreover, he copies their term to link the initial appearance of the prodigy to its reappearance, so that readers will identify the object as one and the same phenomenon on both occasions.

c) In the nature of the case, the magi classify or designate the object according to the conceptual resources at their disposal. These are pagan gentiles. If, however, a Jew,

steeped in the Exodus account, were to witness the same phenomenon, he might well use different nomenclature.

d) Apropos (c), suppose the prodigy is the same kind of phenomenon as the Shekinah or pillar of fire. That would explain why it's more discriminating in terms of when and where it occurs. And that, moreover, would dovetail nicely with the other literary allusions to the Exodus. The Matthean nativity account is crisscrossed with Exodus typology. So this would be just one more Exodus motif. And it foreshadows the Transfiguration (Mt 17), which recapitulates the Shekinah in the wilderness.

e) Likewise, Matthew is limited to the vocabulary that's available to him. For instance, Nicholl thinks it's a comet, but according to modern astronomy, a comet is not a star.

Suppose it had the appearance of ball-lightning. But there is no Greek word for ball lightning, so "star" would have to do.

f) I'm also unclear on how Nicholl understands the adjectival verb. "Rising" in relation to what? I presume he means rising in relation to the horizon, like moonrise.

Problem is, you don't only see them rising. Sometimes they're below the horizon, sometimes above the horizon, sometimes in the zenith, sometimes declining, sometimes setting. It's circular motion. And the timing varies from day to day.

When it becomes dark, you already have constellations well above the horizon. The darkness merely reveals their presence. Some stars never dip below the horizon.

So what does it mean to say the magi saw a comet rising? That's not something they saw all the time. That's not necessarily or even probably how they saw it for the first time.

Or does Nicholl simply think that's an idiomatic phrase? A figure of speech? But that won't do, because he thinks the phrase has implications for the altitude of the phenomenon.

vii) To point them in the direction of Jerusalem, the prodigy needn't be high in the sky. Rather, it only needs to function like a compass point. Go in that direction! Pointers can be horizontal rather than vertical. They can point a traveler to go due west, or southwest, or whatever. Take a lighthouse or a signal fire on a hill. You go in the direction of the light. That's roughly at eye-level with the traveler.

viii) In the narrative, the prodigy has two functions:

a) It signals the birth of a very important individual.

b) It guides the magi from their country of origin to Jerusalem, and from there to Bethlehem.

A comet is too broad and too distant to pinpoint to a particular city (Jerusalem), much less pinpoint a particular house in a particular village. It has to be a narrow-gauged phenomenon to discharge that function. Consider the square mileage underneath a comet.

Even now, it's easy for out-of-towners to get lost in a strange city. And in the 1C, there were no street signs, street lights, or flashlights. How could the magi find the house at night, unless it was a very discriminating phenomenon? A comet lacks that specificity. The area under which a comet extends must be what...hundreds of miles

wide? Even if it were just a few miles wide, that's far too indiscriminate.

Try driving towards a star, or driving towards the moon. Assume you could drive in a straight line, with no obstacles. Where would you arrive? Nowhere. There is no end-point because the star or comet or moon isn't on earth.

Likewise, it's not as if a comet has a beam or shaft of light that shines straight down on a particular address, like a spotlight.

By the same token, have you ever noticed that the moon seems to follow your eyes? Same thing with a comet. There's a straight line of sight from you to the moon, but that's true from many different vantage-points. Going in that direction doesn't mean you're going in the same direction.

Moreover, even if that gives you longitude, it doesn't give you latitude. It doesn't tell you when to stop. It's not like an intersection at the corner of one named street and another named street. There's nothing to mark the destination.

It's possible that the magi could knock on doors and get more information, but the account attributes their success in finding the house to the "star" alone.

ix) Nicholl mocks the idea that the star was like ball-lightning. To begin with, I don't know why he thinks ball-lightning would be absurd, but a comet is not.

In addition, that's just a comparison. The description resembles ball-lightning in certain respects. It's a moving light. And it's small enough to single out a house. The prodigy behaves like directional ball-lightning.

I incline to the view that the Star of Bethlehem was a preternatural phenomenon of the same kind we find in Exodus, viz. the Shekinah, the pillar of fire. A luminous, directional object.

It's possible that some other villagers in Bethlehem saw it, if they happened to be outside at the moment the magi arrived, with the "star" in the lead. But that would only last a few minutes to serve its purpose. The villagers may well have been sound asleep. People tended to retire early before the advent of electrical lighting. They rose at first light and went to bed shortly after sundown. Keep in mind, too, that fear of nocturnal predators might keep them inside after dark.

And even if some of them saw it, they weren't historians, who'd publish their experience. So we wouldn't expect the existence of an independent account (although they might be among Matthew's informants).

x) Regarding how the magi were in a position to appreciate the significance of the prodigy, that's a crux for every position. A liberal would that's a plot hole. To be expected in pious fiction.

But everyone who affirms the historicity of the account must postulate some additional source of information for the magi to connect the dots. As far as that goes, why not revelatory dreams? In the nativity account, Joseph receives revelatory dreams. So does Pilate's wife. So why not the magi? As a matter of fact, the magi are said to receive a revelatory dream in 2:12. So that could just as well be the supplementary source of information they needed to embark on their pilgrimage. Sure, that's speculative, but so

are the alternative explanations, and that has the merit of an oft-stated source of information.

In fact, that might be a good example of ellipsis, which Nicholl himself appeals to: "omitting elements which are implied on context."

xi) Nicholl makes a virtue of interpreting the text in light of modern astronomy. But as a rule, when we interpret an ancient text, we're supposed to construe the text according to the kind of knowledge available to the original reader and the original audience.

xii) When Jason says the absence of recorded evidence is a weakness for Nicholl's theory, I assume he's comparing that to Nicholl's claims that the star was "the greatest astronomical entity in recorded history" (236) and "a talking point within the general population all across the northern hemisphere" (243), and "No comet in recorded history ever put on a display like this." (243) Furthermore, "everyone else who knew their constellations" would have been "glued to the heavens each night" to see what the comet was doing (248).

Given *that* set-up, wouldn't we expect more documentary evidence? Wouldn't Christian scribes be motivated to preserve such records?

xiii) I don't know what Nicholl means by the star "appearing" long before its "rising."

xiv) Not having read the book, I don't know how he defends the astronomical interpretation of Rev 12. I have read astronomical interpretations by Ernest Martin and Bruce Malina. Martin, for one, uses that text to date the birth of Christ. I'm dubious about that approach:

a) The Apocalypse contains a fair bit of astronomical imagery. You need to be consistently symbolic or consistently representational in how you construe the imagery. It would be arbitrary to treat astronomical imagery in Rev 12 as literally descriptive, but other astronomical imagery in Revelation as figurative.

b) The woman and the dragon don't stay in the sky. She flees to the wilderness. She sprouts two wings. He spews a river of water out of his mouth to sweep her away in a flood.

But at this point the astronomical imagery has been left behind. John is using (or seeing) one metaphorical representation replace another in rapid succession. It's arbitrary to treat the astronomical depiction as a star chart, when that suddenly morphs into something entirely different, even though the characters remain the same.

c) It's not clear what constellation is in view. Although some scholars assume it's the zodiac, Leonard Thomas suggests it could be the Corona Borealis. Likewise, there are several constellations that could represent the devil, viz. Draco, Scorpio, Hydra, Serpens. Date-setters don't begin with the text, and deduce a date. Rather, they begin with the desired date, then pick constellations to fit the desired date.

What did the Wise Men see?

I'm going to quote an anecdote from Nabeel Qureshi to draw a comparison. Before doing so, I'd like to make a preliminary observation: I allow for the possibility that Nabeel is regaling readers with tall tales. It's possible that he's cashing in on his conversion.

However, I don't find that the most plausible explanation. He's a psychiatrist by training. He could make a comfortable living that way. It would make for a less stressful, eventful life.

Certainly I don't think he converted with the intention of cashing in. He had no advance knowledge that his conversion would be marketable. And he had so much to lose. Why detonate his relationship with his family, which means so much to him?

It was my first time back in Britain since we had moved to Connecticut eight years prior...Tens of thousands of Ahmadis attended the United Kingdom jalsa...The people I most longed for were my friends from Scotland, the Maliks. Apart from one letter that I received from the youngest brother while I was in seventh grade, I had not heard from any of them. Public email was still in its nascent phase, and international phone calls were too expensive to justify.

But when I arrived at the jalsa, I realized I did not know if my friends would even be there...It would be nearly impossible to look for them by walking through the jalsa too. Apart from the sheer number of people to search through, we had all grown up over the previous seven years, and I was not sure I would recognize them even if I saw them. I sorely wanted to reunite with them, but I did not know where to start. So I turned to God. I just prayed from my heart, bowing my head and closing my eyes. "God, can you please help me find my friends?"

When I opened my eyes, what I saw stunned me stock-still. In the air before me were two streaks of color, one gold and one silver, as if whimsically painted onto the sky by an ethereal brush. They trailed in the distance, obviously leading me somewhere.

I still remember the words I spoke in shock: "You're kidding. I'm supposed to follow those, right?"

What I intrinsically knew was that no one could see the stripes but me. They were not so much in the sky as they were in my perception of the sky. They

were neither a mile away, nor a foot away, nor anywhere in-between They just were. And they were waiting for me.

The jalsa was crowded, and everyone was outside the tents because there was no speech currently in session. I followed the streaks into swarms of people, sifting my way through the crowd as if in a Pakistani bazaar.

*And in fact, the streaks swirled over the jalsa marketplace...the streaks funneled downward, dissipating over a space next to a clothing tent. When I weeded my way to the clearing, I saw two men standing there, chatting and wearing skullcaps. It took a moment, but I recognized them: they were the older Malik brothers. Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Zondervan, 2014), 103-105.*

Here's the comparison: what if the Star of Bethlehem is like *that*? Not that exact phenomenon, but a supernatural phenomenon that's only discernible to those it was meant to guide. Something the intended observer perceives in his field of vision, even though it remains invisible to other observers, because wasn't for their benefit.

How we construe the Star of Bethlehem is based on our conceptual resources. As a result, we may overlook alternative explanations. Because the identity of the star so often comes down to a debate between stereotypical options, that can foster tunnel vision.

The strange star of Bethlehem

Commentators remark on the unnatural motion of the "star". But presumably that's what caught the attention of the Magi. In general, the motion of the sun, moon, and stars is uniform. Sun, moon, and stars always rise in the east and set in West. There's seasonal variation, but that's uniform, too.

To get the attention of the Magi, we'd expect the "star" to do something highly irregular. And that's explicable if it's a supernatural phenomenon. Some people think the motion of the "star" is unrealistic, but that misses the point. It has to be unrealistic to be sign. If it wasn't something extraordinary, the Magi wouldn't be puzzled by its erratic behavior.

Star of wonder

Was the Star of Bethlehem a natural astronomical object? If it was supernatural or preternatural, why does Scripture call it a star? Two observations:

i) Sometimes the word "star" is used metaphorically, to stand for something else (e.g. Num 24:17; Judges 5:20; Isa 14:12; 2 Pet 1:19; Rev 1:16).

ii) Perhaps more to the point, in Matthew's account the object is called a "star" four times (2:2,7,9,10). The first time the object is introduced to the reader, it is the Magi rather than the narrator who uses that designation. It's initially called a star because it appears to be a star-like object to the Magi, when they saw it for the first time. That's their phenomenological impression.

The narrator then picks up on their designation. The probable reason he calls it a "star" is not because he regards the object as a natural astronomical phenomenon, but in consistency with the Magi's usage. Because they classify the object as a star, because the phenomenon is introduced to the reader by quoting the Magi's description, the narrator simply continues with that designation. It would be confusing to the reader if the narrator suddenly used a different descriptor. His usage conforms to the usage of the Magi, because it has the same referent. He and the Magi are talking about the same thing—whatever that is. To shift from one designation to a different designation in the middle of the story would obscure the reference.

Nativity accounts

Critics allege that the nativity accounts are mutually contradictory. Here's how two scholars arrange them:

Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38)

Mary visits Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56)

Birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1:57-66)

Benedictus (1:67-80)

Joseph's reassuring dream (Mt 1:18-25)

Jesus born in Bethlehem (Lk 2:1-7)

Angelic announcement to shepherds (Lk 2:8-20)

Presentation in the Temple (Lk 2:21-38)

The Magi (Mt 2:1-12)

Holy Family flees to Egypt (Mt 2:13-15)

Massacre of the innocents (Mt 2:16-18)

Holy Family returns to Nazareth (Mt 2:19-23; Lk 2:39-40)

D. Bock, **JESUS ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE** (Baker 2002), chap. 2; G. Knight, **A SIMPLIFIED HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS** (Holman 2001), vii.

Both scholars have the same sequence of events.

Luke's nativity account

1. At the bottom of this post I'm going to reproduce an essay about Richard Bauckham. He's unduly skeptical, but still has some useful info. If we date Luke's Gospel to the late 50s or thereabouts, then I don't see why Mary couldn't be a direct source, since she may well have been a teenager when she bore Jesus. Barring that, Luke might well have access to informant like James and Jude, who'd have family lore at their fingertips.

2. An objection to Mary as one of Luke's informants is that Luke doesn't mention the flight to Egypt. Also, Lk 2:39 is pretty abrupt if Luke was aware of the intervening events. There are three potential explanations for the omission:

i) Luke doesn't report the flight to Egypt because Mary wasn't an informant

ii) Luke doesn't report the flight to Egypt even though Mary was an informant because she didn't tell him about it

iii) Even though Mary told him about it, Luke had some reason not to include it

Let's run back through these:

(i) is possible. However, assuming the historicity of the Lucan nativity anecdotes, Mary is naturally the ultimate source of information. However, this could be mediated through the siblings of Jesus. But if so, that still doesn't explain the omission of this particular incident, given the other nativity anecdotes.

(ii) When I look back on my late relatives, it's striking how little they said about their past. It usually came down to a handful of stock anecdotes which they periodically repeated. Although they had detailed recollections of their life, they rarely talked about most of what happened to them, including important things. You could get more information if you questioned them, but it takes some background information to know what to ask.

Or they might volunteer something if a conversation happened to prompt them to relate an incident from their past. One time when we took my grandmother to church, they had a period where parishioners could mention something that happened to them that week. My grandmother seized the occasion to discuss her conversion experience. Not only was that the first time I ever heard her tell that story, even though I knew her well, that was the first time my mother heard her tell that story. My grandmother was in her mid-80s at the time, yet this is the first time she had occasion to mention that in my mother's presence. People can keep very significant things to themselves most of the time.

In addition, as one Synoptic scholar said to me, one has to be careful on insisting what events a person might raise. Since Luke had already made clear that the family was from Galilee, there was little reason to mention the flight to Egypt. They just eventually ended up living in their homeland.

(iii) Perhaps Luke didn't include it because the flight into Egypt is politically sensitive. It raises questions about the Roman administration of Palestine. That's not a problem for Matthew's Jewish audience, but if Luke's Gospel is addressed to a Roman official, then Luke might wish to avoid opening that can of worms.

Richard Bauckham, "Luke's Infancy Narrative as Oral History in Scriptural Form," in The Gospels: History and Christology: The Search of Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI, ed. Bernardo Estrada, Ermenegildo Manicardi and Armand Puig i Tàrrrech (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013) vol. 1, 399-417.

Is there any reliable history in the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel? Raymond Brown's landmark commentary on the two infancy narratives found hardly anything more than the few points that Matthew and Luke have in common: the names of Jesus' parents, the connexion with Nazareth and so forth – but none of the events Luke recounts. Many other scholars would agree. Luke has created these narratives out of Old Testament models and for christological purposes. It is, of course, indubitable that in these chapters Luke is constantly looking back to the Old Testament and forward to the rest of his Gospel, forging connexions in both directions, engendering rich and complex christological meaning. That most commentators now focus on those dimensions and avoid the very difficult issues

of historicity is understandable. I might do so myself in a different context. But older scholarship did not regard the history and the theology as mutually exclusive, and there are some genuine reasons, as I shall explain, why the historical questions have not gone away, much as some scholars wish they would. In order to pick them up again, tentatively as is appropriate in the era after Brown, a good place to begin is the issue of genre.

The question of genre

Any attempt to identify history in Luke's infancy narrative must begin with the issue of literary genre, since this would strongly affect the extent to which readers would expect to find some kind of history in this part of Luke's Gospel. I agree with those scholars, now perhaps a majority, who place the canonical Gospels broadly within the ancient genre of biography, the life of a famous person. In addition, I have argued elsewhere that, as biographies written within living memory of their subject or at least close to living memory, they would have been expected to embody the testimony of eyewitnesses, as good contemporary history and biography did. Luke, uniquely among

the Gospels, includes a historiographical prologue, in which he at least professes to employ best historical practice, in particular dependence on eyewitnesses. In my view, most scholars have been too cautious in envisaging what this claim implies. I think it is likely to mean that Luke was in direct contact with some eyewitnesses, perhaps in second-hand contact with others, and that some of his research for his Gospel (together with Acts) would have involved interviewing such people, as historians and authors of the more historiographical sort of biography did. When he used literary sources, it was because he was assured that these sources were themselves based in eyewitness testimony.

I should say at once that when Luke's preface refers to 'those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses' he does not, as has sometimes been claimed, mean 'from the very beginning of his story (including the infancy narrative),' because parallels in his own work make it clear that the beginning is that of Jesus' public career, at his baptism, and these eyewitnesses were disciples who accompanied Jesus from that time onwards. This

particularly important category of eyewitness is the one highlighted in his prologue, but it does not exclude Luke's dependence also on other eyewitnesses. Of course, in the case of his infancy narrative, readers would not expect Luke to have had direct contact with eyewitnesses. That he was lucky enough to meet Mary before her death is unlikely, even if not completely impossible. We should also note that the infancy narrative does not actually read like other parts of Luke's Gospel. It has very distinctive features that legitimate the question: would readers have expected it to be the same kind of history or, indeed, history at all?

Greco-Roman biographies often, though not always, begin with some account of the origins and youth of their subjects. Standard elements include (1) family background and ancestry, (2) birth, (3) portents and prophecies of future destiny, dating from around the time of birth, (4) appearance, (5) character as already manifest in childhood, (6) education, and (7) childhood anecdotes, which often show characteristics or abilities of the adult man already present prodigiously in the child. Of these, probably the first element (family) is the

most commonly found, no doubt because it was considered very important and some information about it was usually available. None of the other elements is always present and some of them occur only rarely. The birth, for example, often goes unmentioned, no doubt because there was nothing to be said. The biographers supplied material in these categories only when they had sources, written or oral, from which to do so. Of course, this doesn't mean such material is necessarily reliable. Some of it is probably among the least reliable material in these biographies, but the biographers whose work we know did not usually make it up. It is worth making this point especially about the reports of supernatural or remarkable forms of conception or birth (which are very few) and the portents and prophecies of future destiny (which are somewhat more common). As is sometimes quite explicit in Plutarch and Suetonius, for example, such stories had long been in oral circulation, if not in writing, when the biographer recorded them. Sometimes the biographers are careful not to commit themselves to the truth of such stories when they record them. They do not abandon their critical faculties when they recount

such material, and if they seem to us more credulous here than elsewhere, we should remember that most people had no doubt that portents and prophecies do occur.

Luke's narrative of Jesus' birth and infancy obviously ticks several of these standard boxes: (1) family background and ancestry (especially if we include the genealogy from chapter 3, but prominent even in chapters 1-2), (2) birth, (3) prophecies of future destiny (made by angels and prophets), (7) a childhood anecdote that anticipates key features of the adult Jesus. To that extent Luke's infancy narrative conforms to the Greco-Roman biographical model. Other features, however, do not: for example, the fact that Luke tells a continuous chronological narrative and the fact that the canticles are a major feature (albeit a means of prophesying the child's destiny). Add to that the biblical style and the frequent biblical allusions, especially to biblical prophecy, and we can see that, while Luke's infancy narrative does fill the place of the preliminary material in a Greco-Roman biography, Luke has chosen here to write a specifically Jewish kind of historiography, no doubt

both because this was appropriate to Jesus' actual origins and because Luke's overriding purpose is to depict Jesus as the fulfilment of Israel's messianic hopes.

The canticles are a prime example of a Jewish historiographical convention, which can be seen in the Hebrew Bible (the songs of Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah and David), in the books of Judith and Tobit, and in the Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo, an important example because it dates from around the same time as Luke's Gospel. They are a means of commenting on the significance of the events in the narrative, and, and unlike most scholars (including even Brown) I see no reason to doubt that Luke himself composed the songs in his infancy narrative, as doubtless Pseudo-Philo did those in his work. We should also see Luke's creative hand in the speeches and dialogues, which along with the canticles convey much of the rich christological meaning of the infancy narrative. Given Luke's skill and versatility as a writer, I do not think it likely that he had literary sources for his infancy narrative, and we certainly have no hope of reconstructing them. However, when everything

appropriate is said about Luke's biblical inspiration and creative composition in this section of his Gospel, I do not think we should forget his profession of historiographical practice in his prologue. After all, by synchronizing his narrative with broader history (in the references to Herod the king, the emperor Augustus and Quirinius the governor) Luke not only makes an ideological point about the significance of his narrative but also shows that he thinks he is writing some kind of history.

It seems to me likely, therefore, that Luke researched this part of his Gospel in the way that historians did: by interviewing people who could tell him stories about Jesus' birth and early life (as well as those of John the Baptist). The main outlines of his narrative could be called oral history in this sense, and in my title I have therefore called the infancy narrative "oral history in scriptural form," to acknowledge the way that biblical precedent and biblical prophecy have thoroughly informed the way he has told the story. That his oral sources already included some reflection on the significance

of the events in the light of Scripture is likely, but difficult to verify.

The question of sources

A historian's work is no better than his sources and we cannot assume that, if Luke had sources, they were reliable ones. Since the story is a family history, any reliable material would have to come ultimately from inside the family, presumably from Mary herself. Many scholars in the past, of course, have argued precisely that Mary is Luke's ultimate source in these chapters. The popularity of such a view has declined in parallel with a general loss of confidence in the historical value of the infancy narrative. Few commentators now read Luke's repeated statement that 'Mary treasured all these things in her heart' as an indication of his eyewitness source, a view that used to be common. However, in my view there are two reasons at least for thinking that Luke may after all have based his narrative on traditions he learned from the family of Jesus. Both are controversial. The first depends on the view, which I hold, that the 'we' passages in Acts indicate the presence of Luke, the author, at the events. In that case, Luke himself tells us that he

met James the Lord's brother when he accompanied Paul on Paul's last visit to Jerusalem. In the succeeding period he would have had ample opportunity to speak with James and quite plausibly also with other relatives of Jesus.

That argument is not new. My second reason for thinking Luke may have depended on what he learned from the family of Jesus is more distinctive. It requires me to mention briefly an argument I have made elsewhere in detail. Julius Africanus, who evidently had access to Palestinian Jewish Christian traditions about the relatives of Jesus, tells us that they used the family genealogy in their evangelistic preaching. No doubt, they used it to demonstrate Jesus' status as the Davidic Messiah. I have argued that Luke's genealogy, which he inserts into his narrative in chapter 3, looks very much like just such a genealogy as the relatives of Jesus would have used. Like many an ancient genealogy, it both preserves a traditional line of descent and has been manipulated for symbolic, especially numerical, purposes, of which Luke himself shows no awareness. It cannot be adequately explained without both factors, and

therefore much the most plausible source from which Luke could have got it is the family of Jesus themselves. If he did, then clearly he was also in a position to learn other family traditions too.

However, against the hypothesis that Luke's infancy narrative has sources that included good historical information, many scholars argue that it is discredited by its clear historical mistakes and implausible accounts. There are two passages in particular that have been frequently judged to lack historical plausibility: the account of the census (2:1-5) and the narrative of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (2:22-24). Unlike the virginal conception, where issues beyond the ordinarily historical are at stake, these two accounts raise only quite ordinary questions for historical assessment. Moreover, these two accounts really need to be judged at least basically historical if it is to be credible that Luke had any reliable information about events connected with Jesus' birth.

The census in fact continues to be vigorously debated, with new evidence and new theories being advanced. The case against a historical basis

for the connexion Luke makes between a census and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem has certainly not yet proved conclusive. But in the case of the presentation in the Temple, the apparently devastating critique of the historical plausibility of Luke's account, made by a series of prominent scholars, has not been effectively challenged. Since Brown's and Fitzmyer's commentaries there has been hardly any substantial discussion of the historical issues. So I shall devote what time I have left to this issue.

The presentation in the Temple (2:22-24)

In 2:22-24 Luke describes how Joseph and Mary carried out two requirements of Torah: (1) the purification of a woman after childbirth and (2) the presentation and redemption of a firstborn son. Many scholars think that Luke has misunderstood and muddled these Jewish customs and constructed a purely fictional event. Raymond Brown says that Luke 'has created a setting [for the meeting with Simeon and Anna] from an inaccurate reading of Old Testament laws.' The charges against Luke's accuracy are these: (1) Luke has confused the two distinct customs and seems to think the sacrifice of

two birds was required for the presentation of the firstborn son, rather than for the purification of Mary, while he says nothing about what actually had to be done for the child: the payment of five silver shekels.

(2) Luke evidently thinks the Torah required the firstborn son to be presented in the Temple in Jerusalem, whereas in fact the redemption price could be paid to any priest in any location.

(3) There is a chronological difficulty in conflating the two customs, because the Torah requires the child to be redeemed at the age of one month, while the mother's purification is not completed until forty days after the birth.

(4) Luke refers to 'their purification,' whereas in fact only the mother required purification.

More than one scholar concludes that Mary could not have been a source of information for Luke, since she surely would have got these matters right.

I shall take the four charges in turn:

(1) The charge that Luke has confused the two customs has been effectively answered by those

who have pointed out that the account has a chiastic structure (as shown on your handouts). Reference to the purification at the beginning and the end of the passage (A and A1) frame the reference to the presentation of the child to the Lord (B and B1), which is thereby highlighted as the most important topic. Once we have answered the charge of confusion we can see that Luke does refer to the payment of the redemption price in v 27, when he says that they did 'for the child what was customary under the law.' Since Luke's interest is in the dedication of the child to the Lord, he does not make explicit that money was paid to buy the child back, but shows he knew this is what happened. There is no other custom to which the phrase in v 27 could refer.

(2) The claim that the law of the firstborn did not require the child to be taken to the Temple is often stated very dogmatically. For example, Joseph Fitzmyer says that presentation of the child in the Temple 'is a custom about which nothing is said in either the Old Testament or the Mishna. Such a custom for a firstborn son is simply unknown in Jewish tradition.' In the face of such an emphatic

assertion, it is remarkable how unambiguous is the evidence to the contrary.

In Numbers 18 there is a catalogue of the offerings that the people are to bring to the Tabernacle (later the Temple) and that will belong to Aaron and his sons the priests. It includes this: 'The first issue of the womb of all creatures, human and animal, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours, but the firstborn of human beings you shall redeem.' The phrase 'to offer to the LORD' (Hiphil of *qārab* + YHWH) occurs 43 times in the Hebrew Bible, mostly in Leviticus and Numbers, and it invariably refers to the offering of sacrifices in the Tabernacle or the Temple. There can be no doubt that the Torah here requires the firstborn son to be presented to the Lord in the Temple. But, lest anyone be still in any doubt, the text is interpreted for us in Nehemiah 10:35-36, where the people pledge themselves to obey the commandments of Numbers 18: 'We obligate ourselves ... to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our livestock, as it is written in the law ...' Nehemiah 10 is a significant passage, the earliest example of *halakah*

outside the Torah itself interpreting the laws of the Torah. Moreover, it is undoubtedly priestly halakah, a better guide to the way the Temple authorities in the time of Jesus would have interpreted the law than anything we might find in the rabbis. We might also note that in these passages, as elsewhere in the Torah, the offering of the child is the primary concern, whereas the redemption, though assumed, need not even be mentioned. Luke, it turns out, knew the requirements of Torah a good deal better than his modern critics.

(3) In the light of that clear requirement of Torah, it appears that, in the case of a firstborn son, the parents are to present the child in the Temple when it is a month old and then, just ten days later, the mother, at least, must travel to the Temple again for her purification. Since few mothers would leave their month-old child at home, and few fathers would let their wife and baby travel alone to Jerusalem, we are looking at two journeys by both parents, with the child, a mere ten days apart. Few people, unless they lived in Jerusalem, are likely to have done this. It is reasonable to suppose that the presentation of the child would often be postponed

until the time of the purification of the mother. The rule that the child should be one month old could well have been interpreted as putting only a lower, not an upper limit, on the time at which he could be presented.

(4) What is probably the best textual reading in v 22 refers to 'their purification,' meaning, most likely, Mary's and Joseph's purification. If this is simply an error on Luke's part, it is extremely difficult to see how he could have made such a mistake. He certainly read the only passage in the Torah that deals with purification after childbirth (Lev 12:1-8), since he quotes it, and the passage makes no reference at all to the father. It is easier to think that Luke uses a popular, not strictly accurate, way of referring to the purification of the mother, who would usually have been attended by her husband. A more precise explanation of a popular usage of this kind may be possible if we remember that impurity is often communicable to others. Here the matter becomes rather technical. The Torah describes the purification of the mother in two stages. For the first seven days she has a status equivalent to that of a menstruating woman. For

the remaining thirty-three days she has a lesser degree of impurity that prevents her entering the Temple. But could she, in this second stage, still communicate impurity to other people? According to the Mishna, the two Pharisaic houses of Hillel and Shammai disagreed. Hillel said she could not, but the Shammai, stereotypically always the more strict, held that she could. In that case, Joseph, assuming he was in close contact with Mary, would himself have been impure for more or less all of her forty days of purification. His would be a lesser degree of impurity, quickly and easily removed without attending the Temple, but since her purification would in effect remove the source of his impurity, it could have been considered 'their purification.' We do not know whether Joseph and Mary would have followed what the authors of the Mishna describe as the Shammaite interpretation of this law. As is often the case, we do not know which was the most prevalent interpretation of this law at this time or which was adopted by the Temple authorities. Luke deserves the benefit of the doubt.

I conclude that there is nothing historically implausible in this narrative. That does not prove that it is historical, but it does remove one objection, of which some scholars have made most, to the hypothesis that traditions from the family of Jesus form the core of Luke's infancy narrative.

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*For an account of scholarship on the infancy narratives since Brown, see Wansbrough in *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (2009)*

E.g. in my 'Elizabeth and Mary' (Gospel Women) I ignore issues of historicity.

Scholars who continue to find substantial historical value in the infancy narratives include Puig I Tarrrech (2010) ...

*The recent broad agreement on this is due, to quite a large extent, to Burrige's detailed argument in *What Are the Gospels?* For a recent survey of scholarship on Gospels genre, see Diehl (2011)*

*Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses**

For a recent defence of this position, see Aune in Wedderburn FS.

See Jesus and the Eyewitnesses ...

Burridge... On Plutarch, see Duff 2008.

So the term 'creative historiography' (used by Lincoln 2013) is not really appropriate for such material in most of the biographies.

See Talbert, 'Prophecies,' 135; McHugh 288-289. Stories from the Greek myths should not be included here. The Life of Apollonius by Philostratus seems to have been written deliberately to rival the Gospels.

But Talbert, 'Prophecies,' stretches this category, in a way not helpful for comparison with Luke's infancy narrative, by including predictions made at the outset of a character's adult life or public career, long after birth.

E.g. Cicero 2.

E.g. Augustus ... Tiberius (?)

In the case of biographies of writers, about whom the biographers often had little real information,

such matters could be deduced by means of highly ingenious readings of the subject's writings.

For a strongly skeptical view of a popular rumour, see Livy on Scipio Africanus, quoted McHugh 289 n. 12.

Other features found in the birth narratives of Scripture and Pseudo-Philo, but not in Greco-Roman biography, are the naming of the child by an angel before birth (Bible: Isaac; Ps-Philo: Samson, cf. Samuel), and the birth of a child to a barren or elderly woman.

Weizman, Song and Story

Bogaert argues that Luke knew Pseudo-Philo's work. (Note on the birth narratives in Ps-Philo...)

For Luke's infancy narrative as oral history, cf. Laurentin... For the analogy between modern 'oral history' and ancient historiographical practice, see Byrskog

Luke 2:19, 51.

(List commentators)

For a good defence of this view, see Fitzmyer (essays)

Acts 21:18.

Bauckham, Jude and the Relatives

My view of the genealogy has recently been endorsed in a study of the tradition in Julius Africanus by Christophe Guignard (in Clivaz ed.)

Good survey in Porter (2002 in Wedderburn FS). See now also Di Segni (2005), Puig I Tarrech (2010), Rhoads (2011), Dabrowa (2011), Di Segni (2013), Dabrowa (2013).

This discussion is limited to 2:22-24 and so does not consider the figures of Simeon and Anna and their prophecies. For an argument that Anna is a historically credible figure, see Bauckham, 'Anna of the Tribe of Asher' (Gospel Women).

Brown 448; Meier vol 1, 210

Bultmann, The History of the Synoptic Tradition, 299; Evans 213; Marshall 117; Meier vol 1, 210; Brown 447. According to Easton 27, there was no obligation to go to Jerusalem, but 'the use of the

temple for this rite by those living near Jerusalem must have been common.'

Fitzmyer 420-421. See Num 18:16; Lev 12:2-4.

Evans 212: 'Either [Joseph + Mary or Mary + Jesus] would be nonsensical and betray ignorance of Jewish custom... [The pronoun their] is most likely a clumsy device of Luke to bring the child into the proceedings.' Cf. Brown 448; Fitzmyer 424

Fitzmyer 424; Meier 210.

For Luke's use of chiasmic patterns in the infancy narrative, see Bauckham, Gospel Women, 49-51

Nolland 118; Carroll 75

Marshall, 117, seems to think that Jesus, exceptionally, was not redeemed, but this is scarcely credible. There is no way he could be exempt from the law in the eyes of the Temple authorities.

Fitzmyer 425. Cf. Bovon 99: 'the redemption of the firstborn was not connected to the temple.'

Statements of this sort take no account of the fact that elsewhere Luke shows considerable familiarity

(not derived from the Old Testament) of Temple procedures: Luke 1:5-10; Acts 3:1-2. Acts 21:23-24, 26, is a disputed example.

In Num 18:15 and often elsewhere, LXX uses προσφέρειν κυρίῳ. Luke's παραστῆσαι τῷ κυρίῳ is a good equivalent, since παριστάναι can be used of offering in sacrifice (e.g. Rom 12:1).

Lagrange 81, quotes Num 18:15, but comments: 'Il n'était prescript nulle part clairement que l'enfant dût conduit au Temple.' Maybe this misleading comment discouraged later commentators from taking the evidence of Num 18:15 seriously.

Nolland 117, rightly refers to Neh 10:35-36 as evidence of the custom of presenting the child in the Temple, but not to the source of that passage in Num 18:15.

Clines, 'Nehemiah 10 ...'

The confidence of scholars such as Brown and Fitzmyer (who cite no evidence) that the redemption price could be paid to any priest anywhere is evidently based on Strack-Billerbeck (vol. 2, 120) who cite two identical passages in the

Mekilta de R. Ishmael: 'Just as in the case of the firstling born to man, one gives the child to the priest in any location that one chooses, so in the case of the firstling of a beast, one hands it over to the priest in any place that one chooses' (16:1 = 76:3, translation from Neusner 96, 221). S-B give no context, but in the context this statement seems to relate to the situation when 'one lives in a distant place,' i.e. distant from 'the chosen house' (the Temple). Probably it represents a concession based on the analogy of the law in Deut 14:22-26 (note the reference to firstlings in v 23). It not an alternative to the rule that the firstborn should be presented in the Temple, but provides for exceptions to the rule. In any case, these passages (which refer to no named rabbis) are hardly good evidence for the practice of the late Second Temple period, though it is plausible that in that period people living far from the Temple were permitted to present their child to a priest locally.

Most commentators think Luke has drawn the motif of the presentation of the child in the Temple from the story of Samuel in 1 Sam 1, but Samuel was two years old and stayed in the Temple as Eli's assistant.

A proper understanding of the law of the firstborn makes reference to Samuel redundant.

Some scholars think the reference is to Mary and Jesus (e.g. Lagrange 82; Bovon 96, 99), but this is not probable.

Plummer 63, observes: 'Contact with an unclean person involved uncleanness.' But this is too generalized a point to prove anything in this instance.

m. Nid. 10:6: 'The School of Shammai say: Even as one that suffered uncleanness from a corpse,' i.e. she is a source of impurity. See the comment on this passage in Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 757.

Are the nativity accounts pious fiction?

Unbelievers regard the nativity accounts as pious fiction. For the sake of argument, let's bracket the supernatural elements and consider the realistic elements that remain:

i) If Mary was pregnant out of wedlock, we'd expect Joseph to divorce her. In that culture, not only would her condition bring shame on herself, but dishonor her fiancé. So that's realistic.

ii) An angel appears to Joseph in a dream. In that culture, people believed that God sometimes communicated to individuals through dreams. Even if you don't believe in revelatory dreams, there's no reason to think the narrator invented that, since ancient Jews and pagans had dreams which they took to be omens, &c. There's nothing unrealistic about Joseph having dreams which he interprets as divine messages.

iii) Ancient people believed in portents and prodigies. If, therefore, the magi saw something in the sky which they took to be significant, it's not surprising that they acted on it. That's realistic, given cultural assumptions.

iv) Even if modern unbelievers deny predictive prophecy, ancient Jews did believe in prophecy. That included belief in a promised messiah. So there's nothing unrealistic about Herod consulting priests and scribes, who, in turn, quote an oracle.

v) Even if Herod didn't believe in prophecy, his subjects believed in prophecy. He was an unpopular ruler. His subjects considered him to be a usurper. So he'd be paranoid about a perceived rival. That's realistic.

vi) Even if unbelievers don't think Matthew's prooftexts are really about the messiah, it doesn't follow that ancient Jews didn't think his prooftexts were about the messiah. So that's realistic.

vii) Likewise, assassinating the child at the site where Jews believed the messiah would be born would be a logical way to squelch the rumor. So that's realistic.

viii) Killing all the boys 2 years and under gave him a margin of error to ensure that he eliminated his rival. So that's ruthlessly realistic.

ix) If Herod was known to be a threat to Jesus, his parents had no choice but to flee for their lives. So that's realistic.

And if they fled the country, to escape Herod's jurisdiction, why not take refuge in Egypt? Indeed, God protected the Patriarchs in Egypt, so there'd be divine precedent. That would make sense to Joseph.

x) If Joseph thought Herod's son (Archelaus) posed a threat to Jesus, it makes sense that he'd relocate to Galilee rather than Judea. So that's realistic.

When you think about it, some of Matthew's prooftexts could derive from Joseph's understanding of prophecy. Joseph's actions might be guided by his own understanding of ancient Jewish oracles.

As a refugee in Egypt, he might well reflect on Bible prophecies about Egypt, especially concerning God's son (Hos 11:1).

Likewise, suppose that Mt 2:23 is based on folk etymology. You have folk etymologies in the OT. So it's possible that Joseph's choice of where to reside was guided by that conventional hermeneutic.

xi) If there was a census requiring the tribe of David to rendez-vous at their ancestral hometown, the custom of ancient hospitality would mean lodging with relatives. There were no hotels. But by the same token, homes of relatives would rapidly fill up, so it's realistic that Mary and Joseph had difficulty securing accommodations with their kinfolk.

Now, if so many elements of the nativity accounts are realistic, then it's unreasonable to assume that Matthew and Luke fabricated this material—even if you don't approach it from Christian presuppositions. That's a gratuitous assumption, because it isn't necessary to explain the material. If an account is realistic, our default premise is that it's realistic because it really happened. Moreover, it's realistic based on what would motivate the participants, and not necessarily what would motivate a modern reader in their position.

Finally, if the accounts have that much realistic detail, then that lends credence to the supernatural elements.

III. Holy Week

Why didn't Jesus appear to everyone?

One of the stock objections to the Resurrection is that Jesus didn't appear to more people. But the problem with this objection is that infidels will always move the goalpost.

1. Suppose Jesus appeared to Pilate. Suppose we had an ostensible firsthand account of his appearance to Pilate.

How would infidels respond? Their first resort would be to deny the authenticity of the account. It must be a 2C forgery, or something like that.

And they know it couldn't be authentic since dead men don't return from the grave. So you have a circular denial.

2. But suppose the account was authenticated. How would infidels respond?

i) Their next resort would be to ask rhetorically, What's more likely: that Jesus really did appear to Pilate, or that Pilate lied, or hallucinated, or we have a case of mistaken identity, &c.?

ii) They'd add that ancient witnesses can't be trusted. They're so superstitious, you know. So that feeds into their confirmation bias. They see what they expect to see. Things that go bump in the night.

3. Suppose Jesus appeared on national TV. How would the infidel respond?

He might say: What's more likely: that dead men return from the grave, or that his television appearance was a computer-animated illusion?

4. Suppose Jesus made a personal appearance to the infidel? How would he respond?

i) He might say, How do I know it's Jesus? What does Jesus look like, anyway? And it's not like I can do a DNA match.

ii) Or he might say, What's more likely: that dead men return from the grave, or that I had a hypnagogic hallucination?

iii) Or he might say, Even a space alien impersonating Jesus is more likely than Jesus appearing to me. At least space aliens, if they exist, are naturally possible. And any naturalistic explanation, however unlikely, is more likely than any supernaturalistic explanation like a miracle (i.e. the Resurrection).

Behind closed doors

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19, ESV).

It's remarkable how much theology, eschatology, and metaphysics has been mined from this single elliptical verse. It's been used to prop up esoteric theories of the eucharist. Likewise, some apologists and theologians infer from this verse that Christ's body wasn't subject to ordinary physical or spatial constraints. They extrapolate the nature of the glorified body from this solitary verse.

By contrast, here's how a recent commentator understands the verse:

*His coming, therefore, is unexpected, and possibly miraculous, although nothing is made of its miraculous character. Did he just appear suddenly behind the locked doors, or did he knock and gain admission (like Peter in Acts 12:13)? J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Eerdmans 2010), 1007.*

Especially for readers conditioned by conventional translations and popular explanations, this interpretation may seem to be rationalistic or roundabout. However, Michaels has a footnote:

It is unclear whether the “locked doors” are literally locked or simply closed (see BDAG, 546-47). Ibid. 1007n3.

And when we turn to BDAG, this is the definition:

Kleio: to prevent passage at an opening, shut, lock, bar
Close, lock, shut

Another standard Greek lexicon gives the same range of meanings:

Shut, close; lock

Used literally kleio means close (a door, Mt 6:6; 25:10; Lk 11:7; Jn 20:19,26; Acts 21:30) or lock (a building, Acts 5:23). EDNT 2:296-97.

So the Greek word actually has a wider semantic range than “to lock.” It can also mean “to shut or close.”

In that event, Jn 20:9 can be rendered “locked doors,” but it could just as well be rendered “closed doors.”

If the latter, then the passage would emphasize the element of surprise and divine initiative. Jesus knew where they were hiding, and he came to them. He sought them out and manifested himself to them as the Risen Lord.

Many apologists and theologians have erected an elaborate superstructure over what is just an artifact of translation. One possible way of rendering the Greek.

Of course, we can still debate the best way to render the Greek in context, as well as the best overall interpretation of the verse. But this should caution us against raising a skyscraper on the foundation of one ambiguous, elliptical verse.

The WRF Statement of Faith

After two days in the tomb, Jesus of Nazareth rose again from the dead with a transformed but still recognizable human nature. His resurrection body was capable of transcending natural physical laws but still retained its own physical properties. In his ascension, that body was further transformed into the heavenly state which it still possesses and has been taken up into God. Human beings will be resurrected, not as Jesus was on the first Easter morning, but as he is now, in his ascended state.

http://www.wrfnet.org/c/document_library/get_file?folderId=20&name=DLFE-46.pdf

Several issues:

i) I'm unclear on what motivated the transition from a transformed "nature" in the first sentence to his "body" in the next sentence. Are these being used synonymously, or is there an intended distinction? If the latter, in what sense is his "nature" transformed in contradistinction to his body? Was his soul transformed as well as his body?

ii) What's the scriptural basis for claiming that his resurrection body was "further transformed" in the Ascension?

iii) In what sense is the body of Jesus taken up "into" God?

iv) I suppose the assertion about his body "transcending natural physical laws" alludes to a popular interpretation of Jn 20:19, according to which Christ (allegedly) passed through solid doors.

Of course, the text doesn't actually say that. At most, that's a possible inference.

v) For some reason, it doesn't occur to framers of the WFT statement that Christ's *pre*-Resurrection body was *already* capable of transcending natural physical laws. Let's quote two Johannine incidents back-to-back:

19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

26 Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19,26).

16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, **17** got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. **18** The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. **19** When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. **20** But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” **21** Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going (Jn 6:16-21)

At the risk of stating the obvious, walking on water *also* transcends natural physical laws. So why does the WFT statement attribute the incident in Jn 21 to a “transformed” body, but not the comparable incident in Jn 6? Indeed, the incident in Jn 6 is explicitly miraculous, unlike the incident in Jn 21. Why assume his body had to be transformed by the Resurrection to appear in the Upper Room, but not to walk on water?

And while we’re at it, here’s another Johannine incident:

6 After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. **2** And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. **3** Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down

with his disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. 5 Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. 7 Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" 10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. 11 Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12 And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. 14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

While this isn't a case of Jesus' *body* transcending natural physical laws, it's surely a case Jesus *doing* something that transcends natural physical laws. Is that essentially different from the Upper Room incident in Jn 21—even assuming the latter incident is miraculous?

A "spiritual resurrection"

Orthodox Christians take the position that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity is false. To put it more graphically, unless the tomb of Jesus is empty, Christianity is false. If we discovered the skeletal remains of Jesus, that would disprove the Christian faith at one stroke.

However, some unbelievers argue for a "spiritual resurrection." They do that to discount postmortem appearances of Jesus. They chalk these up to subjective visions or hallucinations.

But there's a catch. If you use that argument, then even if you discovered the skeletal remains of Jesus in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, that wouldn't falsify the Christianity faith. That wouldn't even falsify the resurrection of Christ. So that argument poses a dilemma for the unbeliever.

Resurrecting Jesus

In terms of what the glorified body is like, we have roughly two different sources of information. In the NT, we have the Gospel accounts, especially Lk 24 and Jn 20-21. In addition, we have 1 Cor 15. There are other passages, but these are less detailed. There are also some OT passages.

1 Corinthians and the Gospels belong to different genres. The Gospel accounts are historical narratives which describe the postmortem appearances of Jesus, as well conversations. By contrast, 1 Corinthians is more expository. But that's not a hard and fast distinction, for the Gospels contain interpretive statements.

Christ's glorified body is a prototype for the resurrection of the just. So we can learn some things about the glorified body from these accounts.

On the one hand, he wasn't restored to life in the same condition he died in. His wounds have healed. On the other hand, he retains scars from his ordeal.

We might focus on the recognition scenes. Some readers infer from Lk 24:16,31 that the glorified body of Jesus had the capacity to materialize and dematerialize at will. However, that's a fallacious inference.

For one thing, the divine passives indicate that the observers were kept from perceiving Jesus. They didn't hallucinate seeing Jesus. Rather, they hallucinated not seeing Jesus. Instead of perceiving something that wasn't there, they failed to perceive something that was there—until the psychological impediment was removed. Like hysterical blindness.

His body wasn't objectively invisible, but subjectively invisible. That's probably how Jesus could slip through lynch mobs undetected (Lk 4:30; Jn 8:59; 10:39).

It seems likely that Jesus concealed his true identity to heighten the impact when he broke bread, which would remind them of other times when they ate with him or saw him distribute food.

To some degree, we have a similar situation in Jn 20:14-16 and 21:4-7. It's possible that their lack of recognition has the same psychological point of origin. However, the text doesn't say that.

Moreover, the text distinguishes between facial recognition and voice recognition. The observers fail to recognize Christ on sight. It's only when they hear him speak that they know who he is.

So that suggests a different explanation. It may be that Jesus had a more youthful appearance after he rose from the dead. He was in his early 30s when he died. He probably had a weathered complexion from spending so much time out of doors in the hot, dry, sunny climate.

If glorification restores us to a pristine condition, or something approximating a pristine condition, then that process would involve aging us up or down to an optimal age, depending on how old we were when we died. So their lack of recognition may be due to the fact that Jesus looked about 10-15 years younger, without a tan or facial lines.

One time I attended a wedding with my father. He hadn't seen these relatives for over 20 years. When we went into

the reception room, a cousin didn't realize who he was until he spoke.

We also have a recognition scene in Acts 9:3ff. Although this might have antecedents in OT theophanies, the Transfiguration supplies the more immediate precedent (Lk 9:29). Once again, there's a distinction between seeing and hearing, as well as psychologically disparate perceptions of the event (Acts 9:7; 22:9). God is controlling what the observers are permitted to see. And, once again, what we have is not a case of sensing what is not there, but not sensing what is there.

We encounter this differential phenomenon elsewhere (Jn 12:28-29). The event is public, but its perception is private and variable.

My flesh will dwell secure

9

Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;

my flesh also dwells secure.

10

**For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption [or the pit]**

11

**You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.**

(Ps 16:9-11).

**24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death,
because it was not possible for him to be held by it.**

**25 For David says concerning him, “I saw the Lord
always before me, for he is at my right hand that I
may not be shaken; 26 therefore my heart was glad,
and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell
in hope. 27 For you will not abandon my soul to
Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. 28 You
have made known to me the paths of life; you will
make me full of gladness with your presence.’ 29**

“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, 31 he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption (Acts 2:24-29).

Liberals think Peter is quoting Ps 16 out of context. They also think Peter's argument relies on the distinctive wording of the LXX. Some evangelicals agree, but think this is a case of *sensus plenior*. If so, that weakenes the appeal to proof-text the Resurrection. What are we to make of these objections?

i) Peter didn't necessarily, or even probably, quote the LXX. More likely, Luke substituted the LXX when he translated Peter's speech. We need to distinguish between Peter's audience and Luke's audience.

ii) How we should render Ps 16:10b is disputed. "Corruption" is a defensible rendering. But based on Hebrew parallelism, where v10b is the counterpart to v10a, most scholars think it means "the pit." That creates a synonymous parallel between the grave and the pit. "Sheol" could either be a prosaic word for the grave, or a metaphorical word for the grave which trades on Netherworld connotations.

iii) Whether Peter's argument turns on the rendering of the Hebrew word depends on what we think Peter is attempting to prooftext. Even if it means "the pit" rather than "corruption," that doesn't ipso facto invalidate Peter's argument.

iv) Liberals assume the original context has reference to deliverance from premature death rather than the afterlife. In other words, they assume it's about God sparing the Psalmist from dying, rather than God rescuing the Psalmist from Sheol after he dies.

There is, however, nothing in the text itself that singles out that mundane interpretation. Rather, the liberal interpretation is based on the presupposition that at the time the Psalm was written, Israelites didn't believe in the afterlife. Their outlook was this-worldly. Liberals assume an evolutionary view of OT theology, where belief in the afterlife is a later development.

However, belief in the afterlife was widespread in the ancient world. That antedates the OT. So it would be odd if Israel was the one ANE culture that didn't espouse the afterlife. Cf. E. Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," R. Longenecker, ed. **LIFE IN THE FACE OF DEATH: THE RESURRECTION MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT** (Eerdmans 1998), 21-50.

What's distinctive to ancient Israel wasn't belief in the afterlife, but belief in the general resurrection or resurrection of the just. In that regard, that's what set it apart from other ANE cultures.

v) Is Peter using Ps 16 to prooftext the Resurrection, the incorruptibility of Christ's body, or both? If he's only using

Ps 16 to prooftext the Resurrection, then his argument doesn't depend on whether we render 16:10b be as "corruption" or "the pit."

vi) In addition, there's the question of what prevents his body from undergoing decay. In context, that would be the Resurrection. Absent the Resurrection, his body would be subject to decay. Of course, that's a gradual process.

Not to "see corruption" doesn't necessarily (or even probably mean) no decay whatsoever, but rather, an inexorable process of decay—inasmuch as the only thing which would halt or reverse that process is the resurrection of the body.

If Christ's body was incorruptible, it's unclear how that's an argument for the Resurrection. In fact, that's in tension with an argument for the Resurrection, for in that event, it doesn't require the Resurrection to preserve it intact. If it's incorruptible, it could remain in the tomb for millennia without undergoing dissolution.

But that's hardly germane to Peter's argument. To the contrary, the point is not that God will preserve the body in the grave, as if the grave is the decedent's final resting place, but that God will restore the decedent to life—"in the flesh."

vii) Liberals don't regard Ps 16 as a Davidic Psalm, much less a Messianic Psalm. In the evangelical interpretation, David prefigures Christ. In typology, the type is both analogous and disanalogous to the antitype. Peter highlights the contrast. A thousand years have passed since David wrote this hopeful psalm, yet David is still dead! His mortal remains are in the tomb. His body undoubtedly underwent progressive decay, until only bones are left.

So this psalm refers first and foremost, not to David, but to Christ. Yet this will circle around. Because Christ rose from the dead, eventually David will rise from the dead. God will not ultimately abandon him to Sheol. It will be fulfilled in David because it was fulfilled in Jesus.

In sum, we needn't appeal to a *sensus plenior* to salvage Peter's argument. He didn't rip the passage out of context.

Hallucinations

One stock objection to the Resurrection appearances is the claim that these were hallucinatory. Mass hallucinations.

One observation I'd like to make is that we live in a day and age when many people have experienced hallucinations by taking psychedelic drugs. Even when you're hallucinating, it's possible to know that you're hallucinating. You keep telling yourself that this doesn't make sense. It can't be real. In that respect it's like a lucid dream. So even when you're hallucinating, you can retain enough objectivity to realize this isn't for real.

And after you sober up, you can compare your hallucinatory state of mind with your normal state of mind. The things you saw and heard in your hallucination don't exist.

So the hallucinatory theory fails to explain the Resurrection appearances. People who experience hallucinations can still distinguish between appearance and reality, even during their altered state of consciousness, not to mention after the fact.

The Synoptic Resurrection accounts

i) Because Mark, which is commonly thought to be the earliest canonical Gospel, doesn't have an account of the risen Christ, some unbelievers think the Resurrection narratives in Matthew and Luke represent a legendary embellishment of Mark.

ii) A few scholars surmise that the original ending of Mark was lost. If so, then the original ending presumably reported the Resurrection. Of course, that theory can't be proven or disproven.

iii) Textual criticism aside, Mark contains predictions of the Resurrection (Mk 8:31; 9:9,31; 10:34). He records the empty tomb, along with the angelic confirmation of the Resurrection, and prediction of a post-resurrection appearance in Galilee (16:4-7). Therefore, the Resurrection narratives in Matthew and Luke aren't simply tacked onto Mark, in spite of Mark. Mark itself had that expectation, as well as a terse fulfillment.

iv) If our extant MSS of Mark did contain a Resurrection appearances (or appearances), then unbelievers would discount the Synoptical parallels in Matthew and Luke. They'd say Matthew and Luke simply copied their Resurrection narratives from Mark. They'd say Matthew and Luke simply got their information from Mark.

As it stands, the absence of a Resurrection appearance in Mark means that Matthew and Luke provide independent, multiple-attestation. Absent a Markan precedent, that's what we're left with. They didn't get it from Mark, and they didn't get it from each other. So Matthew and Luke each had his own, separate sources of information on that score.

v) And, of course, the Resurrection of Jesus is one of the most widely-attested events in the NT. It isn't confined to the Gospels.

The ending of Mark

i) Some scholars (e.g. Evans, Edwards, Gundry, Stein, Wright) think the original ending was lost. I myself don't think there's any compelling reason to believe the ending we have (16:1-8) is not the original ending.

To be sure, Mark's account gives the Resurrection somewhat short-shrift compared to Matthew and Luke. However, that's a misleading comparison. After all, his Gospel is much briefer to begin with.

ii) More to the point, the ending may be briefer simply because Mark had less information than Matthew, Luke, and John. He may not have seen the risen Christ, unlike Matthew and John. Likewise, he may not have interviewed as many people as Luke. He just wrote what he knew, based on personal observation, without conducting the kind of extensive investigations that Luke did.

To take a comparison, consider the Civil War. You have foot-soldiers writing home. Their accounts are based on personal experience. What they saw. It may include anecdotes from comrades.

Then you have accounts written by the generals. That's based in part on firsthand observation. But they also have a much broader sense of the war. They are in communication with other commanders. They know what's going on elsewhere.

Then you have Civil War historians. They comb through a wide range for primary source material. They didn't witness the events, but their account is based on eyewitness

material. And it covers much more ground precisely because they aren't confined to their personal experience.

On this analogy, Mark is like letters by a foot-soldier in the Civil War. He writes about what he's seen in theater, as well as information he's garnered from campfire conversations with his comrades.

Matthew and John are like Civil War generals. They write from firsthand experience as well. But they are privy to things the foot-soldier is not.

Luke is like a Civil War historian, who collects oral histories from veterans.

iii) But assuming, for the sake of argument, that the ending is less than we'd expect, here's another possibility: what if Mark saw that he was running out of room on his scroll, and had to present an abbreviated account of the Resurrection?

It's usually said that Luke's Gospel pushes the limits of a scroll. Admitted, Mark is much shorter, but was there a standard length scroll back in the 1C? It's not like you had mass production.

For that matter, I assume longer scrolls were more expensive. What if Mark couldn't afford a full-length scroll, so he had to skimp a bit towards the end? It's hard to estimate how much space you will need to say what you want.

The harrowing of hell

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, 20 because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared (1 Pet 3:18-20).

This is an obscure passage that's generated several competing interpretations.

1. In the person of Noah, the preexistent Son commanded Noah's contemporaries to repent.

i) A basic deficiency of that interpretation is that the passage doesn't say or imply that Jesus spoke through Noah.

ii) This interpretation depends on rendering the dative *pneumati* in locative terms ("in the spirit") rather than instrumental terms ("by the Spirit"). Hence, Christ spoke through Noah via the intermediate agency of the Spirit.

However, the distinction between "put to death" and "made alive" alludes to the crucifixion and Resurrection respectively. Jesus was raised by the agency of the Holy Spirit. Given the conceptual contrast between physical death and physical resurrection, it makes more contextual

sense to render *pneumati* in instrumental terms ("by the Spirit"). Otherwise, we have a Docetic/Gnostic Resurrection.

iii) In defense of (1), it dovetails with 1 Pet 1:11, with its reference to the prophetic "Spirit of Christ." However:

a) That's not what 3:18-20 says. Even if it's consistent with 3:18-20, nothing in vv18-20 which indicates that referent.

b) 1:11 has its own interpretive issues. What exactly is mean by the "Spirit of Christ"? Is Christ the subject? Did he take possession of OT prophets?

Or is Christ the object? Is he the topic of OT prophecy? In context, it refers to prophecies about Christ rather than prophecies by Christ. It is not through the agency or instrumentality of Christ, but the Spirit of God.

iii) The sequence of the passage suggests this took place after the Resurrection, and not in prediluvian times:

death>Resurrection>Ascension (v22).

2. During Holy Saturday (between Good Friday and Easter Sunday), Christ went to the limbus patrum to release the OT saints from Purgatory. This is the traditional "descent into hell" or "harrowing of hell."

i) Aside from the anachronism (see above), this assumes the dogma of Purgatory. But that's hardly something an exegete can take for granted.

ii) Likewise, "spirit" is not a synonym for the discarnate soul of Christ. How could that be "made alive" at the moment of death?

3. After the Resurrection, Christ proclaimed final condemnation to imprisoned angels who fell in the days of Noah. A variation on this view refers it to the souls of their offspring (Nephilim), whom they begat with women.

The subjection of angels to Christ in v22 supports this interpretation. The "spirits" in v19 are the same as the beings in v22.

i) This typically assumes that Peter is alluding to 1 Enoch's interpretation of Gen 6:1-4. The imprisoned "spirits" are the fallen angels.

One contextual problem with this identification is that the fall of angels isn't synchronized with the construction of the ark in either Scripture or 1 Enoch.

ii) Likewise, God's "patience" is in reference to Noah's disobedient neighbors. The ark was, itself, a sign of impending judgment. God gave human sinners time and opportunity to repent.

iii) Angels are mentioned in v22, not because that ties into the netherworld setting of v19, but because that ties into the heavenly setting of the Ascension—and Session—of Christ. The Ascension not only represents the Son's "return" to heaven, but the Messiah's enthronement and coregency with the Father. All angels are subject to the Risen Lord.

iv) But even if the passage refers to angels, that doesn't require an Enochic background. There's a similar motif in Isa 24:21-22:

21 On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth.22 They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.

The "host of heaven" suggests angels. In context, fallen angels. They are "imprisoned," to await sentencing and final judgment. Cf. G. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39* (B&H 2007), 424-25.

4. After the Resurrection, Christ extended the opportunity of postmortem salvation to Noah's deceased contemporaries.

i) The passage doesn't actually say that. Rather than an offer of postmortem salvation, there's precedent for postmortem taunt-songs (e.g. Isa 14).

ii) Peter is exhorting his readers to remain steadfast in the faith despite persecution. It would subvert his message to hold out hope of a postmortem second chance.

5. After the Resurrection, Christ proclaimed final condemnation to the damned.

That fits the context of Noah's disobedient neighbors, who spurned God's forbearance. That ill-fated generation constitutes a paradigmatic sample-group of the damned.

"By the Spirit" or "in the spirit"?

Here's how four standard contemporary versions render [1 Pet 3:18](#):

*being put to death in the flesh but made alive **in the spirit** (ESV).*

*having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive **in the spirit** (NASB).*

*He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive **in the spirit** (NRSV).*

*He was put to death in the body but made alive **in the Spirit** (NIV).*

Here's a notable exception:

*being put to death in the flesh but made alive **by the Spirit** (NKJV).*

Of course, that's a revision of the classic 17C version.

Since I don't sit on translation committees, I don't know why they generally render the phrase that way, but here's what two commentators say, which may reflect the thinking of translation committees:

Jobes says that given the parallel syntax, the two datives should be rendered the same way (240). Forbes agrees.

Since the instrumental construction ("by") is not consistent for both, that, in turn, selects for a locative construction ("in"). Hence, as Forbes goes on to say:

Christ was put to death in the realm of the flesh but made alive in the realm of the Spirit (123).

By further implication:

It is unclear whether "Spirit" should be capitalized or not. Having rejected the instrumental sense for pneumatikē and opted for a locative of sphere (i.e., mode/realm of existence), the parallel with sarki probably favors a lower case "spirit" (123).

Jobes is a fine Greek scholar. An expert on the LXX. Likewise, the EGGNT series (to which Forbes contributes) is specifically designed to interact with the finer points of the Greek text. But it seems to me that there are two basic problems with their analysis:

i) Both Jobes and Forbes agree that "made alive" alludes to the Resurrection. However, to say that Christ was raised in the "realm" or "mode" of the Spirit is an obscure and frankly misleading way to describe a physical resurrection.

ii) There's also an issue regarding translation theory. The fact that the Greek construction is parallel doesn't mean the English construction should be parallel—for the obvious reason that Greek and English aren't the same.

One Greek dative can have two different senses (locative, instrumental), whereas it takes two different English prepositions to express each sense. Therefore, a Greek writer can use the same word to express two different relations. He doesn't have to sacrifice verbal symmetry to differentiate the sense.

But verbal symmetry doesn't require semantic symmetry, precisely because the Greek is already flexible in that regard. A Greek writer could intend a locative sense in the first clause, but an instrumental sense in the second clause. He can do that without resorting to two different constructions—and for stylistic reasons, he might prefer the elegance of using the same construction in both instances, even though each carries a different nuance.

To take a comparison: English translators are confronted with a tough choice in [Jn 3:3](#). For John, this is likely a double entendre. The same word can both mean "again" (or "anew") and "above." Both senses fit the context. Both senses are probably intended.

But we lack an English synonym with the same semantic range. Therefore, a translator must make an arbitrary judgment call. At best, he can give the alternate rendering in a footnote. By contrast, John wasn't confronted with that false dichotomy.

iii) For theological reasons, I think we should render the phrase "made alive by the Spirit." Christ was raised from the dead by divine agency. That's widely attested in NT theology.

Rising from the dead

*Nowhere in the Bible or in old Jewish or Christian literature does the language of resurrection refer to a materially new body, physically unconnected to the old. A resurrected body is always the old body or a piece of it come back to life and/or transformed. . . . Resurrection meant bodies in the ground coming back to life. To rise from the dead was to rise from one's tomb. Dale C. Allison, Jr., "The Resurrection of Jesus and Rational Apologetics," *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008): 315-338.*

Surely that's overstated:

i) In reference to the Resurrection of Christ, I agree. That's because there was an extant corpse to resurrect. Indeed, his body had only been on ice for about 48 hours.

ii) But surely Christians and Jews were aware of the fact that sometimes there were no mortal remains (cf. 2 Kgs 23:15-16; Amos 2:1; Rev 20:13). In that case, there is no body in the ground to return to life.

In that event, resurrection requires a materially new body. In that regard, it's physically unconnected to the old. However, although it's numerically distinct, it can be a duplicate body. Discontinuous in one respect, but structurally indistinguishable.

"Spiritual body"

Some people think Paul's reference to a "spiritual body," denotes an immaterial body. A subjective vision. They therefore deny that Paul affirmed the physical resurrection of Jesus.

But if a "spiritual body" is defined in contrast to a physical body, then a "spiritual body" is synonymous with or indistinguishable from a ghost? Assuming they exist, ghosts have a corporeal appearance. On that definition, Paul would be saying Jesus became a ghost three days after he died, and since Jesus is the template for the Christian afterlife, Corinthian Christians will become ghosts in the world to come.

But that's a highly implausible interpretation of Paul's argument in 1 Cor 15. Given widespread belief in ghosts in the ancient world, there'd be nothing special about saying Christ or Christians are immortal in *that* sense.

If, moreover, "resurrection" is synonymous with ghosts, why would there be any chronological gap between death and becoming a ghost? Wouldn't that happen when the soul separates from body, at the moment of death?

Is Jesus a ghost?

The short answer to the title of the post is "no". That said, it's not uncommon for liberal scholars or outright atheists to claim that Paul's reference to a "spiritual body" in 1 Cor 15 denotes something ethereal, in contrast to a physical resurrection. On that view, a "spiritual body" would be something like a ghost.

The usual evangelical argument is that a "spiritual body" is not an immaterial body; rather, that's shorthand for a body empowered by the Spirit of God. And I think that's a persuasive interpretation.

But let's play along with the ghostly resurrection for the sake of argument. It's striking because this is generally put forward by critics of orthodox Christianity, yet it has ironic consequences for critics of orthodox Christianity.

On the orthodox view, if the corpse of Jesus never came back to life, that falsifies Christianity. But according to the ghostly interpretation, even if we discovered the bones of Jesus, that wouldn't falsify Christianity since the Pauline paradigm doesn't require a physical resurrection.

Perhaps a critic would object that while that's true considered in isolation, it contradicts Gospel accounts regarding the empty tomb. Ah, but that presents another irony. Given the ghostly interpretation, a Christian could help himself to one of the naturalistic explanations for the empty tomb (e.g. swoon theory, wrong tomb, stolen body, nonburial, body moved) because, on the ghostly interpretation, there needn't be a supernatural explanation for the empty tomb since Jesus wasn't supposed to be physically resurrected. It doesn't matter what happened to

the corpse. Here a conservative Christian can use one liberal theory to deflect another liberal theory.

Perhaps, though, a critic would object that even if that explains the empty tomb accounts, consistent with the ghostly interpretation, it fails to explain the emphasis in Luke and John on the solidity of the Risen Jesus.

But if (ex hypothesi), we're going to use the ghostly interpretation of 1 Cor 15 as our frame of reference, then it makes sense to question the traditional interpretation of Luke and John, to bring them in line with 1 Cor 15. From what I've read, apparitions can appear to be 3D. Block out light. Be seen from different angles. In a fraction of cases, they are even said to be tangible. So, if we were using the ghostly interpretation of 1 Cor 15 as our benchmark, that could still be harmonized with the post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus in the Gospels.

I'm not saying that's how I interpret the Gospel accounts. But then, that's not how I interpret 1 Cor 15. If, however, a liberal or atheist is going to insist that in 1 Cor 15, a "spiritual body" is ethereal rather than physical, two can play that game. They can't pit that against the Gospels. So that wouldn't be a defeater for Christianity, on their own grounds, so long as the "resurrection" is consistently ghostly in the Gospels and 1 Cor 15 alike.

This creates a dilemma for the critic of orthodox Christianity. How do they disprove Christianity? They can't disprove Christianity by claiming that the Resurrection never happened if they define a resurrection in immaterial terms. For by that logic, it only has to be a ghost or apparition.

The only way they could disprove the Resurrection on those terms is if a reported ghost or apparition of the dead can only be a hallucination. But a problem with that contention is that we have evidence of veridical apparitions and ghosts.

So the dilemma persists. Having raised a shortsighted objection to the physical resurrection of Christ, the critic has unwittingly made the Resurrection unfalsifiable.

Regarding Christ according to the flesh

Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer (2 Cor 5:16).

What does Paul's cryptic comment mean? Here's a possibility: On the one hand there were thousands of Palestinian Jews, as well as however many Samaritans and gentiles, who heard Jesus preach, saw him work wonders and cast out demons. Yet many of them were his enemies. Indeed, some members of the Sanhedrin probably knew Jesus according to the flesh (in that sense), yet voted for his execution. Not to mention the lynch mobs who attempted to stone him or demanded that Pilate crucify him. So even firsthand knowledge of Jesus doesn't automatically save a person.

On the other hand, precious few Christians in churches planted by Paul had firsthand knowledge of Jesus. Living on mainland Greece, they didn't hear Jesus preach, see him work wonders and cast out demons. Yet they could be saved without knowing Jesus according to the flesh (in that sense).

Disappearing act

13 That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, **14** and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. **15** While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. **16** But their eyes were kept from recognizing him...**30** When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. **31** And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight (Lk 24:13-16,30-31).

36 As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" **37** But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. **38** And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? **39** See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." **40** And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. **41** And while they still

disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them (Lk 24:36-43)

26 Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” (Jn 20:26-27).

Christian readers puzzle over descriptions of the Risen Lord. Three preliminary points:

i) Any explanation will be speculative. Any explanation will go beyond the immediate account, to fill in gaps.

ii) I prefer explanations that have some Biblical parallel or precedent.

iii) Both Luke and John go out of their way to accentuate the indisputable physicality of the Resurrection. Hence, I'm leery of any explanations that make that equivocal. For instance, if you say Jesus was able to materialize and dematerialize at will, then that casts doubt on the physicality of the Resurrection. After all, if he could materialize and dematerialize, then what is his natural state? Is he normally incorporeal except when he assumes corporal form to appear to people and interact with people?

That kind of explanation sabotages the emphasis in Luke and John.

Let's take a comparison:

6 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him (Acts 12:6-10).

A couple of features may be parallel to the Resurrection appearances:

i) Chains and locked gates miraculously unlock.

ii) God apparently makes the guard hallucinate. They see things that aren't there and they fail to see things that are there. (Although it's possible that God made them all fall asleep).

(ii) is reminiscent of an episode in Kings, where God makes the Syrian army hallucinate:

14 So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city. 15 When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" 16 He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." 17 Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 18 And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, "Please strike this people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha. 19 And Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not

the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.” And he led them to Samaria. 20 As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, “O Lord, open the eyes of these men, that they may see.” So the Lord opened their eyes and they saw, and behold, they were in the midst of Samaria (2 Kgs 6:14-20).

Returning to the Resurrection appearances with that background material as a possible frame of reference:

i) In what sense did Jesus vanish from their sight (Lk 24:31)? According to Lk 24:16, God caused them to hallucinate by failing to recognize Jesus. They mistook him for a stranger.

In a sense, that's a mass hallucination, but not in the way that "skeptics" suppose:

a) This was a miraculous hallucination. So, far from being a naturalistic alternative, it's a supernatural explanation.

b) They didn't imagine they saw Jesus when they saw no one or saw a stranger. To the contrary, they imagined seeing a stranger when, in fact, they were looking at Jesus.

And when they came to recognize Jesus (Lk 24:31), that was the opposite of hallucination. That was God breaking the spell. They were hallucinating when they misperceived him as somebody other than Jesus. They finally saw him for who he was when God stopped causing them to hallucinate.

This may also explain the sense in which he vanished from view. Given that the account already has an element of psychological manipulation, this may well mean, not that Jesus physically disappeared—much less dematerialized—but that he became invisible to them because he caused them to hallucinate that he was no longer there.

It's like science fiction stories about telepathic aliens who can make humans see things that aren't there or fail to see things that are there.

ii) Here's another possibility: At the Ascension, Jesus disappears from view when he disappears into the Shekinah (Acts 1:9). Likewise, Moses entered the Shekinah (Exod 24:18) and, at the Transfiguration, the three disciples entered the Shekinah (Lk 9:34).

Entering the Shekinah renders a person invisible to outside observers. In Biblical narratives, the Shekinah is visible, but presumably that's a divine convention. If the Shekinah were invisible, and someone entered it, it would appear as though he walked into an invisible room and shut the invisible door behind him. Like those science fiction stories about portals to a parallel universe or time portals to the past and future. Or characters stepping through mirrors in Jean Cocteau's **ORPHEUS**.

iii) In what sense did Jesus enter the Upper Room? Perhaps he miraculously caused the doors to unlock and swing open. (Although it's also possible that he miraculously made a door or wall temporarily pervious, by changing its molecular structure.)

These explanations have three advantages:

- i)** They preserve the unequivocal physicality of the Resurrection.
- ii)** They are miraculous rather than rationalistic.
- iii)** They have Biblical parallels or Biblical precedent.

The guarded tomb

Unbelievers dismiss the account of guarded the tomb (Mt 27:62-66; 28:11-15) as a made-up story. But there are two basic problems with this dismissal:

1. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that it was a made-up story. What would motivate the disciples (or Matthew) to concoct such a story?

Well, since the story is intended to forestall or squash rumors about a stolen body, the only motivation for such a story is in case the disciples did, in fact, steal his body, and then invented this explanation as a preemptive cover-story, conveniently backdated by Matthew, to anticipate and defang rumors about a stolen body.

It's a way of getting in front of the story. You state a potential objection before your opponents have a chance to state it, then come up with your own explanation. That preemptive maneuver weakens the potential objection.

2. So, what's the problem with objection? It only works for unbelievers who think the body was stolen. It doesn't work for unbelievers who endorse different conjecture (other than the stolen body) to explain away the empty tomb.

If, for example, an unbeliever espouses the wrong tomb conjecture, then he undercuts the motive for the disciples (or Matthew) to fabricate a cover story about the guarded tomb, since that presupposes a stolen body, which the wrong tomb theory rejects.

You can only dismiss the account of the guarded tomb if you grant the presupposition which (allegedly) motivated the

disciples (or Matthew) to come up with that explanation. If you reject that presupposition, then you thereby reject the incentive which would give rise to that (allegedly) fictitious story in the first place.

So the only unbelievers who can consistently dismiss the authenticity of this story is the subset of unbelievers who espouse the stolen body conjecture.

Therefore, to dismiss the account of the guarded tomb, they must also dismiss every alternative theory to explain away the empty tomb—except for the stolen body conjecture. Unless you subscribe to the stolen body conjecture, that cancels out your objection to the guarded tomb.

3. Matthew's account is psychologically realistic. The reason the Roman authorities and Jewish authorities wanted Jesus dead is because he'd become a threat to the establishment. He was a rival to the religious establishment. Likewise, he was an indirect threat to Pilate because the Jewish leaders implicitly threatened to denounce Pilate to Caesar unless Pilate executed Jesus.

So both Pilate and the Sanhedrin would have a vested interest in securing the tomb to retain control over the body, since that is how they'd retain control over the story. If you control the body, you control the way the story ends. Jesus died. End of story. No more threat to the religious or political establishment. So both centers of power had a personal stake in doing just what Matthew attributes to them.

However, their elaborate precautions were foiled by an unforeseen contingency—the Resurrection.

Grave robbers!

One thing we can say with relative certainty (even though most people – including lots of scholars!) have never thought about this or realized it, is that no one came to think Jesus was raised from the dead because three days later they went to the tomb and found it was empty. It is striking that Paul, our first author who talks about Jesus' resurrection, never mentions the discovery of the empty tomb and does not use an empty tomb as some kind of "proof" that the body of Jesus had been raised.

Moreover, whenever the Gospels tell their later stories about the tomb, it never, ever leads anyone came to believe in the resurrection. The reason is pretty obvious. If you buried a friend who had recently died, and three days later you went back and found the body was no longer there, would your reaction be "Oh, he's been exalted to heaven to sit at the right hand of God"? Of course not. Your reaction would be: "Grave robbers!" Or, "Hey, I'm at the wrong tomb!"

<https://ehrmanblog.org/an-easter-reflection-2018/>

Depends on who my friend is. If my friend is God Incarnate, if my friend performed astounding miracles at will—including the ability to raise the dead—if my friend predicted his death and resurrection, if Isaiah predicted messiah's death and resurrection (Isa 53:7-12), then the first reaction, the most logical reaction, to the empty tomb shouldn't be "Grave robbers!" Or, "Hey, I'm at the wrong tomb!"

Death & resurrection

The relationship between the crucifixion and resurrection nicely illustrates the difference between providence and miracle. On the one hand, the crucifixion was a natural event. On the other hand, the resurrection was a supernatural event.

Even if humans were naturally immortal, if they didn't die from aging or disease, they could still be killed. The body isn't indestructible.

And the naturalness of his death supplies a necessary point of contrast to frame the supernaturalness of his resurrection. What's naturally possible or impossible furnishes the background for miracles.

If a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky struck Christ dead, that would send the wrong message. He had to die at human hands—just as he had to rise from the dead by divine power.

There's a similar relationship between the Incarnation and many other incidents in the life of Christ. An interplay of providence and miracle.

Is the Resurrection special?

Christian apologists often treat the Resurrection as if that's a uniquely important miracle. In one sense that's true, in another sense that's not the case.

Many apologists focus on the Resurrection for two reasons;

i) They think that's the best-attested miracle. That's the easiest to defend. They can make a case for the Resurrection.

ii) That's a lynchpin miracle. If you can prove the Resurrection, then you can prove more than the Resurrection because the Resurrection has larger implications. The Resurrection becomes a proof for other things.

There's an element of truth to that, although it's overstated. For instance, the multiplication of food is recorded in all four Gospels.

In addition, the Exodus is multiple-attested in the OT. Not just in the Pentateuch, but the Psalter. And given how many people participated in the Exodus, we'd expect there to be independent chains of testimony. Family lore that passed down from descendants of that event, including the Psalmists.

In another respect, all miracles share a common principle. Events beyond the scope of nature to produce. In that regard, the Resurrection is not in a class apart from other nature miracles.

There's another sense in which the Incarnation and Resurrection are fairly unique types of miracles. Most biblical miracles are about life in this world. Things that happen within our world. Things that happen in the course of life.

By contrast, the Incarnation and Resurrection are like two sides of the same door. A door between two worlds. The Incarnation bears witness to an entry point from a larger reality outside our world into our world. A point of contact.

Conversely, the Resurrection bears witness to an exit from our world to the next world, and back again. Passing out of this life, this world, into the next world, then returning—but with a difference. From mortal life through death to immortality.

So these are mirrored miracles. Entry and exit—pointing to a world beyond our world. To a hope beyond our world. A world outside our world which is the source of life and goodness in our world.

The Damascus Road experience

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from the sky shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:1-9).

5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters

to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

6 “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from the sky suddenly shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ 8 And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ 9 Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. 10 And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ 11 And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus (Acts 22:5-11).

12 “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from the sky, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a

voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' 19 "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, (Acts 26:12-19).

1. How should we interpret the Christophany that triggered Paul's conversion? Was it a subjective vision? Or did Jesus appear to Paul physically? If you were a movie director, how would you visualize the scene? What would you show the audience?

2. A critic might say the question is pointless since Acts is pious fiction. I'm not going to take the time to defend the historicity of Acts. There's the classic monograph by Colin Hemer, the multi-volume work edited by Bruce Winter, and Craig Keener's encyclopedic commentary. In addition, there

are commentaries in the pipeline by Richard Bauckham, Stanley Porter, and Loveday Alexander which will presumably include erudite defenses of its historicity.

Approaching this from another angle, if Luke is writing fiction, why does he create an apparent discrepancy between 9:7 and 22:9? Likewise, why does he make Paul's traveling companions have a somewhat different experience of the Christophany than Paul? Why not fabricate multiple independent witnesses who share the same sensory impressions?

3. Suppose, for argument's sake, that Jesus didn't physically appear to Paul. Suppose this is an apparition of the dead. Although in that case it can't be used as a proof-text for the Resurrection, it would still mean that Jesus survived death. Not only is he still alive, but he appears to Paul in the trappings of a theophany. Moreover, an apparition would still be consistent with the Resurrection. So even on that interpretation, the Christophany is incompatible with naturalism or mythicism.

4. Is the Christophany inconsistent with Jesus physically appearing to Paul? According to the three accounts, Paul and his traveling companions individually sensed something with their eyes and ears. They all saw something and heard something. That suggests a public, objective event. A mind-independent phenomenon, caused by an external stimulus. Something you could record on camera if you were there.

5. Does the luminosity imply a psychological vision rather than a physical manifestation? No. The Christophany is reminiscent of the Transfiguration, where a physical Jesus becomes incandescent.

6. Did Paul just see light, or did he see the figure of Jesus? The statement in 9:7 suggests a point of contrast between what Paul saw and what his traveling companions saw. He saw something they didn't. He saw more than they did.

7. Regarding the apparent discrepancy, the intended distinction seems to be that they heard sound or heard a voice, but couldn't make out what was said. Does that imply a subjective vision?

i) It was an overwhelming experience. What if they were too stunned to listen? Consider people who say that when their doctor told them they had cancer, they stopped listening after the word "cancer"? Another possibility is that God controlled what they perceived.

ii) But here's another consideration: Paul is going to Damascus to take into custody Syrian Jews who converted to Christianity. He can handle the Greek or Aramaic side of the conversation, but what if he picked traveling companions whose first language is Syriac to interrogate Syriac speaking converts? When Jesus speaks to Paul in Aramaic, they might not understand what was said. On a related note:

"Arabs" traditionally lived outside Damascus, especially in the mountainous regions; the "Arabian mountains" stood above Damascus. Paul's forays into "Arabia" could have gone much further than this. Some ancient writers included in "Arabia" (a term often used broadly)

not only traditional Nabatea but also all the cities of the Decapolis...Language might also pose a potential barrier, though Paul could have found people who understood him. Although most Nabatean inscriptions are in a Nabatean form of Aramaic, Nabateans seem to have traditionally spoken an ancient dialect of Arabic, attested in their names... C. Keener, Galatians (Baker 2019), 93-94,96.

8. Why was Paul blinded but they were not? Why did they only see light? Since we weren't there, we can't say for sure. But here's one way to reconstruct the scene: as they are walking, Paul momentarily turns around (due to subliminal divine prompting) and bam: the Christophany explodes into view. He is facing the Christophany while his traveling companions have their back to it. They don't turn around because it's painfully bright.

Paul sees Jesus, in a glaring nimbic aura, before it blinds him. Just like staring directly at the sun doesn't instantly blind the viewer, but if you look at it for too long, you will go blind.

9. The time of day means they were wide awake when it happened. It wasn't a trance or revelatory dream.

10. Because the KJV uses the word "heaven", modern versions tend to copy that since Bible translations are commercially conservative; they avoid changes that would upset customers used to a traditional, venerable version. But "heaven" is ambiguous and prejudicial. It can mean several different things:

i) The abode of God/saints/angels

ii) An event that originates in heaven

iii) The sky

iv) A pious circumlocution for God

The Greek word doesn't imply that Paul saw Jesus in heaven (i). The description of the event, judging by its impact on Paul and his traveling companions, suggests light from the sky. That's reminiscent of the Ascension, where Jesus is suspended in midair, until the Shekinah envelops him.

Locked doors

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"...26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:19,26).

This is often thought to mean Jesus walked through solid walls. While that's a possible inference, there are problems with that inference:

i) The narrator doesn't mention the locked doors to prep the reader for a miracle. Rather, the reason he provides is to draw attention to the disciples' state of mind: they were terrified that the authorities would arrest them. Since the authorities executed their leader, were they next? They were distraught and demoralized. That's the explicit reason for mentioning the locked doors.

While that's all consistent with a miracle, the locked doors require no further explanation. That's their narrative purpose: not a setup for a miracle, but a symptom of the disciples' panic.

ii) In this chapter and the next, the narrator records several scenes, including this scene, to emphasize the physicality of

the Resurrection. If, however, Jesus could dematerialize and dematerialize at will, then that subverts the narrator's aim. That means Jesus is intermittently embodied. Sometimes he has a body, sometimes he's wraithlike. Not consistently physical or ghostly but alternating between those two different states.

iii) This is not to deny the possibility or implication of a miracle. But it reflects a very limited imagination on the part of the reader to assume he gained access by passing through walls. An inviting parallel is Peter's jailbreak (Acts 12). While that involves Peter miraculously overcoming physical restraints and barriers, it's not because his body dematerializes. Nothing happens to his body. Rather, supernatural things happen to the physical restraints and barriers—as well as the guards.

Another example is Paul's jailbreak (Acts 16). In a sense, nothing supernatural happens. But the timing is providential. A coincidence miracle.

John's Gospel is generally explicit about the miracles of Christ. They showcase his divine power. It would be odd if the narrator was recording another miracle, but in such ambiguous and understated terms. And the primary miracle in Jn 20-21 is the Resurrection itself.

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.

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).

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).

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.

<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).

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.

Easter chronology

Another issue that some raise is how the resurrection account in John differs from the accounts in the Synoptics. A key figure, Mary Magdalene, leads those who inform the disciples of the empty tomb in the Synoptics after being told Jesus was raised. Luke 24:4 and John 23:13 have this announcement begin with two angels, Matthew 28:5 speaks about an angel, and Mark 16:5 has a young man tell them. Yet in John Mary is perplexed and does not know where the body is until Jesus appears to her, a scene described after John and Peter have run to the tomb.

So what is one to make of these differences? My own understanding is that part of the issue is resolved by seeing that John's telling begins with how John and Peter experienced the event. John has Mary begin her report even though John and Peter do not wait for her to tell her whole story but run to check the empty tomb. Then John tells in detail what Mary experienced. John's mention that the women did not know where the body was placed is where their report to him begins, but the

report did not get as far as the messenger's announcement of Jesus's resurrection before Peter and John departed to see what had taken place. This is all collapsed in the Synoptics into the women's report to the group about the announcement of an empty tomb. John often supplements the Synoptics with fresh details that overlap the accounts of the other evangelists. Likewise here, literary arrangement and choices are the keys to differences in sequencing.

D. Bock, "Precision and Accuracy: Making Distinctions in the Cultural Context," J. Hoffmeier & D. Magary, eds. **Do HISTORICAL MATTERS MATTER TO FAITH?** (Crossway 2012), 374-75.

John's Passion week chronology

13 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 During supper... (Jn 13:1-2).

28 Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover (Jn 18:28).

14 Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" (Jn 19:14).

Some scholars think there's a discrepancy between John's Passion week chronology and the Synoptic chronology. There are different proposals for finessing this alleged discrepancy.

1) One issue concerns the timing of the Crucifixion. Did it take place at the third hour (Mk 15:25) or the sixth hour (Jn 19:14)?

i) One proposal is that John uses the Roman system whereas the Synoptics use the Jewish system (e.g. Andrew

Steinmann). But that's disputed.

ii) Perhaps a better explanation is that, before the advent of clocks, when people told time by the sun, the time of day was inherently imprecise. Sunrise and sunset vary throughout the year. Hence, it's anachronistic for modern readers, with digital clocks, to expect precise hourly time-divisions.

2) A more substantial issue concerns the relationship of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion to the Sabbath.

i) One suggestion is that John and the Synoptics are working from different, independent traditions (e.g. J. R. Michaels). The problem with that suggestion is that if John and the Synoptics endorse divergent traditions, then that's at odds with the inerrancy of Scripture.

ii) There's also the question of whether John was familiar with the Synoptic Gospels. Assuming that's the case, then even if, for whatever reason, his chronology is different, that wouldn't be a mistake on his part. Rather, that would be intentional. It's not as if his chronology is different because he was ignorant of Synoptic chronology. Rather, the difference is deliberate.

iii) Apropos (ii), another suggestion is that John adapted the timeline for symbolic reasons, to synchronize the Crucifixion with Jewish pilgrims sacrificing their paschal lambs (e.g. Leon Morris, Craig Keener). However, that's subject to certain objections.

a) This is based on later Jewish tradition, which may not go back to the time in question.

b) Even if the tradition is accurate, it might be too subtle for John's audience. That, however, assumes John wrote with just one audience in mind. But authors often pitch their work at different levels. The basic story is comprehensible to the average reader. But they also write with the ideal reader in mind—someone who will appreciate the subtleties.

c) If John changed the day to make a theological point, there's no underlying event to support the symbolism.

iv) Perhaps the best suggestion is that John is referring to something else. As one scholar explains:

If one is not content to posit a contradiction between John and the Synoptists (a position which has its own difficulties, not the least of them being the indications that John himself knows, and sometimes follows, the Synoptic chronology [See below, pp293-294]), various possible ways of reconciling them are worthy of consideration.

"The Preparation of the Passover" (Jn 19:14) is a phrase which naturally recalls the rabbinical expression "the Eve of the Passover," meaning Nisan 14, "The Passover" itself being Nisan 15. However, the rabbinical form of language is curiously at variance with the OT, where it is Nisan 14 that is "the Passover," and Nisan 15 is the first day of "Unleavened Bread" (Lev 23:5f; Num 28:16f);

and there is no clear example of the rabbinical phraseology in the NT. So, as the "Preparation," *paraskeue*, commonly means Friday (the preparation for the Sabbath), and as the word is used twice in this sense in the very same chapter of John (Jn 19:31,42), it seems better to understand "the Preparation of the Passover" as meaning "the Friday of Passover week" - either the Friday of the Jewish week (from Sunday to Saturday) within which Passover fell that year, or, perhaps better, the Friday within the feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread, though of as a single festival (cp. Mk 14:1; Lk 22:1).

"Eat the Passover" (Jn 18:28) is more difficult, for there is no doubt that it would usually mean "eat the Passover lamb." But since it turns out, in light of the foregoing evidence, that this interpretation would make John contradict himself about the chronology, a less usual interpretation becomes a distinct possibility. The sacrifice of the Passover lamb, and the meal which followed, were only the first (though the most important) of the many sacrifices and sacred meals which took place throughout the Passover and Unleavened Bread,

and had done so since OT times. In the first century, it was held that the command not "to appear empty" before the Lord at the pilgrim feasts (Exod 23:15; 34:20; Deut 16:16) had a precise meaning: it meant each male Israelite bringing a burnt offering and a peace offering, in addition to the Passover lamb; and this obligation is the subject of the tractate Hagigah in the Mishnah. Those referred to in Jn 18:28 as wanting to remain ceremonially clean so as to "eat the Passover" are the chief priests and the Pharisees (cp. v3). The Pharisees would have been very scrupulous about the Hagigah duty, and as it involved a peace offering, which necessarily included a sacred meal, they would certainly have wanted to remain ceremonially clean so as to be able to eat it. Even more would this have concerned the chief priests, since a share of every peace offering went to the priest who offered it.

Moreover, the peace offering might be an ox from the herd, rather than a lamb or goat from the flock.

The question, therefore, faces us, was it possible to use phrases like "to sacrifice the Passover" and "to eat the Passover" to cover these other sacrifices and sacred meals as well? In OT times, Deut 16:2f

shows that it was, and as the OT was the Bible of Judaism, and the Pentateuch was reckoned its most important part, it was always possible for Pentateuchal phraseology to be echoed or copied. What Deut 16:2f says is:

Though shalt sacrifice the Passover unto the Lord thy God, of the flock and the herd, in the place which the Lord shall choose to cause his name to dwell there. Thou shalt eat no leavened bread with it (i.e. with the Passover); seven days shalt thou eat unleavened bread with it, even the bread of affliction.

Here the phrase "sacrifice the Passover" is actually used, and the phrase "eat unleavened bread with the Passover" (and therefore "eat the Passover" itself) is clearly implied; and in both cases the reference is to what goes on for seven days, and includes the sacrificing and eating of oxen from the herd as well as lambs and kids from the flock. The usage is found again in the Hebrew of 2 Chron 30:22, in the account of Hezekiah's Passover, where the literal meaning is

So they ate the festal sacrifice (i.e. the Passover, v18) for the seven days, offering sacrifices of peace offerings, and giving thanks to the Lord, the God of their fathers.

Moreover, the earliest example occurs in biblical Greek as well, since Deut 16:2f is literally translated in the Septuagint (whereas 2 Chron 30:22 is paraphrased). R. Beckwith, Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian (E. J. Brill 1996), 290,294-296. Cf. Steinmann, From Abraham to Paul (Concordia 2011), 276ff.

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.

Elvis sightings

A common atheist trope is to compare the Resurrection to postmortem Elvis sightings. There are multiple problems with that comparison:

i) In my reading, atheists who use that comparison never document their claim. We're just treated to unsourced reports. They don't tell us where they got their information. Is this a newspaper story?

They don't cite named witnesses. They don't say when and where it occurred. No date. No address.

They don't quote what the witness said. They don't quote "Elvis" saying anything.

Note how different this is from NT accounts of the post-Resurrection appearances which name witnesses, say where it happened, when it happened. What Jesus said and did. What the witnesses said.

Atheists mention Elvis sightings as an example of how legends can develop, but ironically, the atheist meme is helping to popularize an urban legend. Atheists rely on thirdhand rumors of Elvish sightings, which, in turn, contributes to the legend. A circular process.

ii) Given the proliferation of Elvis impersonators, there's nothing incredible about reports of observers who say that saw a man matching the description of the late pop star. To the contrary, that's to be expected. Indeed, that's inevitable.

iii) Given how populous America is, what might seem like a large number of reports can be statistically insignificant.

iv) How many reported Elvis sightings are simply jokes? Because atheists don't cite actual reports, don't interview (alleged) witnesses, there's no telling.

v) Some atheists compare the Elvis cult to devotion to Jesus. Problem is, even if there are studied parallels, that would be a case of fans aping Christian piety. The fact that some fans, influenced by Christianity, turn Elvis into a travesty of Christ, does absolutely nothing to cast doubt on the original source of inspiration.

vi) The comparison begs the question. It only works because most folks believe that Elvis is dead. But to say that's analogous to Jesus assumes the very issue in dispute.

"It is the Lord!"

7 That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea (Jn 21:7).

Jn 21 is one of the major accounts of the post-Resurrection appearances of Christ. Liberals typically discount the historicity of John because it's too theological. Mind you, that's difficult to finesse even on their own terms inasmuch as John's Gospel often includes many historical details lacking in the Synoptic Gospels.

One critical test of authenticity is the criterion of embarrassment. And v7 fits the criterion. Indeed, commentators seem a bit embarrassed discussing the verse.

Commentators typically contend that the Peter wasn't totally nude. Rather, he was wearing a loincloth or short tunic. They say this in part on the assumption that Jewish scruples about public nudity would inhibit Peter from fishing in the buff.

However, one problem with that explanation is that, if Peter was already wearing just enough to avoid "indecent exposure," it's less understandable why he'd then don his outer garment. Was he *that* self-conscious about appearing bare-chested in the presence of Christ? Was that considered unseemly in the hot Palestinian climate? Was that not something Jewish men did? Seems unlikely.

Richard Bauckham takes issue with the conventional wisdom:

Richard Bauckham However, as you say, everyone went to the [Roman] baths. Even the rabbis went to the baths. I think even Jews, who were more sensitive about nudity than most people, just thought it was natural to be naked around and in water. Fishermen worked naked, even on shore. The Victorians were the first to invent bathing trunks.

<http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2014/07/03/paul-and-gentile-circumcision/#comment-10709>

Assuming that's correct, it would better explain the account. It's just a bunch of guys here. Like a locker room. And it was so much simpler, when working in water, checking their nets, not to be bogged down by wet clothing.

There's a certain theological irony about his feeling the need to clothe himself in the presence of his Creator (cf. Jn 1:3). It's not as if God doesn't know what we look like underneath. But people can be (and often are) illogical in that respect. Consider how many Christians still think you ought to dress up for church. Wear your "Sunday best." So it's psychologically realistic.

Commentators sometimes puzzle over donning an outer garment just before diving into the water. Surely the less you're wearing, the easier it is to swim. Mind you, that objection applies regardless of whether we think Peter was wearing nothing all, or wearing a loincloth or short tunic—before he donned his outer garment and dove in.

Again, though, that objection misses the point. People will often sacrifice practicality for decorum. Yes, his sense of modesty interferes with swimming, but modesty has nothing to do with efficiency.

So you have this somewhat comical, down-to-earth detail in the midst of an account about the Risen Lord. One of those parenthetical details that lends credence to the account. Not something you'd expect the narrator to invent.

Pumpkinification

I'm going to comment on Richard C. Miller's **RESURRECTION AND RECEPTION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY** (Routledge 2014).

i) I admit that I haven't read much past the introductory chapter. That's so bad that I'm disinclined to deepen my acquaintance with the book. The first chapter gives you the gist of what follows.

It might be objected that by failing to read the whole book, I'm missing out on the supporting material which substantiates his thesis. When, however, Miller compares the Resurrection accounts with Seneca the Younger's satirical **PUMPKINIFICATION OF THE DIVINE CLAUDIUS** (to take a typical example), I doubt I'm missing much. Comparisons like that succeed, not in discrediting the Gospels, but in discrediting Miller.

ii) Miller is much like Robert Price, except that Miller has fancier credentials and a starchy style. Miller's approach is a throwback to the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule of Bultmann, Bousset and Reitzenstein.

Justin Martyr's 1 Apology presented the framing contours of the Gospel narrative as having resided within a mythic mode of hero fabulation....Central to the earliest great apology of the Christian tradition, this grand concession casts a

*profound light on the nature of earth
Christian narrative production (2).*

I think that's a misinterpretation of Justin's statement. I think Justin simply deploys an ad hominem argument. Pagans shouldn't find the Gospel narratives incredible, for by their own lights, there are similar events in pagan literature. He proposes this comparison for the sake of argument.

Could the apology indeed, have admitted that the earliest Christians had composed Jesus' divine birth, dramatically tragic death, resurrection, and ascension within the earliest Christian Gospel tradition as fictive embellishments following the stock structural conventions of Greek and Roman mythology, specifically the narrative traditions of the fabled antique Mediterranean demigod? (2)

i) Not only does that rest on a misinterpretation of Justin's statement, but we need to consider how Justin got his name. He was martyred for the faith. But according to Miller, that would mean Justin died for what he himself deemed to be a fictional Savior. How likely is that?

ii) Moreover, even if we grant Miller's implausible interpretation of Justin, that creates no presumption that Justin's interpretation of the Gospels is correct. Justin didn't author one of the canonical Gospels. And he was writing generations after they were written.

In addition, his own background is very different from the Gospel writers. By birth and breeding, Justin was a pagan Greek, trained in Greek philosophy and literature. Even if he thought the Gospel writers were adapting a translation fable, there's no reason to think his understanding mirrors the understanding of the Gospel writers. He moves in a different conceptual world than they do.

The text becomes all the more disturbing when considering that the argument did not even qualify as an "admission" per se but merely arose as a statement in passing, as though commonly acknowledged both within and without Christian society. Indeed, the implied author even included himself, as well as all Christians, as complicit in this mythopoeic enterprise. Did this earliest defense of Christianity deliver a candid assessment when stating that there was "nothing unique" or sui generis about these dominant framing contours of the Jesus narrative? (2)

Once again, this would mean many Christians chose martyrdom rather than recant their faith, even though, according to Miller, they thought the Gospels were fictional.

The apology's at times overt rejection of antecedent iconic figures of classical antiquity, however, further complicates the matter. In 1 Apology 5, for instance, the apology asserted that the classical pantheon was, in truth, a cast of demons. (2)

This reinforces my contention that Justin's statement reflects an apologetic strategy. He accommodates his pagan audience by responding to them on their own grounds. But that doesn't reflect his own position.

As previously understood in Greek philosophical tradition, this supreme reason existed as universally accessible to all peoples throughout time. The apology merely made explicit that which the prologue of John's Gospel had already implied (Jn 1:1-14). (3)

i) The syntax of Jn 1:9 is ambiguous: does it refer to Christ coming into the world or everyone coming into the world?

ii) John is using logos as a Septuagintal carryover for God's creative speech. That's further borne out by the conspicuous allusion to Gen 1. Logos doesn't mean "reason" in Jn 1. The background lies in OT usage rather than Greek philosophy.

Accordingly, Justin's works provided no historical argument supporting the resurrection...Indeed, scanning the multitude of documents, one finds that the early Christians apparently never did make such a claim or attempt such an argument, unlike modern Christian apologists, because that was not their perspective nor was this the story's conventional function (8).

It's unclear what Justin would have to add. By the time of writing, the eyewitnesses to the Resurrection were dead. Justin is writing well over a century after the Resurrection. So there's nothing more to say, above and beyond the testimonial evidence recorded in the NT.

In the cultural expression in the Hellenistic Orient, this process of

syncretism typically meant the appropriation of Hellenic forms under significant indigenous names...Thus, Philo of Alexandria... (9).

i) Mentioning Philo is counterproductive, for that draws attention to the dramatic contrast between a Hellenistic Jew like Philo and the NT writers.

ii) But there's another basic problem with Miller's analysis. There's no one way in which a religious minority group reacts to the dominant culture. There are at least two opposing responses:

a) One is assimilation with the dominant culture. This can range from wholesale apostasy to subtle syncretism.

b) Conversely, members of a religious minority group may double down on their religious distinctives to preserve their hereditary identity. Diaspora Jews can be more conservative, more traditional, than Jews in a Jewish state, or Jews where Jews are in the majority. For instance, Hasidic communities in NYC may be far more observant than many or most Jews in Tel-Aviv.

Likewise, Muslim communities in Europe or the UK may be more uncompromising than Muslims in Muslim countries. If you're in the religious majority, you can simply follow the path of least resistance. It doesn't take any particular effort to have or retain your sense of identity. That's constantly reinforced by the society you live in. That's the dominant culture to begin with. As a result, religiosity may be quite lax.

It's clear from Acts and the Pauline epistles that Paul was the kind of Diaspora Jew who resisted assimilation. Likewise, Palestinian Jews (who wrote Matthew, Mark, and John) resented the Roman subjugation of the Holy Land. These weren't Quislings. They were proudly, stubbornly Jewish.

Of particular importance to the present study, one notes that the other works of a more reserved Jewish character known from earliest Christian writing (e.g., Matthew's logia tradition or "Q," Hebrews, James, and the Didache) give no trace of the Hellenistic, theopoetic themes outlined in 1 Apology 21 (i.e., divine birth, translation, and ascension). Such themes of Hellenistic exaltatio in Paul, the Gospels, and Acts of the Apostles survive as the celebrated textual products of these early Christian movements of the urban Greek East (12).

It's ironic that by his own admission, Hebrews doesn't conform to his translation fable trope. For, apart from Stephen's speech in Acts 7, Hebrews is the closest expression of Hellenistic Judaism that you will find in the NT. And even then, the outlook is far removed from Philo.

How was it that Paul, for all his Judaic training, appeared at the core more to resemble an itinerate Stoic philosopher than any known rabbi of the Roman Levant? (12).

That assumes what he needs to prove. Consider, moreover, what Paul had to lose by becoming a Christian. He was a rising star in Judaism. Had a brilliant career in the making. Was well connected with the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem. A star student of the greatest rabbi of his generation.

By becoming a Christian, he was ostracized by his social circle. Yet Miller would have us believe that Paul destroyed his career for the sake of a fictional Messiah. Not that Paul believed this was real, but we know better. Rather, Miller thinks Paul knew better.

Indeed, the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles belie any effort at contextualizing their language or composition in Jewish Palestine. Knowledge of the literary context inscribed within the documents themselves presents not the markings or signs of a mundane, local familiarity with

with Galilee, Samaria, or Judea, but general, wayfaring descriptions more typical of festival pilgrims of the Jewish Diaspora, returning Roman troops, and disposed emigrants romanticizing the setting of a distant homeland. First composed, signified, and sacralized in the Hellenistic urban world of Roman Syria, Anatolia, Macedonia, and Greece, these works typically reflected and played on crudely stereotypical myths of Jewish Palestine (12-13).

Let's consider a few counterexamples:

Richard Bauckham's lecture "Mark's Topography: The Cognitive Map of a Capernaum Fisherman."

The geographical information in Mark's Gospel, especially about Galilee, has often been thought to be confused and certainly presents some problems. The lecture uses 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.

<http://davidbcapes.com/2013/08/11/a-o-collins-lecture-featuring-dr-richard-bauckham/>

The fourth Gospel actually presents a much more consistently chronological account of Jesus' ministry, even though that emerges not as a primary intention but as a "fringe benefit" of its desire to include material from Jesus attending the various Jerusalem festivals (which can be dated). And the claims Jesus makes for himself at each of those festivals dovetail closely with the significance of the festivals-Bread of Life at Passover time, working as the Father does on the Sabbath, Light of the World and living water at Tabernacles, the Good Shepherd at Hanukah, and so on. John likewise contains more details of geography and topography than any of the Synoptics and, where he can be

tested, he has consistently been shown to be accurate.

<http://www.4truth.net/fourtruthpbible.aspx?pageid=8589952783>

In a recent lecture in Jerusalem, James H. Charlesworth, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature and Editor of the Dead Sea Scrolls Project at Princeton Theological Seminary, outlined some of the new archeological finds in the environs of Jerusalem that are challenging the detractors of the Apostle John being the author of the book by his name. Charlesworth contended that recent finds demonstrate convincingly that the Gospel of John was probably written much earlier than often suggested and is, therefore, valuable for the study of the historical Jesus — in recreating his time, place and social environment, and in helping us understand his life, actions, teachings and agenda.

For instance, John chapter 5 records the story of the healing of an invalid man at the Pool of Bethesda in

Jerusalem. The pool is said to have consisted of five porticoes, or porches.

For hundreds of years, people believing the pool did not exist read this text symbolically and theologically. 'Bethesda' means 'house of mercy' and was interpreted to be a symbol for the mercy Jesus showed the disabled man. 'Five porticoes' symbolized the Pentateuch (Five Books of Moses), since there has not been found a pentagon (5-sided structure) in antiquity. And what the Pentateuch could not do, Jesus will do. Verse 8 reads, "Jesus said to him, 'Stand up!'" – providing a beautiful explanation of what Jesus does. Spiritually speaking, he makes people upright!

Beginning in the late 1800s and continuing in stages since then, archaeological excavations have been carried out in a location in the northeast quadrant of Jerusalem's Old City based upon literary evidence in Josephus (War 2.15.5 §328) and Eusebius (Onomasticon 58.21–26). The Copper Scroll text discovered in 1947 at Qumran also describes a hidden treasure "in the Bet 'Eshdatayin (pool precinct) in the pool at the entrance to its smaller basin" (3Q15 11.12).

Bet 'Eshdatayin is in the dual Aramaic form and refers to two basins for the pool. Excavations have revealed sections of two massive pools, covered colonnades and a segment of Herodian steps in the general area described in John 5 and in Josephus' writings. Rather than a pentagon shape, the five porticoes mentioned in John 5 surrounded the pools on the north, south, east and west, with the fifth portico dividing the 2 pools east to west (as seen in the photograph).

The Herodian steps in the Pool of Bethesda (see photo) can be seen today and are believed to extend for the length of the southern pool, or approximately 100 meters. It is a massive pool that is mostly covered by a parking lot today. The repetition of steps-landing-steps-landing can be easily seen and is typical of a mikvah, a pool or bath used to perform purification rites in Judaism.

In order to enter the courts of the Temple, located a little over 100 meters from the Pool of Bethesda, one had to be pure. In order to be pure, one had to be fully immersed in 'living water.' Thus a host of scholars today believe that the Pool of Bethesda was a first-century mikvah that served this purpose

for tens of thousands of Jerusalem residents and for the thousands more that visited Jerusalem during the three annual pilgrimage feasts.

It has been estimated by some that over 100,000 Jews were in Jerusalem during the feasts. That is a lot of 'living water' needed for purification. It is likely the massive Pool of Bethesda helped to serve this purpose, along with other ritual baths surrounding the Temple. The requirement was that the worshipper must dip himself or herself in a mikvah before entering the courts of the Lord.

Re-reading John 5 with the pools, colonnades and steps in view, one can now easily envision the disabled man lying on his mat on the landing trying, with great difficulty, to immerse himself in the water just below. One can also envision another individual racing past him as the water is stirred up.

Now we can begin to understand that what the Gospel of John describes is precisely what had happened. The surviving literary records, such as the Copper Scroll, Josephus, Tacitus and the New Testament, refer to the water systems of Jerusalem, but none except John specifically mentions the Pool

of Bethesda. That is to say, no other literary record but John and the Copper Scroll appear to have been aware of the pools which were likely destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

This is especially important because the Gospel of John is the only gospel that claims to have an eyewitness. Luke interviews the eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4), but John actually claims to have been an eyewitness to the miracles of Jesus (John 1:14; 19:35; 21:24-25).

Therefore, the story in John 5 was not a later creation of Christology (explaining the divinity of Jesus), but a real historical event that took place in a real time at a real place. That is how he knew the details about the pool, its name, its function, the age of the disabled man and the fact he was lying on a mat. All of these incredible details of the account attest to the eyewitness testimony of John, thereby adding to the credibility of its author and the early date of its authorship.

Visitors to Jerusalem today can enter the premises of St. Anne's Church in the Muslim Quarter and see the real place where Jesus healed the invalid,

perhaps on the very steps that you can observe today.

Meanwhile, John 9 tells the story of Jesus healing a blind man by smearing mud on his eyes and telling him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. The old paradigm in Jesus Research interpreted this passage on a very Christological basis, since they concluded there was no Pool of Siloam nor a relationship between the Gospel of John and actual history. The invented story simply shows how Jesus is the “light of the world” (verse 5) by showing the progression from first receiving physical eyesight followed eventually by receiving spiritual eyesight.

But in 2004, archaeologists discovered an ancient pool in the southern portion of the City of David excavations, south of the Temple Mount, which had been hidden since 70 A.D. The 50-meter northern edge and part of the eastern edge of the pool have been excavated while the remaining pool is on property owned by the Greek Orthodox Church.

Like the Pool of Bethesda, one can easily see the pattern of steps and platforms allowing pilgrims to easily enter the pool for full immersion in

preparation for entering the Temple located 700 meters to the north. That is to say, like the Pool of Bethesda, the Pool of Siloam was also likely a mikvah, according to many archaeologists. These two pools represent the largest mikvaot (plural form) that have been discovered to date in the Land of Israel. Also, like the Pool of Bethesda, it is conceivable that Jesus immersed himself at this pool before entering the Temple.

<http://int.icej.org/news/special-reports/jerusalem-finds-validating-gospel-john>

For additional corroboration, cf.

Craig Blomberg, **THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL: ISSUES & COMMENTARY** (IVP 2002).

Craig Keener, **THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: A COMMENTARY** (Hendrickson 2003).

Could any fresh, third-party observer not immediately perceive the pattern: A Judeo-Christian version of Zeus-Jupiter, with his own storied demigod son born of a mortal woman? (13).

That papers over categorical differences:

i) Zeus sired demigods by copulating with human women. By contrast, the Virgin Birth involves the agency of an incorporeal God. Moreover, the imagery of "overshadowing" Mary probably evokes the Shekinah filling the tabernacle (Exod 40:35). So the conceptual background lies in the OT, not Greco-Roman mythology.

ii) In Greco-Roman mythology, gods and men range along a common continuum. Gods are scaled up humans. Humans with greatly enhanced abilities.

iii) Demigods are hybrid beings. Humans with superhuman athletic abilities.

iv) By contrast, Jesus is Yahweh Incarnate. He is more powerful than Hercules. He is more powerful than Zeus. He is more knowledgeable than Zeus.

His power isn't physical, like Hercules. To the contrary, Jesus can act at a distance. By word or by touch. Likewise, the NT teaches the preexistence of the Son. It's a fundamentally different theological paradigm.

Plainly stated, this book explores the ancient conventionality and significance of the "resurrection" and "ascension" narratives of Jesus in the New Testament. The investigation, more specifically, seeks to discern any

semiotic-linguistic relationship between what Plutarch described as a Mediterranean "translation fable" tradition in classical antiquity (Vita Romuli 2.:3-28.6) and the postmortem accounts of the New Testament Gospels and Acts of the Apostles (14).

i) The NT Gospels are not in a class apart from the OT. Both the Gospels and the OT share the same worldview. God, angels, evil spirits, miracles, prophecies. The NT is continuous with the OT. It's the OT, not Greco-Roman literature, that supplies the literary and conceptual background.

ii) The Resurrection accounts are not the apotheosis of a demigod into full godhood. In the Gospels, Jesus is divine from the outset. He is not admitted into the pantheon by virtue of the Resurrection. Rather, he returns to the Father. He originally came from heaven.

Classicists have long been (self)trained not expressly to disrupt the sacred tenets of the Christian West and thus have leveled veiled criticism, albeit at times most thinly, within the relative privacy of their privileged society (15).

Classicists like John Lightfoot, F. F. Bruce, Bruce Metzger, and Colin Hemer were conversant with the same material that Miller cites. Yet they defended the historicity of the NT.

...the tradition functioned in an honorific capacity; the convention had become a protocol for honoring numerous heroes, kings, and philosophers, those whose bodies were not recovered at death (16).

The strongest conventional signals of the translation fable operate under a subtext of distinction, namely, in demonstrating one or more of the signature divine feats of the translated corpus. Most typically this mean a "vanished body"... (30).

It's not like Jesus died on a foreign field, or died at sea. There was a chain-of-custody. The fact that the tomb was empty on Easter doesn't mean his body went missing. To the contrary, his body is very much on display throughout the Resurrection narratives.

To what extent did the Roman translation narratives provide a mimetic backdrop for the Gospel narratives? (16).

i) Of course, that's political propaganda. A backstory written to retroactively legitimate the pretensions of imperial Rome.

ii) Miller is comparing a purely fictional, mythological figure (Romulus) with a historical figure (Jesus) whom contemporaries wrote about. There's no comparison.

...the book also tacitly delivers a rather forceful critique of standing theories regarding the likely antecedents of the early Christian "resurrection" accounts. These tend to fall into two large pools: early Jewish resurrection tradition or the denial of any antecedent, thus positing a sui generis status, a perspective typically arising out of faith-based discourse (16).

i) Miller is blind to his own plausibility structure. Is he an atheist? Does he believe in miracles?

If you take a secular outlook for granted, then that precommits you to believing that the Resurrection accounts are fictional.

ii) Likewise, if you deny the existence of ghosts, then you assume that all accounts of postmortem apparitions are fictional, fraudulent, or hallucinatory.

If, however, ghosts are real, then Greco-Roman stories about dead relatives visiting the living may have a basis in fact. Even if the specific stories are fictional, they are inspired by genuine anecdotes or real-life experience.

Postmortem apparitions and haunted houses are well-attested and widely-attested. Moreover, in a pagan culture steeped in the occult, or necromancy, these encounters would be expected.

To take a comparison: many films about WWII, the Vietnam War, and the Civil War have fictional plots, fictional characters, and fictional dialogue. Yet a real event frames and underlies these movies.

My point is not that the Resurrection narratives are ghost stories. Indeed, Luke and John go out of their way to quash that misinterpretation.

I'm just responding to Miller on his own terms. I'm merely pointing out that the kind of literature he cites (e.g. postmortem apparitions) may sometimes be true to life.

The bodies of the gods were more physical, more perfect than those of mere transient mortals. They possessed super-human traits, that is, bodies without the limitations of the quotidian human condition. They remained durable, imperishable, immortal, powerful, perfect, beautiful, robust,

immune to disease and debilitation, and were physically able to travel through the air, to transform (undergo metamorphoses or adopt an incognito form), to appear and to vanish, to teleport, even multilocate. Also, unlike the shades, the immortals were fully capable of interacting with the physical world in all human respects to the extent of fighting in battles, eating mundane foods, and even having intimacy and offspring with mortals (29-30).

i) Yes, the Greco-Roman gods were corporeal. That's the antithesis of Yahweh, who is incorporeal. Yet Yahweh is the frame of reference for NT theism and NT Christology.

ii) There's no indication in the Gospels that Jesus had the Olympian physique of Steve Reeves in Hercules. There's no indication that he had the athletic physique of Apollo in Classical Greek statuary.

iii) Greek gods could be injured. In the Iliad, Ares is wounded by Diomedes.

Did Hephaestus have a "beautiful," "perfect" body? Wasn't he a cripple?

iv) Even before the Resurrection, Jesus had an uncanny ability to elude lynch mobs. Not to mention his body

becoming supernaturally luminous at the Transfiguration.

v) Conversely, even after the Resurrection, he was scarred from the Crucifixion.

vi) There's evidence for bilocation in the paranormal literature. You can't just assume that's fictional or mythological.

vii) Even before the Resurrection, the miracles of Jesus aren't due to his having a special kind of body.

These works, in turn, inspired the homonymous Metamorphoses of Ovid, Apuleius, and Atoninus Liberalis in Roman antiquity, not to mention the mythographic thematic plays of such writers as Lucian of Syria (30).

Miller fails to distinguish between authors who consciously write fiction; careless, gullible authors who pass along legendary stories; and serious writers who report events based on firsthand observation or firsthand information.

The guards at the tomb

62 The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate **63** and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ **64** Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” **65** Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” **66** So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (Mt 27:62-66).

This is discounted by "skeptics" due to its patently apologetic thrust. But a basic problem with that reaction is that the anecdote is inherently plausible. If Jesus predicted that he was going rise from the dead, both Pilate and the Jewish establishment would be motivated to nip that legend in the bud. Surely they didn't need an aggressive new religious sect, headquartered in Jerusalem, to contend with.

Moreover, even if you lack prior belief in Jesus, there's nothing implausible about messianic claimants forecasting their return from the dead. To my knowledge, that's not uncommon. Making good on the prediction is the tough part. To take a modern example, some devotees are still

waiting for Rebbe Manachem Schneerson to rise from the grave. So there's no reason to doubt that Jesus made that prediction.

The Passion and the Passover

[Exod 12:1-20] Passover was originally a home-based rather than a temple-based ceremony. Israel had no temple at the first Passover, but the instructions made no allowance for a temple: families were to gather in their homes and every family was to make its sacrifice at the same time (12:6). It would never be possible for every family to sacrifice its lamb simultaneously on the one altar at one temple. However, Deut 16:2 states that Passover was to be sacrificed "in the place where Yahweh chooses to have his name dwell" (this is generally taken to be the central sanctuary), and v5 indicates that the Passover is not to be sacrificed in any of the other towns in Israel...It is possible that there was to be an official, national celebration of Passover at the temple in addition to (not instead of) the local celebrations. 2 Chron 30:1-18 describes a national celebration of Passover conducted at the temple. For practical reasons, this probably took place later than the normal Passover time.

This may explain a problem in the NT, that Mk 14:12-16 says that the first Eucharist in the upper

room was a Passover meal, in contrast to Jn 18:28, who asserts that Passover had not yet occurred (John says that the Pharisees had not yet eaten Passover on the morning of Jesus's crucifixion), Possibly the Last Supper was a home-based Passover seder, while the Pharisees were preparing for the national, temple-based service that took place on the next day. D. Garrett, A Commentary on Exodus (Kregel 2014), 361-62.

Did John redate the crucifixion?

i) For modern readers, there's an apparent discrepancy between Synoptic chronology (Mk 14:12) and Johannine chronology (Jn 19:14) regarding the date of the crucifixion. I say *modern* readers, because we need to distinguish between modern readers and ancient readers. Inevitably, Scripture sometimes presents hermeneutical difficulties for modern readers that wouldn't be difficult for the original audience inasmuch as they had a lot of background knowledge which Bible writers took for granted—information that's lost to us.

ii) There are different ways in which scholars and commentators explain the apparent discrepancy. Liberals think it's a historical blunder. Conversely, some scholars harmonize the respective presentations in ways that preserve the historicity and inerrancy of both. I've quoted solutions by Roger Beckwith and Eugene Merrill. I think both are plausible. Edward Klink has an explanation that I'll quote in another post.

iii) However, some scholars and commentators finesse the issue by positing that John changed the date of the crucifixion for symbolic reasons. That explanation may preserve the inerrancy of the text, but at the expense of historicity.

iv) Yet other issues aside, it's not entirely clear why they assume *John* changed the chronology. Even if we grant, for discussion purposes, that the difference is due to theological redaction, why presume that John altered the chronology rather than the Synoptics?

Perhaps the assumption is that John is the last Gospel to be written, so while he was able to redact the Synoptic chronology, the Synoptics were in no position to redact the Johannine chronology—inasmuch as that didn't even exist at the time when Mark was written (or Matthew or Luke).

v) Actually, I'm not convinced that John was the last Gospel. No doubt his Gospel was later than Mark, but I'm not sure it was later than Matthew or Luke. It may well be that all three (Matthew, Luke, John) were written in the 60s. See the case by Bishop Robinson in **REDATING THE NEW TESTAMENT** (SCM 1976), chap. 9.

vi) In addition, even if John's Gospel was written in the 90s, it doesn't follow that he's directly interacting with the Synoptics. He may be entirely independent of what they wrote. Of course, John and the Synoptics often overlap, yet that's not primarily due to literary dependence—if at all—but due to dependence on a common event: the life of Christ. They all share that reference point. That's the ultimate source.

vii) Furthermore, a good case can be made for Johannine authorship—or at very least, that the narrator was an eyewitness. But in that event, the author of John was at least as well informed as the Synoptics. So there's no presumption that Mark got it right while John got it wrong. Indeed, if you're going to insist that they can't both be right, there's evidence that John has a more intimate and systematic knowledge of dominical chronology than Mark. Just in general, John's chronology is more detailed and discriminating. And if he was the Beloved Disciple, he had more firsthand knowledge of Christ's itinerary than Mark.

Passover and Last Supper

Here's how one scholar resolves the apparent contradiction between John and the Synoptics on dating the crucifixion:

We must begin with what is (emphatically) clear in the narrative before moving to what is unclear. The biggest and most traditional "constant" in the exegetical equation is the assumed relation between the Last Supper and the Passover meal, especially in the Synoptic Gospels. In the Fourth Gospel, however, such a concept is entirely and intentionally foreign. While it is usually assumed that the Synoptics make the connection clear, this assumption finds no direct warrant from Scripture itself.

It is really only Mk 14:12-16 that allows for the suggestion of a Passover meal connection, and even in this verse there is no exegetical demand to view the Lord's Supper as a Passover meal. A few reasons can be provided. First, the reference to the Passover-meal "preparations" in Mk 14:12 is made by the disciples, not Jesus. While Jesus does give them instructions for the preparation of a meal, he never once refers to the meal as a Passover meal;

the disciples assume it is a Passover meal because of the approaching Passover Feast. Certainly the meals are theologically related, but they are also (and necessarily) distinct. This might be exactly what the text intends to depict in its implicitness, with the absence of a Passover lamb (because it was not a Passover meal) making the point explicit—Jesus was to be the Lamb (Jn 1:29). Even if the disciples thought it was a Passover-like meal (Mk 14:16), that does not mean that it was viewed as such by Jesus. For him this meal was instituting (proleptically) the new covenant in his blood.

Second, there is no reason to suggest that the time of the meal in Mk 14:12 is on Friday, for on the normal Jewish method of reckoning days this meal would be on the evening prior to the sacrifice preparations, since the Jewish day was normally understood to begin at sunset of the previous day (as Mark's Gospel makes clear in Mk 15:46). "In other words, he [Mark] was as clearly aware as John was that Jesus held his Passover meal not on the official day, but deliberately one day earlier" [France]. And similar to the Gospel of John, we would argue that such an adjustment was not

merely out of historical necessity but also for very important theological reasons.

Third, the statement by the narrator in Mk 14:2 that the Jewish authorities were seeking to kill Jesus "but not during the feast" for fear of the people's reaction, adds further support to the chronology depicted by John. Unless the Jewish authorities changed their mind (about which the reader was not made aware by the text), this rules out the possibility that Jesus was arrested on the evening when everyone else was participating in the official Passover meal. That is, by Mark's own account, Jesus had to be arrested on the previous evening before the actual day of the Passover.

Fourth, the Barabbas incident (vv39-40; cf. Mk 15:6-14) is best explained on John's chronology. The obvious premise of the Barabbas release—an amnesty or pardon granted to some Jewish prisoner at Passover—is that amnesty was given precisely so that this Jew, upon release, could take part in the Passover meal. The common Synoptic chronology that relates the Lord's Supper to the Passover meal is unable to explain the point of Barabbas's release, for the meal would have already been celebrated!

The Barabbas incident only makes sense if the Passover meal had not yet occurred and if the Lord's Supper (as recorded in the Synoptics) is not the Passover meal.

By making the Passover meal the implicit background for the Lord's Supper (per Mark) or Jesus's final meal with his disciples (per John), the Gospels transfer the theology of Passover and the old covenant (the lamb, the blood, the ceremony) to Jesus and the new covenant. This is why John (and the Synoptics) is so careful to connect the final meal of Jesus to the Passover but not define it as such. For this final meal was actually the first Lord's Supper, and the only one that would look forward and not back, situated between the "Passover" meals of both covenants so as to make Jesus the fulfillment and subject matter of them both. In several places the Gospel has employed the historical reality of the Jewish "Feasts" in order to highlight the cosmological forces at work in the narrative (see comments on 10:22). The use of the Passover in John is no exception. E. Klink, John (Zondervan 2016), 758-60.

One angel or two?

1. How many angels were at the tomb? One (Mt 28:2; Mk 16:5)? Or two (Lk 24:4; Jn 20:12)?

2. One explanation, favored by unbelievers, is legendary embellishment. Luke is jazzing up Mark. There are, however, problems with that explanation.

i) If Luke duplicated angels to jazz up the Resurrection account, why does he only have one angel appear to Zacharias? For that matter, only Zacharias actually sees the angel. The congregation must infer that he had a vision. Would it not be more impressive to make the congregation see the angel?

ii) Are two angels really more impressive than one? If Luke wants to garnish the account to make it more sensational, surely he could invent something more spectacular.

3. The standard conservative explanation is that there were no less than two, so it's not contradictory to mention fewer than the sum total.

4. That may be an adequate harmonization. But here's another tack. What if some numbers are idiomatic? Take some examples from vernacular English, viz. second fiddle, second thought, six feet under, eleventh hour, cloud nine, inching along, third degree, one-horse town, take five, a dime a dozen, five will get you ten, forty winks, ten-to-one, nine lives, nine times out of ten, six ways from Sunday, whole nine yards.

That list could be easily extended.

Let's consider some biblical examples. Jesus talks about his ability to summon more than twelve legions of angels (Mt 26:53). While that may well be literally possible, the figure is simply meant to convey vastness.

Take 40 days or 40 years. That motif is a numerical convention. Although it refers to real events, it wasn't meant to specify the actual interval.

Or take the refrain in Amos 1-2: "For three sins of X and for four," where the numbers are rhetorical.

Or take Daniel's prophecy of 70 weeks (Dan 9:24). In my opinion, that's a symbolic interval, yet to denotes a real event.

Or take the Joseph cycle (Gen 37-50), which has 3 pair of dreams: the dreams of Joseph and Pharaoh, as well as the butler and the baker. Three sets of two dreams.

So what if two of something is sometimes a stock number? It refers real individuals, but the sum wasn't meant to be literal. The actual number is indefinite.

Angels at the tomb

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” 4 And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. 5 And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed (Mk 16:1-5).

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, “Do

not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified (Mt 28:1-5).

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. 2 And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel (Lk 24:1-4).

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet (Jn 20:11-12).

1. The number of angels at the tomb is a familiar crux. Some readers chalk it up to legendary embellishment and/or divergent sources. Some readers don't think there were any angels at the tomb. Many inerrantists harmonize the accounts by saying that if there were two angels, then there was at least one angel, and so it's an issue of selective emphasis.

However, this isn't just about inerrancy. If the Gospels get details wrong in the Resurrection accounts, that lowers confidence in the reliability of the reports.

2. I'd like to approach this from a different angle:

i) One potential problem is that readers all along the theological spectrum are bringing an unexamined assumption to the text. Ask yourself, from the viewpoint of Scripture, if you were at the tomb that morning, what you'd see. If angels were there, would you see them? Would everybody who went to the tomb see the same thing vis-a-vis angels?

ii) Not necessarily, or even probably. In Scripture, angelic apparitions take different forms. Sometimes angels appear to be indistinguishable from humans. What gives them away is if they appear or disappear out of thin air, or reveal supernatural powers. Take the angels in Gen 19 who blind the Sodomites.

iii) Sometimes angels have a radiant appearance. In that case, their luminescence divulges their supernatural identity.

iv) Sometimes angels assume corporeal form. These are physical apparitions. They are present as external objects to the observer. In that event, everyone would see the same thing. In that modality, if two angels were present, everyone would see two angels. The phenomenon involves an external sensory stimulus.

v) Sometimes angels appear to people in dreams and visions. These are telepathic apparitions. Angels can access the minds of the human recipient.

These aren't figments of the imagination. The cause originates outside the mind of the recipient, but it's still a psychological phenomenon. A telepathic projection.

vi) In the case of (iv), angels control the perception of the recipient. They are only seen by those to whom they reveal themselves telepathically. In that modality, if a group of people went to the tomb, they might simultaneously see different things. One observer might see no angels at all while another observer might see what appears to be an ordinary man, while another observer might see a radiant angel, while another observer might see two angels.

As a result, they'd give different accounts of what they saw, or didn't see. Yet their reports would all be consistent in principle. Two observers can be present at the same place at the same time, yet angels might be detectable to one but undetectable to another.

vii) That angels were seen by some witnesses in the cemetery doesn't imply that they were continuously present there. If one or two angels were seen by some witnesses inside the tomb, that doesn't entail that they sat in the tomb for hours. They might appear just to be seen by a particular witness, then disappear.

The seven last words of Christ

1. There are harmonies of the Gospels that collate the "seven last words of Christ" on the cross:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Lk 23:34)

Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise (Lk 23:43)

Woman, see your son. Son, see your mother (Jn 19:26-27)

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Mk 15:34, par. Mt 27:46)

I'm thirsty (Jn 19:28)

It is finished (Jn 19:30)

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Lk 23:46)

There are Good Friday liturgies centered on the last seven words, as well as musical settings (e.g. Haydn).

Many cultures attach special significance to a person's dying words. And Jesus is extra special.

2. However, there are "scholars" who don't think Jesus spoke all the words attributed to him from the cross. They think it's artificial to take different sayings from different Gospels and splice them together. They think the sayings attributed to Jesus in each Gospel make sense in the context of each Gospel's Passion narrative, but when you try to combine them, you end up with unrelated sayings. That disrupts the logical connections and narrative strategy of each Gospel writer. And a harmonistic sequence is arbitrary, by breaking them apart, as they exist in each Gospel, then mixing and matching them.

3. There's a grain of truth to the objection inasmuch as any reconstructed order will be a bit conjectural. That said:

4. The dying words of Christ recorded in the four Gospels are realistic if you consider the situation:

i) Some people die a peaceful painless death. Likewise, some people are lucid right up to the moment of death. But even in that ideal situation, if they sense they're dying, this is their last chance to tell their loved certain things. So I expect they frantically consider what to say. They're rapidly running out of time, so they say *whatever* comes to mind *whenever* it comes to mind. Long silences in-between. Things pop into their heads. So there's no logical flow to what they say.

Most of us don't make a list of things we'd like to say on our deathbed. So we improvise at the end. It might be a good spiritual exercise to draw up a list.

ii) However, that's a best-case scenario. Some dying people are only intermittently lucid. So there will be no logical connection between what they said before and what they said later. During moments of lucidity, they say whatever

comes to mind. They don't keep track of what they said before.

In addition, if, like Jesus, they're in unbearable pain, then consecutive thought isn't even possible. The pain consumes their attention. Unbearable pain destroys sustained concentration. They can't maintain a train of thought. It's all they can do is muster their dwindling energy to temporarily force the pain into the back of their minds in order to think, reflect, and say something coherent.

It would be completely unrealistic if the last recorded words of Christ read like a nice little prepared speech. It's not coincidental that the pre-Passion teaching of Christ consists of extended talks. Parables, speeches, and dialogues—whereas what he says from the cross is reduced to fragments. Broken sentences and terse utterances. A few words here, a few words there. That's what we'd expect given his excruciating ordeal.

5. Now the Gospel writers, in selecting what statements to record, may select related sayings.

6. The authenticity of Lk 23:34 is disputed, but that's on text-critical grounds rather than redaction critical grounds.

Dawn of the dead

51 And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, 53 and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many (Mt 27:51-53).

This is a much-mocked text which I've discussed before, but I'd like to make some additional observations.

1. What exactly is the objection to this incident? In my experience, off the top of my head:

i) It's only reported in one Gospel

ii) It's weird

iii) Triggers popular associations with the Hollywood zombie genre

iv) If it happened, why isn't the incident more widely reported?

v) What happened to the raised saints?

2. At what point did this text become ridiculous or incredible? Historically, did Christians find this text incredible or ridiculous? Let's take a comparison:

i) Traditionally, in Christian cemeteries, corpses and coffins are buried pointing east. From what I've read, that's based on belief that Jesus will come from the east (Mt 24:27; cf. Isa 63:1; Zech 14:4). When he returns, the dead will be facing him. They will rise out of their graves, in his direction.

My immediate point is not to assess folk theology, but to note that traditional Christian burial customs reflect the same basic outlook as Mt 27:51-53. Historically, Christians didn't find that absurd or unbelievable. That, in itself, doesn't make it true, but it's not as if the alleged absurdity of the account was the default impression of most readers or believers.

ii) By the same token, it's interesting to consult the historical witness of patristic expositions. Apollinaris says:

It is plain that they have died again, having risen from the dead in order to be a sign. For it was not possible for only some of the firstborn from the dead to be raised to the life of the age to come, but the remainder [must be raised] in the same manner. Manlio Simonetti, ed. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 14-28 (IVP 2002), 297.

While Jerome says:

Just as the dead Lazarus was resurrected, so also many bodies of the saints were resurrected. Thus they showed the Lord rising again. And yet, though the tombs were opened, they were not resurrected before the Lord was resurrected. thus he was the firstborn of the resurrection from the dead. Now we should understand the holy city in which they were seen when they were being resurrected either as the heavenly Jerusalem, or this earthly one which was previously holy. 321. Thomas. P. Scheck, trans. Commentary on Matthew (CUA 2014), 321.

Theophylact says:

And those who were dead in sins arose and entered the Holy City, the heavenly Jerusalem, and appeared to the many who were walking the broad road [leading to perdition]. By appearing to them, they became an exemplary model

of a good life and of repentance. For if one sees a man who was formerly deadened by many passions now changed and ascending to the holy heavenly City, he imitates that man in every way, and himself repents. These things have been explained in a rather elaborate manner; but you, O reader, understand that the raising of the dead which occurred at the Lord's crucifixion, also revealed the freeing of the souls in hades. Those who arose at that time were seen by many, lest the event appear to have been only an apparition. They arose as a sign from God, and it is evident that they again died. Some say that after Christ's resurrection, these arose and have not yet died; but I do not know if this should be accepted.

My point is not to evaluate their interpretation, but to document how ancient or medieval Christians took it seriously. Other examples include Matthew Henry and John Gill. My purpose is not to recommend their commentaries but to document how Christians in the past weren't embarrassed by this episode.

3. In his commentary, Evans takes the position that this pericope is a scribal interpolation. Craig. A. Evans, **MATTHEW** (Cambridge 2012), 466-68. For those who regard the scene as inherently legendary, that explanation salvages the historicity of Matthew. But to my knowledge there's no text-critical evidence whatsoever that this passage is a scribal interpolation. If that's the case, it's hard to explain the uniformity of the MS tradition. How could a scribe add that to the original Gospel without generating diversity in the record of transmission? How did his interpolation win out, leaving no alternatives in the extant MSS?

4. Raising the widow's son is only recorded in Lk 7. Raising Lazarus is only recorded in Jn 11. So the fact that the incident under review is only reported in Matthew isn't suspicious compared to analogous accounts. If you're going to be skeptical, you need to be consistently skeptical.

5. Bart Ehrman likes to harp on high rates of illiteracy in the 1C Roman Empire. But in that case, how many witnesses to this event would be in a position to commit their testimony to writing? And even if they did, how many witnesses would be in a position to publish their testimony? It's not like they could contact a reporter at **THE JERUSALEM POST**. At best, their testimony would circulate orally.

6. Another question is how widespread sightings there were. That depends on many variables. How many saints were raised? What was the population of 1C Jerusalem? How many witnesses in relation to how many saints? How many people would be in a position to recognize the former decedents? Are we talking about a sprinkling of saints dispersed in the general population density of the city? How noticeable would that be?

Calvary

One of Bart Ehrman's stock examples of alleged discrepancies in this Gospels is his contention that Mark and Luke present contradictory accounts of the Passion. I'll make a few observations:

i) Part of the problem is with his illogical assumption that if one account includes information not mentioned in another account, that must be fictional or unhistorical.

ii) It doesn't occur to Ehrman that if someone is in a state of extreme physical and emotional distress, that person may well be subject to mood swings. Surely that's a commonplace of human experience. People in that condition may oscillate between hope to despair. It's perfectly realistic for the same person to have conflicting feelings—especially when traumatized. It would be surprising if Jesus did not experience a gamut of emotions during this crisis.

iii) In addition, a subjective feeling of divine abandonment is entirely consistent with an objective reality of divine provision. That's a common motif in the Prophets and Psalms. A sense of utter desolation doesn't mean the sufferer has in fact been deserted by God.

Mary, don't you weep!

20 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. **2** So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. **12** And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. **13** They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” **14** Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. **15** Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” **16** Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic,

“Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” —and that he had said these things to her.

I'd like to comment on two puzzling features of this scene:

i) Why didn't the Magdalene recognize Jesus by sight? One simple explanation is that was still too dark to see clearly. Evidently, they went to the tomb at first light. In the twilight conditions when she spotted him, the lighting is too dim to clearly see his face. There's a difference between first light and sunrise.

In addition, she didn't expect him to rise from the dead, which contributed to her mistaken identification.

ii) Then there's his mystifying exclamation not to cling to him. Commentators are perplexed. I certainly don't know for sure what the explanation is. But I'll take a stab at it.

In the Mosaic cultus, there was the principle of sacred space. Certain objects and places were symbolically holy. These were off-limits to unauthorized personnel. Likewise, they might even be off-limits to authorized personnel at unauthorized times. Contact was only permissible for certain people at certain times. To transgress that was hazardous or fatal.

Jesus supplants the temple. His resurrection is analogous to raising the temple (Jn 2:19-22). Perhaps, in the dewy bloom of the Resurrection, he was "dangerously" holy. Consecrated, set apart. Temporarily untouchable.

iii) In addition, as Klink points out in his commentary (846-48), Jesus doesn't plan to stick around. The Easter appearances are intended to confirm the fact of the Resurrection, but he won't be physically accessible for the duration. Rather, the Holy Spirit will take his place. His Resurrection appearances are a temporary presence. In that sense, witnesses shouldn't get too used to having him back—because he will be leaving them to return to the Father.

At the tomb

One puzzling detail in John's resurrection account is why Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to touch him (Jn 20:17). That's a head-scratcher. Another enigmatic detail is why she fails to recognize him by sight (vv14-16). Likewise, how Jesus accessed the upper room, when the doors were locked. If the accounts are legendary, it's inexplicable why the narrator would fabricate baffling details.

i) I've commented on all these details before. A naturalistic explanation for the Magdalene's failure to recognize Jesus is that it was still too dark to see clearly. If the women set out as soon as possible, if they set out before sunup, at first light, when it was just bright enough to find their way to the cemetery, it may have been too dim for the Magdalene to make out Jesus' features. In addition, if he was standing with the sunrise behind him, his face would be in the shadows.

ii) Here's a supernatural explanation. Jesus was about 33 when he died. The hot dry climate is hard on the complexion. He spend lots of time out of doors, so he may have had a prematurely aged appearance. A very weathered complexion. Not to mention how fatiguing his ministry was.

One effect of glorification is rejuvenation. If a Christian dies at 95, they don't be resurrected at 95. They will be resurrected at an optimal age.

Suppose Jesus was resurrected as a 20-year-old. In that event, the Resurrection may have taken some twenty years off his appearance, if he was looking closer to 40 at the time of death. If so, he'd bear an eerie resemblance to the

Jesus she knew, but how could it *be* Jesus if he wasn't nearly that young? That may explain her disorientation.

iii) I suppose there's the question of whether Jesus underwent the aging process. If senescence is due to original sin, and Jesus is impeccable, then was he exempt from the aging process? That may depend in part on whether Adam and Eve were naturally mortal or immortal. Was immortality conferred by the tree of life?

But even if senescence is a consequence of original sin, a vicarious atonement might require Jesus to assume the punitive effects of original sin despite his impeccability.

The women at the tomb

I discussed this recently in combination with some other things, but I'd like to discuss it separately so that it doesn't get lost in the shuffle. A common objection to the Resurrection accounts is alleged discrepancies in the women at the tomb. Oftentimes, objections to the accuracy of Scripture depend on hidden assumptions. In this case there's the unspoken assumption that a single group of women went to the tomb. But is that a reasonable assumption?

i) I don't think the Gospel writers would be in a position to know if one group or more than one group of women went to the tomb. They didn't accompany the women. They got information from some of the women after the fact, but if Salome shares her experience with Matthew or Mark while Mary Magdalene shares her experience with John, the Gospel writers wouldn't know from that whether one or more than one group of women went to the tomb. They'd simply know that a group of women went to the tomb, but they wouldn't know which was which in case more than one group went there.

ii) And this is more than just hypothetical. Surely the women who went to the tomb lived in different neighborhoods. So that complicates the logistics. They had to walk from different locations, more or less distant to a common rendezvous. It's not as if they all agreed to reconnoiter at Salome's house at 6AM sharp. They didn't have Rolex watches.

So if we try to visualize the process, you'd have women leaving their house at somewhat different times, walking for

longer or shorter distances to arrive at a common rendezvous, then traveling together to the tomb.

Would women normally travel alone at twilight, or would we expect at least two women from each home to make the trek together for safety? So there might be additional unnamed women.

It also seems like they were in a hurry to get to the tomb as early as light conditions permitted. So did they wait for everyone to arrive? Did they even know who all would show up? That might be difficult to synchronize. When they went to the tomb would depend on the sky brightening and how deserted the streets were.

Did some go ahead? It's easy to imagine groups of two or more women going to the tomb. There's no presumption that it had to be coordinated. Or have a single rendezvous. If two or more women nearby, it would be natural for them to reconnoiter at one of their homes, then travel to the cemetery from that rendezvous. That would be more convenient than having one rendezvous for everyone. The rendezvous would vary according to the neighborhood where they resided.

IV. Mythicism

Legendary emperors

Christ mythicists like Richard Carrier deny the historicity of Jesus. In addition, Bart Ehrman denies the reliability of testimonial evidence. Let's briefly touch on some elementary problems with that stance:

1. It's a double-edged sword. If you deny that even firsthand sources are generally reliable, then secondhand sources will be even more unreliable. Yet critics of the Bible rely on secondhand sources to impugn the historicity of Scripture.

i) For instance, they say Daniel mispredicted the death of Antiochus Epiphanes (c. 215-164 BC). That, however, depends on how much stock you put in extrabiblical sources, viz. Appian (2C AD), Diodorus Siculus (1C BC), Polybius (1 BC), 1 Maccabees (c. 90 BC), 2 Maccabees (c. 78-63 BC).

Most of these weren't even by contemporaries of Antiochus IV. None of them were eyewitnesses. Given Ehrman's historical skepticism, why use sources like that as benchmarks to judge the historical accuracy of Daniel?

That's even assuming the oracle in question refers to Antiochus IV rather than a future Antichrist.

ii) Or take Quirinius (c. 51 BC–c. 21 AD). Critics say Luke's reference to his "census" is a historical blunder.

Now, there are literary notices regarding Quirinius in Dio Cassius (c. 164–235 AD), Florus (2C AD), Josephus (c.37–c. 100 AD), Suetonius (c. 71–c. 135 AD), and Tacitus (c. 56–c. 120 AD).

None of these writers were contemporaries of Quirinius. Not even younger contemporaries. All of them were writing generations after the fact. Given Ehrman's historical skepticism, why uses sources like that as a benchmark to judge the historical accuracy of Luke?

2. Consider a more radical stance. You have omens, portents, prodigies, miracles, and apotheosis attributed to Roman emperors like Julius Caesar, Augustus, Vespasian, and Trajan. Ancient accounts of Roman emperors can check numerous boxes in the mythotypes of Lord Raglan and Joseph Campbell. Given the legendary embellishment of Roman emperors by Greco-Roman historians, if we apply mythicist principles in their case, we ought to conclude that Julius Caesar, Augustus, Vespasian, and Trajan never existed! These are fictional characters who exhibit the same mythical traits as Romulus, Remus, Perseus, Theseus, Hercules, Achilles, Aeneas, &c.

Did Josephus exist?

A stock objection to the historical Jesus is the dearth of references to Jesus outside the NT by his contemporaries. Christian apologists usually respond by mentioning references to Jesus in Tacitus and Josephus.

I'd just like to turn this around. How many references are there to Tacitus and Josephus by *their* contemporaries? Other than their own writings, what literary references do we have regarding 1C figures like Tacitus and Josephus from their own period?

Offhand, I don't recall "skeptics" who doubt the historicity of Tacitus and Josephus despite the lack of independent attestation by their contemporaries.

Selective historical skepticism

I'm going to comment on an article by Hector Avalos:

<http://amestrib.com/sections/opinion/columns/hector-avalos-who-was-the-historical-jesus.html>

I am an agnostic about the existence of the historical Jesus.

If he were more forthcoming, he'd admit that he's an apostate and a militant atheist.

A main problem continues to be the lack of documentation from the time of Jesus to establish his existence definitively. Jesus is supposed to have lived around the year 30. But there is no mention of him anywhere in any actual document from his own time or from the entire first century.

That denial turns on Hector's idiosyncratic definition of an "actual document from his own time or the entire first century."

The best known stories about Jesus are the biblical gospels. Despite recent claims to the contrary, most biblical scholars recognize that none of the actual manuscripts of these gospels originated earlier than the second century.

The best efforts of textual scholars have failed to recover the so-called “originals” of any biblical text. Thus, it is difficult to know what has been added or subtracted from any original accounts.

Several problems:

i) If scribes frequently and drastically added or subtracted from the original text, that would generate dramatic and increasing diversity in our extant MS tradition. Where's the evidence?

ii) It's not as if scribes tacked Jesus onto accounts originally bereft of Jesus. Jesus isn't exactly a minor character in the Gospels. Without Jesus, there is no narrative. There is no plot. The Gospels are pervasively centered on Jesus, from start to finish. It's not like a scribe could insert or excise Jesus from the Gospels with the stroke of a pen. The accounts are totally built around Jesus. What he said and did. What others said to him or about him. What was done to him, with him, or for him.

iii) Significant tampering with the text would be extremely controversial. Christians divide over far less. That would leave its mark in the historical record.

iv) The church has never had the centralized command-and-control required to systematically alter the text of Scripture. The church is too geographically diverse, with too many competing factions and rival power centers.

v) The aim of textual criticism was never to discover the original documents, but to recover the original wording. Keep in mind that this is like proofreading. The general state of the text is not in doubt. With few exceptions, it's a question of correcting minor errors that crept into the text in the process of repeated transcription.

vi) The reason we have so many MSS of Scripture in the first place is because Jews and Christians revere the sacred text. That's why they are zealous to preserve and transmit the text for posterity.

Historicists often will reference the famous Annals of Tacitus, the Roman historian, for evidence of the existence of Jesus. However, even John P. Meier, author of "A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus" and a historicist, admits: "As with Josephus, so with Tacitus our observations must be tempered by the fact that the earliest manuscript of the Annals comes from the 11th century."

That paranoid attitude leads to radical skepticism regarding the possibility of historical knowledge. And it's at odds with his own alleged field of expertise—medical anthropology. For instance:

As I began to research Greco-Roman healthcare, I saw that the problems with their system mentioned in Greco-Roman sources were the problems that were being addressed in the Bible: the cost of healthcare, going to the temple to receive it, crowded spaces and tiny limitations. They address these problems in Greco-Roman literature and the solutions were being addressed right there in the New Testament.

One of the things I was surprised to learn in your book was that there were actual pharmaceuticals at the time.

Yes, we know that from a number of sources. Number one, we have whole books such as a book by a man named Celsus, big compendium on all medical and all the substances that were used.

http://www.chreader.org/contentPage.aspx?resource_id=317

Notice how confident he is in using Greco-Roman sources to reconstruct ancient Mediterranean healthcare, even though he doesn't have the original MSS at his disposal. Why isn't he agnostic about the existence of the historical Celsus?

True enough, we cannot document the existence of most individuals who lived in the first century. So why should we expect documentation for Jesus?

But that absence of evidence is still curious because, when speaking of Christianity, the Bible says that “everywhere it is spoken against” (Acts 28:22, RSV). More traces should remain in the first century of a group that everyone was speaking against.

Is Avalos really that obtuse? The phrase "everywhere it is spoken against" is hyperbolic. Has he no grasp of literary conventions?

In favor of the historicists are the frequent allusions in the New Testament (e.g., Galatians 2:1-10) to “James, the brother of Jesus,” which seems to designate a particular person, and not just a follower of Jesus. It would be odd for a mythical character to have a brother who seems genuinely human.

On the other hand, 1 John 4:3 states: “Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.” The rest of this biblical epistle suggests that there were other self-described Christians who did not believe that Jesus had come in the flesh.

If the existence of a real flesh-and-blood Jesus was so well established, why were there Christians who did not believe in such a flesh-and-blood Jesus in the first place?

There's no reason to think John's opponents in Asia Minor were in Palestine during the public ministry of Christ. The apostle John is the primary source of information about the life of Christ for his Anatolian parishioners. And, of course, his opponents reject his testimony.

Heretics are quite capable of dematerializing flesh-and-blood. Take failed millenarians who dematerialize the physical return of Christ.

Guarding the tomb

I'm going to comment on a statement attributed to William Lane Craig, concerning the guards at the tomb of Jesus. It had been posted on YouTube, but apparently that's no longer available. However, there is a transcript floating around. Assuming the transcript is accurate, that will form the basis of my comments:

Well now this is a question that I think is probably best left out of the program, because the vast, vast majority of New Testament scholars would regard Matthew's guard story as unhistorical.

I don't look to NT scholars to tell me what really happened. They don't know something I don't know. They don't have an independent source of knowledge. They weren't there. They don't know anybody who was there. They have the same source of information I have.

Even if we bracket the inspiration of Scripture, who's more likely to know what happened—a scholar writing 2000 years after the fact, or a 1C author of a 1C Gospel? Matthew is in a far better position to know what he's talking about than "scholars" who are 2000 years removed from the events.

I can hardly think of anybody who would defend the historicity of the guard at the

tomb story.

It's incredible that Craig would say that. Just off the top of my head, scholars who defend the historicity of this account include Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg, D. A. Carson, Knox Chamblin, R. T. France, Craig Keener, Leon Morris, John Nolland, Grant Osborne, Robert Stein, David Turner, David Wenham, and N. T. Wright. I can't quite tell what C. A. Evans' position is, but he takes the account seriously enough to supply a lot of corroborative material.

***And the main reasons for that are two:
One is because it's only found in
Matthew and it seems very odd that if
there were a Roman guard or even a
Jewish guard at the tomb that Mark
wouldn't know about it and that there
wouldn't be any mention of it.***

i) I find Craig's objection very odd. Our primary evidence for what Mark knew is what Mark recorded. Although Mark may well have known some things he didn't write down, the only hard evidence we have of what he actually knew is what he actually wrote. By definition, whatever else he may have known he kept to himself.

ii) Moreover, why assume that he would have included this incident in his gospel even if he knew about it? The gospels are selective accounts. Maybe it didn't interest him. Maybe it didn't interest his target audience.

iii) Conversely, Matthew, Luke, and John all record things you don't find in Mark. So why would this be exceptional?

The other reason is that nobody seemed to understand Jesus' resurrection predictions. The disciples - who heard them most often - had not an inkling of what he meant and yet somehow the Jewish authorities were supposed to have heard of these predictions and understood them so well that they were able to set a guard around the tomb. And again, that doesn't seem to make sense.

That fails to distinguish between what the disciples *understood* and what the disciples *believed*. Although the disciples sometimes misunderstood Jesus, oftentimes their problem was not a failure to understand him, but a failure to believe him. They found many things he said hard to believe. This is a common theme in the Gospels. Jesus frequently reprimands the disciples for their lack of faith.

So, most scholars regard the guard at the tomb story as a legend or a Matthean invention that isn't really historical.

Fortunately, this is of little significance for the empty tomb of Jesus, because the guard was mainly employed in Christian apologetics to disprove the conspiracy theory that the disciples stole the body.

It may not be significant to *Craig*, but it's clearly significant to *Matthew*. And shouldn't Christians calibrate their faith by Matthew rather than Craig?

But no modern historian or New Testament scholar would defend a conspiracy theory, because it's evident when you read the pages of the New Testament that these people sincerely believed in what they said. So, the conspiracy theory is dead, even in the absence of a guard at the tomb.

Unbelievers regard any naturalistic explanation, however unlikely, as more likely than a miracle.

The true significance of the guard at the tomb story is that it shows that even the opponents of the earliest Christians did

not deny the empty tomb, but rather involved themselves in a hopeless series of absurdities trying to explain it away by saying that the disciples had stolen the body. And that's the real significance of Matthew's guard at the tomb story.

But if the account is unhistorical, then how is that account a historical witness to belief in the empty tomb?

I'd like to close with a few general observations:

i) To some extent, Craig's position is surprising. After all, he used to defend this very account. However, that was about 30 years ago, so maybe he's changed his mind.

ii) But at another level, this is consistent with Craig's apologetic strategy, which stresses scholarly consensus and a minimal facts approach.

iii) However, Craig's reply seems to go beyond apologetic strategy. He doesn't seem to be confining himself to a hypothetical fallback position. He isn't merely saying that even if, for the sake of argument, this account is fictitious, that would still be of "little significance" because it doesn't impinge on the core facts about the Resurrection. Rather, he seems to be openly denying the historicity of the account.

Carrier's limp reply

Richard Carrier attempted a brief response to my post:

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/9978#evidence>

I don't know if he was responding just to me, or if his reply took in some of my commenters. For comparison, let's recall his original claim:

And all specialists on John agree this was written in the early to mid second century, by authors unknown.

Now for his new comment:

Richard Carrier says April 13, 2016 at 4:11 pm

Wow. That's weak. They actually aren't embarrassed that's their rebuttal?

So Carrier's own views are dictated by fear of embarrassment. That's very revealing.

I especially like how he insists there are specialists on John alive today who date it before 100 AD. And then doesn't name

*a single specialist on John alive today
who dates it before 100 AD.*

Notice that Carrier didn't name any "specialists" who date John to the mid-2C.

Also observe how he's now scaled back his original claim by saying "alive today". Why does he add that belated qualification?

Ironically, his own radical dating scheme is a throwback to old dead liberals like Bruno Bauer, W. C. van Manen, and Alfred Loisy, so his restriction to living scholars is selectively inconsistent.

Since he didn't define "specialist on John," I'll provide own definition. That would include authors of scholarly commentaries on John and scholarly monographs on John. That would also include scholars who write NT introductions that necessarily give specific attention to sifting the evidence for dating the NT documents. Some scholars write both. By that definition, specialists who date John's Gospel before 100 AD include:

Craig Blomberg (80s-90s), D. A. Carson (80s), E. E. Ellis (c. 80), Donald Guthrie (90s or sooner), Donald Hagner (90s), Craig Keener (90s), Andreas J. Köstenberger (mid-80s-early 90s), Joseph Lightfoot (90s), J. Ramsey Michaels (any time within the latter half of the 1C), Leon Morris (60s), Stanley Porter (90s), J. A. T. Robinson (60s). Theodor Zahn (80s).

I will assume he means fundamentalists.

Which he doesn't define. Does he mean anyone who doesn't superimpose the filter of methodological atheism onto John's Gospel?

I don't count fundamentalists as reliable scholars.

And I don't count secular fundamentalists like Carrier as reliable scholars. His conclusions are foreordained by motivated reasoning.

Incidentally, notice how he makes himself the standard of comparison ("I don't count..."), as if his mere approval or disapproval is the arbiter of truth.

Any more than I count astrologers as reliable astronomers.

An argument from analogy minus the argument.

Richard Carrier has more waffles than IHOP

Richard Carrier has made another comment about my post. Before I respond to his latest comment, observe his evolving claims. He originally said:

And all specialists on John agree this was written in the early to mid second century, by authors unknown (yes, plural: John 21:24).

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/9978>

Subsequently, in response to my post, he said:

Richard Carrier says April 13, 2016 at 4:11 pm

I especially like how he insists there are specialists on John alive today who date it before 100 AD. And then doesn't name a single specialist on John alive today who dates it before 100 AD.

I will assume he means fundamentalists. I don't count fundamentalists as reliable scholars. Any more than I count astrologers as reliable astronomers.

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/9978#comment-1059207>

Notice how his comment moves the goalpost—twice!:

i) He now restricts his claim to specialists "alive today."

ii) He now restricts his claim to "specialists" who aren't "fundamentalists".

Today he made an additional comment:

Richard Carrier says April 14, 2016 at 2:31 pm

(P.S. I should allow that some non-fundamentalist specialists do at least allow the possibility John was written in the 90s. But not as a definite conclusion. And they generally all agree John used Luke as a source, so the specialist dating now of Luke to the 90s puts John unlikely so early.)

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/9978#comment-1059215>

i) Notice how this moves the goalpost yet again by his belated concession that all specialists on John *don't* agree that this was written in the early to mid-2C. So he's now reversed himself. Carrier has more waffles than IHOP.

And let's consider some other things he added:

ii) Since the internal evidence doesn't contain any data that would allow us to date it definitively, it comes down to a range of plausible dates. Given present evidence, the date will be inconclusive. However, we can rule left field dates like the mid-2C. One problem with Carrier's 2C date is that John accurately depicts the conditions of Jerusalem before the fall. That requires the narrator to be in touch with living memory.

iii) How can scholars "generally all" agree? If it's *generally*, that falls short of *all*, and if it's *all*, that's more than *generally*. This is an indication that Carrier is just winging it. He doesn't actually have fix on which scholars say what.

iv) To say the specialists date Luke to the 90s is a serious overgeneralization. Many Lukan scholars assign a pre-70 date to that Gospel.

v) To say the scholars "generally all" (whatever that means) agree that John used Luke as a source is another serious overgeneralization.

vi) There are some striking coincides between Luke and John. But it doesn't follow that John used Luke as a source. After all, right in his prologue, Luke says he used informants. Well, what if John was one of his informants? In that event, John's Gospel might sometimes seem to echo Luke, not because his Gospel is dependent on Luke's Gospel, but because Luke (the author) was dependent on the Apostle John for some of his information. Even if John's Gospel is later than Luke's Gospel (which I take to be the case), the Apostle John can be a source of information for an earlier Gospel (i.e. Luke's Gospel). Carrier fails to distinguish between a literary source and a personal source.

The hero's journey

Ever since the 19C (James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*), some atheists have attempted to classify Jesus as a variation on the mythical hero archetype. One methodological problem with that tactic is the sheer variety of classification schemes. There are many different hero mythotype taxonomies, depending on which comparative sources are used, and which features are included or excluded to abstract a lowest common denominator. So the classification scheme is very rubbery. An atheist can mix-and-match to manufacture a designer mythotype that will dovetail with his preconceived agenda. Here's a useful list:

https://faculty.gcsu.edu/custom-website/mary-magoulick/hero_patterns.htm

Various Patterns of Hero Journeys *from folklorists who compared hero stories from around the world. Levi-Strauss' is the one I rely on most. Kluckhohn's is the most general and useful of the other type. Campbell's coordinates well with patterns of the ritual process. Most were produced in the mid-20th century from comparisons of many stories*

Claude Lévi-Strauss's view of the hero (based on comparison of myths from around the world, but especially Native American myths) = Structuralism

- Series of impossible mediations between oppositions which are ordered according to
 - Geography: e.g. east – west
 - Cosmology: e.g. below – above
 - Logic: e.g. integration, resolve distances
 - Sociology: e.g. patrilocal – matrilineal residence

Techno-economic schema: e.g. water
famine → hunt → success

Global integration (of 2 extreme propositions)

Hero = Mediator between dualities / oppositions

Often in TWIN form: Messiah & Trickster

Clyde Kluckhohn's Pattern (based on his study of
Spencer's analysis of Navaho mythology which led to his
own realization of these similarities with other world
mythology)

- The hero has adventures and achievements of extraordinary kind (e.g., slaying monsters, overcoming death, controlling the weather).
- There is often something special about the birth of the hero (occasionally heroine)
- Help from animals is a frequent motif.
- A separation from one or both parents at an early age is involved.
- There is antagonism and violence toward near kin, though mainly toward siblings or father-in-law. This hostility may be channeled in one or both directions. It may be masked but is more often expressed in violent acts.
- There is eventual return and recognition with honor. The hero's achievements are realized by his immediate family and redound in some way to their benefit and that of the larger group to which the family belongs.

Johann Georg von Hahn's Hero Pattern (based on
biographies of 14 heroes--mostly Western--including
Oedipus)

The hero is of illegitimate birth

His mother is the princess of the country

- His father is a god or a foreigner
- There are signs warning of his ascendance
- For this reason he is abandoned
- He is suckled by animals
- He is brought up by a childless shepherd couple
- He is a high-spirited youth
- He seeks service in a foreign country
- 0. He returns victorious and goes back to the foreign land
- 1. He slays his original persecutors, accedes to rule the country, and sets his mother free
- 2. He founds cities
- 3. The manner of his death is extraordinary
- 4. He is reviled because of incest and he dies young
- 5. He dies by an act of revenge at the hands of an insulted servant
- 5. He murders his younger brother

Jan De Vries Hero Pattern (based on comparison of traditional folk tales, mostly European)

1. The hero is begotten

He is born

His youth is threatened

He is brought up

He often acquires invulnerability

He fights with the dragon or other monster

He wins a maiden, usually after overcoming great dangers

He makes an expedition to the underworld

He returns to the land from which he was once banished and conquers his enemies

3. He dies

Lord Raglan's Hero Pattern (based on comparison of 18 classical myths, mostly from the Western world)

His mother is a royal virgin

His father is a king, and

Often a near relative of his mother, but

The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and

He is also reputed to be the son of a god.

At birth an attempt is made, often by his father, to kill him, but

He is spirited away, and

Reared by foster parents in a far country

We are told nothing of his childhood, but

3. On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.

1. After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,

2. He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and

3. Becomes king

4. For a time he reigns uneventfully, and

5. Prescribes laws, but
5. Later he loses favor with the gods and/or his subjects, and
7. Is driven from the throne and city.
3. He meets with a mysterious death,
3. Often at the top of a hill.
3. His children, if any, do not succeed him.
1. His body is not buried, but nevertheless
2. He has one or more holy sepulchers.

Joseph Campbell's Structure of the Heroic Journey (based on comparison of parts of narratives from around the world). Similar to the pattern of separation, initiation/transformation, return of the ritual process (see Victor Turner)

SEPARATION/DEPARTURE:

The Call to Adventure

Refusal of the Call

Supernatural Aid

Crossing the First Threshold

Passage Into the Realm of Night

THE STAGE OF TRIALS & VICTORIES OF INITIATION:

The Road of Trials

The Meeting with the Goddess

Temptation

Atonement

Receiving the Ultimate Boon

THE RETURN & REINTEGRATION WITH SOCIETY:

Reconciliation

Healing

Paradise Regained

Carrier's snow job, part 1

Last Spring, Richard Carrier debated Craig Evans:

<http://ksutv.kennesaw.edu/play.php?v=00030027>

In this post I'll comment on that debate. Carrier also posted a self-serving analysis of the debate which I will comment on in a sequel post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/08/carriers-snow-job-part-2.html>

Evans is a savvy, erudite NT scholar, and he made many good points. There were, however, some significant weaknesses in his presentation:

i) Evans is basically a Synoptic scholar, whereas much of the debate concerned Paul's witness to Jesus.

ii) Evans hadn't read Carrier's book (**ON THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS**), so he was caught off guard by some of Carrier's arguments.

iii) Evans is a theological moderate, so he makes a number of gratuitous concessions that a more conservative Jesus scholar like Craig Blomberg, Craig Keener, or Darrell Bock would not.

iv) Even if Evans had prepared for this particular debate, he'd be unable to rebut Carrier's rapid fire presentation in

the time allotted.

I'm going to focus on Carrier's presentation. It was a smooth performance. Like a good demagogue, Carrier is persuasive if you don't know what to listen for, or have a credulous predisposition to take his word for it.

He outlines his case with visual displays. Carrier does a snow job by bombarding the viewer with a blizzard of factoids. They fly by too fast to evaluate. And many audience members lack the background knowledge or resources to register the gaping holes in Carrier's putative evidence.

Roswell

What really happened

What was said to happen

What was said to have happened within just 30 years

While it's true that urban legends can develop quickly, this example is counterproductive of Carrier's thesis. Although some conspiracy buffs believe the government covered up the crash landing of a flying saucer, the Roswell legend is a national joke.

Ned Ludd

Movement invented legendary founder

Widely believed no one questioned until recently

Notice that this is a secular example. Carrier can't appeal to religious dynamics.

Cargo cults

Did John Frum or Tom Navy exist
Visions and spirit communications to shamans
Later claim: real men came to island
No such persons ever existed
We know because anthropologists happened to be on
islands at the time.

But from what I've read, real men did come to the island, bringing provisions. For instance:

The island's John Frum movement is a classic example of what anthropologists have called a "cargo cult" —many of which sprang up in villages in the South Pacific during World War II, when hundreds of thousands of American troops poured into the islands from the skies and seas. As anthropologist Kirk Huffman, who spent 17 years in Vanuatu, explains: "You get cargo cults when the outside world, with all its material wealth, suddenly descends on remote, indigenous tribes." The locals don't know where the foreigners' endless supplies come from and so suspect they were summoned by magic, sent from the spirit world.

The cult got its biggest boost the following year, when American troops by the thousands were dispatched to the New Hebrides, where they built large military bases at Port-Vila and on the island

of Espíritu Santo. The bases included hospitals, airstrips, jetties, roads, bridges and corrugated-steel Quonset huts, many erected with the help of more than a thousand men recruited as laborers from Tanna and other parts of the New Hebrides—among them Chief Kahuwya.

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/in-john-they-trust-109294882/?all&no-ist>

So the legend had a basis in fact. It underwent embellishment, but it wasn't shamanistic visions and spirit communications evolving into a story about real benefactors visiting the islands. Rather, it was the other way around: real visitors gave rise to subsequent legendary embellishment. So Carrier seems to have the development exactly backwards.

Moreover, the legendary embellishment was spurred by consumption of hallucinogens. As the same article explains:

Chief Isaac and other local leaders say that John Frum first appeared one night in the late 1930s, after a group of elders had downed many shells of kava as a prelude to receiving messages from the spirit world.

But 1C Christians didn't imbibe or ingest hallucinogens to trigger an altered state of consciousness. So that's another instance in which Carrier's attempted parallel breaks down.

From these three examples, Carrier draws the conclusion founders often invented. Hence, creating the presumption that Christians invented Jesus. But his generalization is absurd. Were the Founding Fathers invented? E.g. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Patrick Henry, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington.

Consider the number of American cities named after pioneer settlers. Were they invented?

Consider philosophical schools like Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, Hegelianism, &c. Were their founders invented?

Consider religious movements, viz.

Armstrongism
Augustinianism
AUM Shinrikyo
Bahai
Benedictines
Buddhism
Calvinism
Christadelphians
Christian Science
Confucianism
Divine Light Mission
Eckankar
Falun Gong
Franciscans
Islam

Jehovah's Witnesses
Jesuits
Lutheranism
Methodism
Moonies
Mormonism
Nation of Islam
Quakers
Raëlism
Scientology
Scotism
Seventh-Day Adventism
Sikhism
Swedenborgianism
Thomism
TM
Zoroastrianism

The list could easily be expanded. There's no presumption that ostensible founders of a religious movement were invented. To the contrary, that's very exceptional.

Moses
Romulus
Theseus
Osiris
Dionysus
Mithras
King Arthur

i) Which begs the question by assuming that Moses and King Arthur never existed.

ii) Moses wasn't the founder of Judaism. Yahweh was the founder of Judaism. Moses was just a prophet. If you're

going to speak of human founders at all, Abraham was as much the founder of Judaism as Moses.

In time of Christianity:

savior gods

all the "son" of God (or daughter)

all undergo a "passion"

all obtain victory over death

all have stories about them sent in human history on earth

Yet none actually existed

Originally agricultural deities converted into personal savior gods.

Osiris

Adonis

Romulus

Inanna

Zalmoxis

dying/rising gods

If Jesus existed, he'd be exceptional.

i) What are the dates of the sources?

ii) It's not enough to postulate parallels. Quote the texts. Show us the alleged parallels. Not tendentious summaries, but what the original texts actually say.

For instance, here's the "resurrection" of Osiris:

358 Recognizing the body he divided it into fourteen parts⁸⁷ and scattered them, each in a different place. Isis learned of this and sought for them again, sailing through the swamps in a boat of

papyrus.⁸⁸ This is the reason why people sailing in such boats are not harmed by the crocodiles, since these creatures in their own way show either their fear or their reverence for the goddess.

The traditional result of Osiris's dismemberment is that there are many so-called tombs of Osiris in Egypt;⁸⁹ for Isis held a funeral for each part when she had found it. Others deny this and assert that she caused effigies of him to be made and these she distributed among the several cities, pretending that she was giving them his body, in order that he might receive divine honours in a greater number of cities, Band also that, if Typhon should succeed in overpowering Horus, he might despair of ever finding ^{p47}the true tomb when so many were pointed out to him, all of them called the tomb of Osiris.⁹⁰

Of the parts of Osiris's body the only one which Isis did not find was the male member,⁹¹ for the reason that this had been at once tossed into the river, and the lepidotus, the sea-bream, and the pike had fed upon it;⁹² and it is from these very fishes the Egyptians are most scrupulous in abstaining. But

Isis made a replica of the member to take its place, and consecrated the phallus,93 in honour of which the Egyptians even at the present day celebrate a festival.

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis_and_Osiris*/A.html

That doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to the death and resurrection of Christ. Yet Osiris is Carrier's paradigm-case. He keeps harping on that alleged parallel. That's only plausible because he doesn't actually quote primary sources in his debate.

iii) Here's a classic critique of parallelomania

<http://www.michaelsheiser.com/PaleoBabble/Metzger.pdf>

Here's another critique: M. Hengel, **THE SON OF GOD** (Fortress, 1983), 25-30.

Jewish version
basic structure+local religion
variant suffering savior god

This is Carrier's attempt to discount awkward evidence to the contrary. When the alleged parallels break down, Carrier says that's because it's a "local variation". He makes his theory unfalsifiable since counterevidence is dismissed as a "local variation" on the "basic structure".

Osiris paradigm

Public stories placed his death & resurrection in earth history

Private stories explained it's allegory for his actual death and Resurrection in outer space just below moon
Most outsiders believed historical

One basic problem with that comparison is to disregard the Palestinian Jewish context of Jesus, as well as the OT background for the theological interpretation of Jesus. By the same token, it disregards the Jewish antipathy towards paganism.

Plausible, not necessarily prove true of Jesus

Carrier's tactic is to persuade the viewer through the cumulative impact of specious examples.

Jesus was a preexistent deity (Phil 2:5-11)

Jesus was an angel (Gal 4:14)

Jesus knew Moses (1 Cor 10:4)

i) Since Phil 2: 5-11 is a classic proof-text for the divine incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Son, a text that takes for granted some background knowledge about the historical Jesus, this runs counter to Carrier's thesis.

ii) The fact that Jesus knew Moses is consistent with orthodox Christology.

iii) An angel isn't a preexistent deity.

iv) Carrier's thesis requires him to say that Christians originally regarded Jesus as an angel. But he only has one

dubious proof-text for that claim. He misinterprets Gal 4:14. This text could mean either of two things:

As in 1:8, Paul refers to an angel as an exalted messenger, to be received with all due reverence. "As Christ Jesus" thus is ascensive: "You welcomed me as an angel of God, indeed, as if I were Christ Jesus himself." D. Moo, Galatians (Baker, 2013), 285.

Two matters need discussion here: (1) whether the phrase is generic and means "an angel from God" or whether it is specific, wherein Paul is picking up a common Septuagintal phrase and intends "the angel of God"; and (2) the relationship between the two phrases—whether they are progressive and ascensive (one word leading to the next that is higher) or appositional (the second clarifying the first. It should be noted also that the second issue exists only if one decides that the phrase is specific. If it is generic, then it automatically means that the two phrases are progressive and (ascensive).

In the first place, one called "the angel of the Lord" (or "God") regularly serves as the divine messenger in several OT narratives; and in some of these narratives the "angel" turns out to be the Lord himself. This is especially true of the crucial narratives in Gen 18 and Exod 3-4, plus the Gideon narrative in Judg 6.

But whether Paul's next phrase, "as Jesus Christ," is intended to stand in apposition to, and thus to identify, the angel of God is a different matter. That is, Christ may very well assume the role of the OT "angel of the Lord".

*In favor of "the angel of God" as equal to Christ himself is the fact that "the angel of the Lord" often turns out to be a representation of Yahweh himself, so that the two become one in some way. On the other hand, there is simply no firm evidence that would lead us to believe that Paul had a kind of "angel Christology". One is always wary of a christological perspective based on one or two texts that themselves are rather obscure. G. Fee, *Pauline Christology* (Eerdmans, 2007), 229-31.*

The upshot is that Gal 4:14 either:

i) Distinguishes Jesus from an angel

or

ii) Identifies Jesus as Yahweh

According to (i), an angel is a supernatural creature, and that stands in contrast to who Jesus is.

According to (ii), the "angel" is really a theophany. On that view, Paul regards the OT "angel of the Lord" as a Christophany. But on that view, the angel is not a creature, but a local manifestation of Yahweh himself.

Angelic descent

Pre-Christian Jewish belief (Philonic parallels) in an archangel who was already called:

The firstborn son of God (Rom 8:29)

the celestial "image of God" (2 Cor 4:4)

God's agent of creation (1 Cor 8:6)

And God's celestial high priest (Heb 2:17; 4:14).

i) Paul was tutored in Palestinian Judaism, not Alexandrian Judaism. Paul was a protégé of Gamaliel, not Philo. It's a different conceptual world.

ii) Paul's usage isn't based on Philonic Platonic categories, but OT categories. Jesus as the "firstborn son" alludes to passages about the Davidic messiah like Ps 89:27.

2 Cor 4:4 has its background in the Exodus theophany (Exod 32), combined with a Last Adam typology.

In 1 Cor 8:6, Jesus is more than God's agent. Rather, Paul inserts Jesus into the Shema.

iii) Philo has no incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection.
Carrier disregards the historical setting of Hebrews.

Carrier attempted an antithetical parallel between Jesus and Satan, then inferred that since Satan doesn't exist, by parity of argument, neither does Jesus. But, of course, NT Christians did believe in a personal Devil.

earliest Christian writings
imported into history
typically what happens:
Jewish patriarchs
pagan savior gods
modern cargo cults

That begs the question by assuming the Jewish patriarchs are fictional characters.

our sequence of evidence corresponds to it:
Epistles only speak of a celestial being and revealed gospel (7 authentic Paulines)
Gospels come decades later. Well-crafted literary fictions allegorical function

To say the Gospels are intentionally fictional is a highly contentious claim. I'll say more about that in my sequel post.

all later historicity claims based on the gospels
Tons of "historical" evidence forged in its place (dozens of Gospels, acts, fake epistles, doctored passages fabricating evidence

Which fails to distinguish between the canonical Gospels, which were authored by eyewitnesses or authors who knew eyewitnesses, and 2C apocrypha.

Paul never says who birthed Jesus or where never places on earth

Paul never says who killed and buried Jesus or where

There's a lot about OT history that Paul never mentions. That hardly implies that he didn't believe in OT history. Paul talks about what is relevant to his correspondents. And he takes for granted their knowledge of the historical Jesus. Paul's general focus is on the theological significance of the Christ-Event, and Christian ethics.

1 Thes 2:15-16 inauthentic

Begs the question. Ignores evidence to the contrary.

"the archons of this age" (demonic forces) who killed him (1 Cor 2)

Although the "archons of this" age could denote demonic forces, it could also denote human rulers, or human rulers in league with the demonic forces.

All creeds in Paul lack any historical events

False: consider Paul's discussion of the Lord's Supper in relation to the institution of the Last Supper.

2C creeds radically reverse this fact: Ignatius refutes words and implications of Paul

Speaking to an issue on which Paul is silent is not a refutation of Paul. To affirm something isn't to deny something that wasn't said. Carrier's inference is fallacious.

only revelation and Scripture as sources of info:
Gal 1:11-12 revelation

Carrier is equivocating. What Paul got by revelation was Jesus appearing to him and a theological interpretation of the historical Jesus, as well as a theological interpretation of OT messianism. It's not a substitute for oral history.

1 Cor 15:1-3 gospel I preached...received...according to scriptures...appeared to Cephas
1 Cor 11:23 I received from the Lord
Not earthly event

i) That's misleading. Paul uses a standard formula for authoritative oral history.

It comes from the Lord in the indirect sense that it's ultimately traceable to the historical Jesus. But Paul's immediate source of information is from eyewitnesses.

ii) Apropos (i), Carrier edits out Paul's explicit appeal to eyewitnesses in 1 Cor 15:5-7. At the very least, this alludes to oral history regarding the empty tomb and physical post-Resurrection appearances of Christ. Paul takes for granted that his audience is familiar with the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

Moreover, Mark's Gospel may well have been in circulation by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (AD 55-56).

iii) "According to the scriptures" doesn't mean Scripture is his source of information regarding the historical Jesus.

Rather, it means the mission of Christ was (a) in fulfillment of OT Scripture, and (b) OT Scripture provides a theological interpretation.

Brothers of the Lord (Rom 8:15-29)

Born (=made) of the sperm of David

word for divine manufacture, not descent

Born (=made) of a woman

allegory (Gal 4:24)

He was "made" into flesh, not "born" (ginomai rather than gennao, same word Paul uses to refer to manufacture of Adam and our resurrection bodies.

That's erroneous. For instance:

The noun sperm ("seed") in Jewish thought, and particularly in the Greek OT (LXX) and NT, usually means simply a "human descendent"-though in messianic contexts "seed of David" also conjures up ideas about Israel's Messiah...and the noun sarks ("flesh") in non-ethical contexts elsewhere in Romans and Paul's other letters means simply "human" or "human descent"... Thus this first part of the couplet can be translated "the one who was descended from David with respect to his human descent (or 'according to his humanity')".

R. Longenecker, The Epistle to the Romans (Eerdmans, 2016), 64-65.

"David's seed" doesn't mean Jesus was literally made from David's sperm. Is Carrier really that obtuse? It's idiomatic for ethnic ancestry. Cf. "For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (Rom 11:1). Paul isn't suggesting that he was the direct product of Abraham's sperm. Rather, he can trace his ancestry back through Benjamin to Abraham, as his lineal forebear. "The seed of x" is idiomatic for "descent of x". A synonym for posterity. Just check Greek lexicons.

Carrier denies that Gal 1:19 (cf. 1 Cor 15:7) refers to the James as the stepbrother of Jesus because any Christian can be a brother of Jesus (Rom 8:29). However, "brother" can't be synonymous with Christian brother in this context because Paul uses "brother" to single out a particular James. If he was using "brother" in the figurative sense, that added descriptor wouldn't distinguish James from Peter and John.

2 Pet 1:16 forges an eyewitness account of meeting Jesus on earth

That begs the question regarding the authorship of 2 Peter.

otherwise unknown Christians claiming Jesus was cleverly devised myth (2:1). Gospels cleverly devised myths

Which makes them false teachers.

first time Jesus appears in Paul, after death.
Rom 16:25-26 revelation...scriptures
Rom 10:14-17 how shall they be sent without a preacher
1 Cor 9:1 Apostle...sees Jesus
2 Cor 12 & 1 Cor 14 revelations spirit communications
no Jews heard Jesus preach, only apostles received revelations
no eyewitness testimony
revelatory cult like shamans in cargo cults
no references to Jesus preaching other than from heaven
No one meeting Jesus before his resurrection
no references to Jesus ever working miracles or being healer or exorcist
no historical stories about Jesus at all

i) That's ridiculously skewed. In 1 Cor 15, the question at issue isn't the earthly ministry of Christ, but the resurrection of the just. Will Christians be raised from the grave?

Paul uses the bodily resurrection of Christ as divine precedent. In that context, he naturally begins with the death of Christ, not what happened before then—which is beside the point.

ii) He says Jesus was "buried". That's earthly. And it alludes to the crucifixion. Paul isn't talking in a vacuum. His audience is expected to know about the life of Christ. They've been evangelized. Paul is *reminding* them of Christ's resurrection (in Jerusalem), to ground the resurrection of Christians in union with Christ.

eternal archangel recently given flesh to die and rise
and report this by revelation
completely reversed in the Gospels
Mark: no cosmology, just appears out of nowhere and
starts doing stuff

i) That's a prejudicial way of putting it. That's like saying that in a biography about Eisenhower's presidency, Ike just appears out of nowhere in starts doing stuff. But the point of a presidential biography is to focus on the person's political career. Likewise, the point of Mark is to focus on Christ's public ministry. That presumes an unstated backstory.

ii) If, moreover, the Gospel writers were so prone to confabulation, why doesn't Mark concoct a detailed infancy narrative? There was pious curiosity about Jesus as a child. That's why apocryphal infancy Gospels fill that gap. But Mark doesn't do that because he doesn't make stuff up.

Matthew: born (made in a womb) but not preexistent
Ditto: Luke/Acts
John: Preexistent, identical to God
progression from ordinary guy to preexistent being

That ignores the high Christology of the Synoptics. Cf.

S. Grindheim, **CHRISTOLOGY IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS**

S. Gathercole, **THE PREEXISTENT SON**

20 years before Mark, Paul already identifies Jesus as preexistent being, God's viceroy, whose flesh was made by God (Phil 2)

i) Actually, Phil 2 identifies Christ as preexistent divine being who acquired a human nature and died on the cross.

ii) I'd date Mark earlier than Carrier does.

Criteria don't work

Stan Porter

Morna Hooker

Mark Goodacre

Hector Avalos

John Gager

Christopher Tuckett

Anthony Le Donne

Rafael Rodriguez

Dale Allison

That's deceptive. For instance, Porter has conservative views regarding the historicity of Jesus. Likewise, Allison doesn't simply reject the standard criteria, but proposes alternatives. He takes the position that people remember events better than words, and they remember the gist of what was said. Cf. **CONSTRUCTING JESUS, CHAP 1.**

Gospels full of myth-markers

Assimilate Jesus to known hero formulas

(countercultural heroes, Rank-Raglan Sons of Gods, suffering saviors, miracle men, persecuted righteous man)

i) There's evidence for the existence of "miracle men", viz. Keener, **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS.**

ii) Righteous men are persecuted. That isn't mythical—that actually happens.

iii) Carrier's use of the Rank-Raglan paradigm has been challenged, viz.

<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/12/mcg388023.shtml>

<http://ronnblom.net/is-jesus-a-rank-raglan-hero/>

elements taken from OT and Homer
Jesus a retelling of Moses, Elijah, Odysseus

i) Jesus and Elijah sometimes perform similar miracles because suffering people need the same kinds of miracles. Sickness and death, especially in the 1C, can only be cured by miracles.

ii) To say the life of Christ is a retelling of Odysseus is the height of absurdity. In Homer, Odysseus is a mere man. A husband and father. King of the island of Ithaca. A veteran of the Trojan War. After the war, he suffers various ordeals from Poseidon, Cyclops, Circe, Calypso, the Sirens, the Laestrygonians, Scylla and Charybdis, &c. The plot and cast of characters has nothing in common with the Gospels.

Full of etiological myths (baptism, eucharist)

What makes Carrier assume baptism and the eucharist were not established by Jesus?

and mythic models (faith healing, exorcism, dealing with critics)

That begs the question. There's medical evidence for faith healing. There's psychiatric evidence for demonic possession.

full of improbable events—which are central, not incidental to every story.

In the debate, Carrier illustrates this allegation by mentioning the darkness during the crucifixion. Let's take a comparison: on May 18, 1980, in Yakima, WA, the town went dark at daytime. That was due to volcanic ash from the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, occluding the sunlight.

Now, if this was reported in a 1C religious text, with no explanation regarding the cause, Carrier would say that's mythical and improbable. Yet that was a natural event.

Ascension of Isaiah
late 1C/early 2C Gospel
prophet Isaiah receives vision of Jesus descending and becoming incarnate
earliest vision we can reconstruct lacks Jesus visiting earth
Jesus is crucified by Satan (archon of this age) in the sky below the moon.
parallel to Osiris

Carrier's use of that text has been critiqued:

<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/10/mcg388028.shtml>

got suppressed later
evidence outside Bible?
doesn't mention earthly life (1 Clement; Hebrews)

Hebrews alludes to a familiar narrative about the earthly ministry of Christ, before his Ascension.

Josephus and Tacitus having no sources other than the gospels or Christians citing gospels no independent corroboration/evidence

Except 1 Clement, which only knows a revealed Gospel obvious fiction (infancy gospels, other apocrypha) based on Gospels or informants relying on the Gospels (Josephus, Tacitus)
no corroboration of any earthly story

i) There's no presumption that Tacitus had to get his information from Christians. Many Romans were stationed in Palestine during the public ministry of Christ.

ii) And even if he did get his information from Christians, that doesn't mean his Christian informants had to get their information from the Gospels. There were thousands of witnesses to the public ministry of Christ. There'd be a living memory of his life and work.

all other evidence from first 80 years of Christianity's development not preserved 80 blackout
no church records or correspondence from later half of 1C

What about Romans-Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude?

Even if Carrier implausibly dates some of these to the 2C, quite a few still date to the later half of the 1C.

Carrier's snow job, part 2

Here's a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/08/carriers-snow-job-part-1.html>

In this post I'm commenting on Carrier's self-serving debate postmortem:

<http://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/10935>

he argues these Gospels must be telling the truth because they “exhibit extensive and compelling verisimilitude,” which is the same thing as saying Mike Hammer novels are really realistic and get all sorts of cultural and historical facts right, therefore Mike Hammer existed. The fallacy is palpable.

It's entirely possible John correctly describes the location of the pool, that it was indeed five porticoed, was named as he said, was a healing site, and near the sheep gate (the location of which archaeology has not identified). But this information would have been available in reference books and histories of Judea, and in other stories and legends of events there, and known to countless persons who had lived there in later

decades (like Josephus, for example). That the authors of John knew the layout of Jerusalem therefore tells us nothing about whether they had any eyewitness information pertaining to Jesus, or any historical information about Jesus at all.

But even what little verisimilitude the Gospels have is moot. To get Jewish culture and geography right only requires being Jewish or knowing or reading any informed Jew, especially someone who grew up in that time and place, or wrote about it—like Josephus, who did both.

That the Gospels, like many myths and legends and other varieties of historical fiction in antiquity, get some incidental cultural and historical details right, is not evidence that Jesus existed.

Matthew knew these better and repairs Mark's mistakes, but not from being a better witness to Jesus, but just being a more informed Jew. Hence correcting these errors and getting them right has no connection to having any special knowledge of Jesus. It just means an author knew the Holy Land and Jewish laws and customs better. Luke, meanwhile, gets his details of the region from the

Jewish historian Josephus (and probably, in the same way, other historians now lost, for other regions discussed in Acts). And John has been edited out of order so hopelessly it's actually of little use geographically (see OHJ, Chapter 10.7), and he says nothing about customs that wasn't common knowledge among Jews. So there really isn't anything remarkable about these books using common knowledge and reference books to set their scenes.

i) That poses a central dilemma for Carrier. On the one hand, to discount the historicity of the Gospels, he must insist that these were written too late to be in touch with living memory. On the other hand, to account for the historical accuracy of the Gospels, he must insist the authors did have access to informants from that time and place. Carrier can't straddle that fence. He will fall over one side or the other.

ii) Sure, it's possible to write accurate historical fiction. There are two or three ways to do that. If the novelist lived at that time and place. But Carrier denies that with respect to the Gospel writers.

Or if the author had access to informants who lived at that time and place. But if Carrier concedes that in reference to the Gospel writers, then he can't exclude testimonial evidence to the historical Jesus.

iii) I'm also curious about his casual appeal to "reference books and histories of Judea". Really? He thinks a Gospel writer, after the Jewish War, could just go a local library or local bookstore to consult a tour book on Jerusalem or Palestine before the fall of Jerusalem?

Already the non sequitur is obvious. But it's worse, because there is little else in the Gospels that is so specific. And indeed much that is erroneous.

His Argument from Second Century Historians is basically that historians a century after the fact say Jesus existed, therefore he did. The same historians who did not know anything about Jesus except from what Christians told them—Christians who were relying on the Gospels. So his argument is: later historians repeat the fact that Christians a century later said Jesus existed, therefore Jesus existed. This is a non sequitur. No second century historian gives any indication they had any means of knowing whether the man depicted in the Gospels actually existed or not.

What makes Carrier assume that someone like Papias or Polycarp had no direct knowledge of Christ's disciples? Likewise, the chain from John to Irenaeus.

They were two or more lifetimes removed from the pertinent events, and mention no access to any documents or witnesses or memoirs to guide them.

As a teenager, my mother knew a great-aunt who came to live with her parents in her old age. Her great-aunt was born in 1842. I'm writing in 2016. In that respect, there's just one link between me and my great-great aunt. Likewise, my father's grandfather was a Civil War vet. I know because he used to tell my father war stories about his experience. In that respect, there's just one link between me and my great-great grandfather. Because generations overlap, living memory can span a considerable interval.

We have no eyewitnesses to the historicity of Jesus, and no author who claims he existed on earth has shown that they had any credible access to eyewitnesses. In fact, none even claim they did—except the authors of the Gospel of John, and their witness is a fabrication (OHJ, pp. 500-05; fabricating witnesses was common in ancient mythography: Alan Cameron has a

*whole chapter on it in Greek
Mythography in the Roman World).*

Richard Bauckham will be publishing an expanded edition of his classic monograph on **JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES**.

*Paul, the only source we have who
definitely wrote in less than an average
lifetime after when Jesus would have
lived...*

The "average lifespan" is a statistical mean that's diluted by high child mortality in the ancient world. But people who survived childhood could have a normal lifespan. Consider the church fathers (excluding those who died prematurely from martyrdom).

*One (Luke) outright denies it and
conspicuously does not mention having
access to any eyewitnesses, only to the
previous Gospels, none of which written
by eyewitnesses nor citing any.*

Luke doesn't say his research was confined to previous Gospels. And it's clear from Acts that Luke had a wide range

of contacts, including founding members of the Jerusalem church.

The earliest (Mark) cites no sources at all, and was clearly not himself an eyewitness, and never mentions knowing or speaking to any.

i) How is it "clear" that Mark was not an eyewitness to any of the events he narrates? And if he was an eyewitness, then we wouldn't expect him to cite sources.

ii) Moreover, Carrier is duplicitous. Even if Matthew, Mark, or Luke either claimed to be eyewitnesses or cite eyewitnesses, Carrier would preemptively discount their testimony as fabricated.

And Matthew just copied Mark verbatim...

Matthew sometimes simplifies Mark to make room for Matthew's supplementary material. So it's not verbatim. The fact, though, that Matthew is so conservative in his use of Mark demonstrates his fidelity to his sources. He doesn't take historical liberties with Mark.

and expanded and revised him with more speeches many of which many

scholars agree were composed afterward and thus did not come from eyewitnesses (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount is an original composition in Greek written after the Jewish War: OHJ, pp. 465-67).

That's nothing more than a tendentious assertion. Incidentally, it's funny how Carrier reprimands Evans for appeal to scholarly consensus, yet Carrier is quick to invoke scholarly consensus when it serves his own purpose.

Nor would an eyewitness just copy verbatim the book of a non-witness and pass it off as their own testimony...

A strawman inasmuch as Matthew doesn't just copy verbatim Mark's account. In addition to the material that Matthew and Luke derive from Mark, they include some distinctive parables. Yet the parables of Jesus constitute evidence for the historical Jesus:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/07/the-parables-of-jesus.html>

And much of what Matthew adds to Mark is sufficiently ridiculous as to rule out his having or using eyewitness

*sources at all (like magical stars: 2:9-11;
virgin births: 1:18-25...*

That's only ridiculous of you presume miracles are ridiculous

zombie hordes: 27:52-53;

These are no more "zombies" than Lazarus restored to life (Jn 11). "Zombie" instantly triggers associations with Hollywood horror films. That's not an accurate comparison. It's just an applause line for Carrier's sycophants.

*flying monsters from outer space: 28:1-8;
etc.).*

An angel is a "flying monster from outer space"? That's hardly an accurate description. Rather, it's another applause line for his groupies.

*John's authors (plural) alone claim to
have used some previous written Gospel
written by (they claim) an eyewitness
(whom they do not name in the present
text, although enough clues remain to*

entail they meant Lazarus), a person never before heard of, whom the Gospel of John suddenly inserts everywhere into the story, and for whom we have ample evidence of his invention.

Actually, the prologue of John begins with a programmatic statement regarding the firsthand knowledge of the narrator (1:14).

Mark doesn't seem to have a good grasp of the local geography or customs.

In a forthcoming collection of essays, Richard Bauckham will dispute that.

Yet even the most informed author, Matthew, isn't a paragon of accuracy. For example, it's well known that the Pharisees did not forbid healing on the Sabbath, yet they are depicted as arguing this with Jesus repeatedly, when the arguments put in the mouth of Jesus are actually the same Rabbinical arguments used by the actual Pharisees

themselves (e.g., see Geza Vermes' discussion in The Authentic Gospel of Jesus, pp. 46-47).

Isn't that reprojecting later Mishnaic or Talmudic codifications back into the 1C? Indeed, before 70 AD?

Similarly, none of the Gospels presents a trial sequence that is at all plausible within the known laws and customs of the time (Proving History, p. 154).

i) Aren't the Gospels actually our earliest source of information in that regard?

ii) Moreover, Carrier's statement is naive. Even if the trial of Jesus was extralegal, kangaroo courts are nothing new.

The clearing of the temple scene is not at all plausible given the known facts of the temple layout and its police force (OHJ, pp. 431-32).

i) The text doesn't say Jesus emptied the entire temple complex.

ii) But in any case, police force is no match for omnipotence. One incarnate Son of God can effortlessly defeat an army. It's like telepathic aliens.

The Barabbas narrative invents non-existent Roman customs to create an ahistorical Jewish symbolism (OHJ, pp. 402-08).

How does Carrier know that? He doesn't.

Matthew ridiculously has Jesus ride into town on an adult and a baby donkey simultaneously (OHJ, pp. 459-60).

That's an incompetent misreading of the text. Jesus rides on the mare, with the colt in tow.

The disciples abandon their jobs and property and families, and pick up and follow and completely devote themselves to Jesus after he, a complete stranger and a pauper, just walks up to them and utters a few sentences.

There's no reason to think Jesus was a "complete stranger" to them.

So we can't tell if Paul means God manufactured Jesus a body out of David's semen, or if he was born to some human father descended from David... Paul nevertheless does say Jesus was made from the flesh of David (literally out of his semen, as everyone knew prophecy literally said and thus required)

I already addressed that misinterpretation in my prequel post. Does Carrier know nothing about idioms? Does Carrier imagine that prophecies can't employ idiomatic expressions? Is he playing dumb, or is he really that dense?

...and thus wore a human, Jewish body when he was given flesh to wear after descending from heaven (as Paul says in Philippians 2).

Paul doesn't say Jesus "wore" a human body. Paul doesn't say he was given flesh "after" descending from heaven.

But that tells us nothing about where he wore that body—on earth or in space? Was Jesus an incarnate archangel on earth, or was he like his neighbor Osiris, who actually wore (and died in) his human body in outer space just below the moon, and only in the public myths disguising that cosmic truth does he wear it on earth?

He had a human body to live among humans. And he died on the cross. These are transparent allusions to the historical Jesus. Paul expected his audience to have that basic background knowledge.

Evans says Paul wrote that Jesus had “twelve disciples” in 1 Corinthians 15:5. That’s false. The word disciple does not exist there. Nor anywhere in Paul’s letters. These were the first apostles (as Paul says in Galatians 1:17).

"Disciple" and "apostle" are commonly used as synonyms. That's a standard linguistic convention.

Who, like Paul, “saw Jesus” after his death. Conspicuously no mention is made of them ever seeing Jesus before he died. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 omits any ministry for Jesus, never mentions anyone having met or seen him in life, much less being hand-picked by him in life, and only says we know of his death and burial from scripture, while the first time Paul mentions anyone knowing anything about Jesus from witnessing it, he only mentions the “visions” of a celestial Jesus that came after his prophesied death. Not before. This is so peculiar that it is actually evidence against historicity. Not for it.

I discussed that in my prequel post. Carrier disregards the context of 1 Cor 15, which concerns the resurrection of the body. So the starting-point is the death of Christ.

Evans claims Paul recites what Jesus said at “the last supper.” But in fact Paul never calls it a last supper, mentions no one being present, and says he knew of

those words because he learned of them from a revelation from Jesus, not from any witness (1 Corinthians 11:23). Paul never mentions there being any witness. He also never mentions a betrayal in connection with this, contrary to Evans's conjecture; in fact, Paul only references Jesus being delivered up for death—by God, as Paul elsewhere says (OHJ, pp. 560-61). And that this occurred during a specific night is already a part of the alternative hypothesis, since the question is not whether it was believed to have occurred at a specific time, but where—on earth or in the heavens. Because Paul makes no mention of where it occurred.

This shows you how desperate Carrier is. Paul is drawing a comparison between the Lord's Supper and the Last Supper. To object that Paul doesn't use the traditional designation commits the word-concept fallacy.

Writers often count on readers to read between the lines, based on common knowledge. Communication takes for granted a shared preunderstanding between the communicator and his target audience. Is Carrier so inept that he doesn't grasp that elementary fact? Carrier's

problem is that he needs to suppress evidence that runs counter to his mythicism.

Why Were Paul and All His Congregations Uninterested in Any Facts about Jesus's Life? The silences in Paul's letters are really weird and hard to explain in any believable way.

Evans had no response to this beyond the standard implausible conjecture that Paul was wholly uninterested in anything to do with Jesus's life. Which is not only inherently unbelievable and not in evidence (Paul never says such a thing or anything indicative of it), but also doesn't explain why no one else he wrote to or against was at all interested in such facts, either, since none ever presented him with any evidence or argument from them that ever required his response.

i) That's a deceptive, prejudicial way to frame the issue. I'm interested in lots of things that don't make their way into any particular letter. Letters are topical.

ii) Moreover, we don't have Paul's complete correspondence. We only have the sampling that providentially survived.

I should also mention that it is also not relevant to argue, as Evans did, that Jesus was built out of Jewish concepts of resurrection rather than pagan.

Syncretism is about combining both, not choosing one over the other. If you don't know that, if you don't know what syncretism is or how it works, you are not competent to debate the matter.

When many Jews borrowed resurrection, apocalypticism, a flaming hell, and a divine enemy of God as concepts all from the pagan Zoroastrians who occupied their lands, they Judaized those concepts, making their own versions of them that were peculiarly Jewish and built on Jewish ideas. The result was a combination of pagan and Jewish elements. That's how syncretism works.

That only works if you date Zoroastrian sources early, OT sources late, have genuine parallels, and can demonstrate borrowing. For multiple problems with Carrier's assumptions, cf. E. Yamauchi, **PERSIA AND THE BIBLE** (Baker, 1990), chap. 12. As Edwin Yamauchi observes:

One major problem is that the details about Persian eschatology are drawn almost exclusively from the Bundahishn, which is a ninth-century AD Pahlavi writing. We are, in fact, lacking any religious texts from the crucial Parthian era (250 BC to AD 225). A second problem is that there is no convincing evidence that Cyrus was a Zoroastrian.

"Life, Death, and Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," R. Longenecker, ed. *Life in the Face of Death* (Eerdmans, 1998), 47-48.

Carrier's snow job, part 3

This is a sequel to my two previous posts:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/08/carriers-snow-job-part-1.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/08/carriers-snow-job-part-2.html>

My third and final post is a mopping up operation. In my first installment, I focused on Carrier's opening statement. In my second installment, I focused on Carrier grading his own performance.

In the course of the debate, Carrier added to the case he laid out in his opening statement. I'm going to comment on that.

1. Carrier said Luke used Josephus. Carrier has said that before. As luck would have it, here's Dr. Timothy McGrew's assessment of Carrier's claim:

<http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2010/08/tim-mcgrew-on-carriers-treatment-of.html>

2. Carrier said that according to Mt 27:45, "the sun went out for 3 hours," but astronomers can't verify that claim.

However, the text doesn't say that. Rather, it says there was darkness over the land (i.e. land of Israel). Which doesn't imply that the sun stopped shining.

Even from a naturalistic standpoint, there are different ways that can happen. Fallout from a volcanic explosion can block sunlight. Swarms of locusts can block sunlight. Dust storms can block sunlight.

My point is not to furnish any particular explanation for Mt 27:45. The text itself only states the effect, and not the cause of the effect. It could be supernatural rather than preternatural.

3. Carrier explained why he thinks the canonical Gospels are fictional by design. He cited Christ's parable in Mk 4, with its distinction between insiders and outsiders. He said that's a clue that the entire Gospel is parabolic. Jesus is a fictional character in that giant parable. It represents a double truth policy. The noble lie.

But Carrier's appeal is forced:

i) Parables are embedded within narratives. Although parables are stories, they are told by a speaker outside the story (Christ). So that's a fictional narrative within the historical narrative.

ii) The distinction in Mk 4 isn't between literal and figurative, or factual and fictional, but between those who understand the message and those who don't. No one supposed the parables were describing real life events.

4. Apropos (3), Carrier cited the account of Jesus cursing the fig tree as proof that Mark is fictional by design, because the withered fig tree is symbolic.

i) That, however, is a false dichotomy. Sure, Christ's action is symbolic. Indeed, scholars have noted that many of his miracles are enacted parables. That is to say, the action

functions as an object lesson. But the fact that Jesus used the fig tree to illustrate the impending judgement of unbelieving Israel does not imply that no such miracle occurred. Indeed, a nonexistent miracle would fail to illustrate the point.

ii) Carrier said the miracle is historically ridiculous. He didn't explain what he meant. Does he mean the very idea of a miracle is ridiculous, or that believing in miracles is ridiculous? In any case, his dismissal presumes that miracles are incredible, but that, of course, begs the question—as well as ignoring extensive evidence for many well-attested miracles.

iii) Furthermore, the hermeneutical question isn't whether the parable is ridiculous from Carrier's standpoint, but Mark's standpoint. Unlike Carrier, Mark was not an atheist.

5. Apropos (4), Carrier classifies the canonical gospels as fiction. Now "fiction" is a coarse-grained category, so let's explore different kinds of fiction.

i) You might have **unintentional fiction**. Take someone who repeats an urban legend. He thinks it's true, but it's actually false.

That wouldn't be a fictional genre. Rather, that would be a case of *intentional nonfiction*. He means to tell the truth, but he's mistaken. The urban legend is fictitious. Yet something can be fictitious without belonging to a fictional *genre*. In unintentional fiction, the falsehood is unwitting.

Another example in kind would be an initial news report that turns out to be false. A week later the paper or station

or network issues a retraction. The reported incident is fictitious.

However, Carrier doesn't think the canonical Gospels are fictional in *that* sense.

ii) You might have **nonreferential fiction**. By that I mean, the writer doesn't attempt to be realistic. That doesn't necessarily mean he attempts to be unrealistic. But he's simply going with his imagination and the creative momentum. It's spontaneous. Although the story might sometimes intersect with reality, that's incidental.

However, Carrier doesn't think the canonical Gospels are fictional in *that* sense.

iii) You might have **historical fiction**. However, that's ambiguous.

a) For instance, some historical fiction is **semi-autobiographical**. Examples include novels and stories by Giorgio Bassani, as well as the adventures of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain.

In this case, the author doesn't necessarily intend to write realistic fiction. He doesn't plant historical nuggets at strategic points in the plot to give it an air of verisimilitude. Rather, the story is realistic because he's writing about his own time and place. So the historical quality is almost a side-effect. He isn't working historical nuggets into the story. Rather, because he draws on memory as well as imagination, it's only natural for the narrative to correspond to real life in many respects.

However, Carrier doesn't think the canonical Gospels are fictional in *that* sense.

b) By contrast, you have **self-conscious historical fiction**, where the author intends to write historical fiction. He deliberately incorporates historical details into the story to give it an accurate period milieu.

Carrier thinks the canonical Gospels are fictional in *that* sense.

6. Apropos (5), here's a basic problem with Carrier's classification. What's his evidence that the canonical Gospels are fictional in the particular sense he demands? How does he distinguish evidence for one kind of fiction from evidence for another kind of fiction?

From what I can tell, he has no evidence that singles out his subcategory of fiction. His classification isn't driven by the evidence, but by his theory. His theory demands that the Gospels be fictional in the sense of 5(i-b). That's because he denies the existence of Jesus. So he must classify the Gospels in a way that excludes any evidence for the historical Jesus.

He can't admit that the Gospels are fictional in the sense of 5(i), because that would amount to a mainly nonfictional account with some inadvertent fictitious elements.

He can't admit that the Gospels are fictional in the sense of 5(ii), because the Gospels have too much archeological corroboration. His classification must be able to accommodate "incidental" factuality, without conceding that the Gospels are generally historical. So he needs a literary

category with enough built-in flexibility to keep his theory safely unfalsifiable.

But assuming (ex hypothesi) the Gospels are fictional, there's no a priori reason they must be *historical* fiction. Carrier himself keeps comparing the canonical Gospels with the apocryphal gospels. Yet the apocryphal gospels *aren't* historical fiction. The authors of the apocryphal gospels didn't attempt to reconstruct an accurate setting. Rather, the apocryphal gospels are imaginary from start to finish. Imaginary plot, characters, dialogue, setting.

There's no effort to make them true to Palestine or Jerusalem in the time of Christ. Rather, the apocryphal gospels are written from the artless ethos of someone living in the 2C—or later. Their authors aren't even conscious of the anachronism.

Conversely, some apocryphal Gospels are deliberately written to present an alternative version of events that diverges from the canonical gospels. Written by heretics who wish to supplant the historical Jesus with a different Jesus.

If Carrier were serious about his comparison, we'd expect the canonical Gospels to be fictional in the sense of 5(ii), but he can't allow it because that's inconsistent with archeological corroboration.

And he can't permit the canonical Gospels to be fictional in the sense of 5(iii-a), because that would mean they were written by someone contemporaneous with the events he narrates; someone who lived in Palestine or Jerusalem during the public ministry of Christ; or an author whose informants hail from that time and place. That would make

the canonical Gospels far too factual to cohere with his theory of a nonexistent Jesus.

So by process of elimination, he must classify the canonical Gospels as fictional in the sense of 5(iii-b). But that's an ad hoc classification. That isn't based on differential evidence, but what his theory requires. It's not the evidence that selects for that subcategory, but his theory. He begins with his theory, then picks out a classification that suits the needs of his theory.

7. Incidentally, if the canonical Gospels are really allegories of what was going on in Gentile churches, why don't they mirror the kinds of issues we find in the NT epistles or 2C apocryphal Gospels? The narrator would invent characters who give voice to controversies in the late 1C or 2C. Characters would pose questions to Jesus, who'd give authoritative answers. So why are the canonical Gospels so focused on Jews, to the neglect of Gentiles?

8. Darrell Bock draws attention to another obvious problem with Christ mythicism: if Jesus never existed, why doesn't the Jewish polemic against Christianity exploit and accentuate that fact? If Jesus never existed, surely the most efficient way for Jews to counter the nascent Christian movement is to point out that Jesus never existed! Surely Jews were uniquely qualified to say that, if that was so. If Jesus existed, he lived in Jewish history. What could be more damning than for Jews to say we have no record of such a person.

Moreover, Carrier can't say that evidence was suppressed. Christians had little control over what Jews said about Christianity, as the Jewish polemic against Christianity illustrates.

9. Because he disallows any evidence for the historical Jesus in the Epistles, Carrier must compartmentalize the Epistles from the Gospels.

Perhaps the most glaring example is his treatment of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11:23ff. He is forced to deny that transparent an allusion to the Last Supper. To do so would concede damaging evidence for the historical Jesus. So he had to pretend that it's not an allusion to Judas betraying Jesus, and the institution of the Lord's Supper. Rather, Paul thought that happened to Jesus in outer space. Incidentally, it's very droll when Carrier is so sure that we can detect Homeric allusions in Mark's Gospel, but we can't detect an allusion to the Last Supper in 1 Cor 11!

Now, in a way, his position, even though it's special pleading at its most preposterous, is a half-truth. It flags the fact that readers subconsciously interpret the Pauline passage in light of Gospel accounts regarding the institution of the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the wording of the Pauline passage is especially close to Luke, which makes sense if they were friends.

If, however, we bracket the Synoptic background information and read the Pauline passage in isolation, then it's very obscure. Without the background information supplied by a Synoptic Gospel, Paul's description would be cryptic or even incomprehensible. For the original audience, Paul's reference was supplemented, either by their knowledge of a Synoptic Gospel, or oral history regarding the life of Christ.

10. In the debate, Carrier said dying-and-rising savior gods were all the rage at the time of the NT, whereas they're not in ancient times. Why would there be a dying and rising god in Judaism conveniently in the culture and the time when

dying and rising gods were all the fashion whereas in ancient times that was not the case? He says this around the 1:03 mark. And he revisits that contention around the 1:40-41 mark, posing a rhetorical question about whether that's just a random coincidence or total coincidence.

Giving examples, he claims the Pyramid texts "explicitly" describe the death and "resurrection" of Osiris. By the same token, he says the **SUMERIAN DESCENT OF INANNA TO THE UNDERWORLD** "explicitly" describes her death, "resurrection", and "ascension". And in passing he mentions Adonis. But his appeal suffers from many problems:

i) His chronology is contradictory. On the one hand, he stresses the timing of a Jewish version of a dying-and-rising savior gods. That's synchronized with a general fad for dying-and-rising savior gods in NT times. And that stands in contrast to ancient times, when that was not the case.

Yet he then does an about-face, and appeals to the cult of Osiris and Inanna in ancient times. The Pyramid texts date to the 3rd millennium BC (5th and 6th dynasties). Likewise, by his own admission, **THE DESCENT OF INANNA TO THE UNDERWORLD** goes way back to ancient Sumerian literature.

So this wasn't all the rage during NT times, in contrast to ancient times. Rather, that motif antedates NT times by centuries or even millennia. But in that case, it could well be coincidental that you have these parallels.

I'm not saying his alleged parallels are genuine. I'm saying that even if you accept his interpretation, his argument is gratingly inconsistent.

ii) Maybe I missed it, but I don't find an explicit description of Osiris's "resurrection" in the Pyramid texts. Likewise, I don't find an explicit description of Inanna's "resurrection" and "ascension" in **THE DESCENT OF INANNA TO THE UNDERWORLD**.

One problem is the use of Christian terminology, which has very specific connotations. But the alleged parallels don't match the terminology.

In **THE DESCENT OF INANNA TO THE UNDERWORLD**, you don't have Inanna dying, before her soul descends to the Underworld. Rather, she dies after descending to the Underworld.

By contrast, Jesus didn't descend to the Underworld. And even if you think he did, that would be after he died. Likewise, Osiris remains in the underworld.

iii) Carrier discerns parallels from stories with such disparate characters, plots, and settings, that it's hard to see what criteria he uses to distinguish parallels from nonparallels.

iv) A fundamental problem with Carrier's comparative mythology is the fact that it's a throwback to James Frazer's obsolete paradigm. But don't take my word for it. Let's quote a few examples from the standard reference work:

The category of dying and rising gods, once a major topic of scholarly investigation, must now be understood to have been largely a misnomer based

on imaginative reconstructions and exceedingly late or highly ambiguous texts.

There are two major forms of the Adonis myth, only brought together in late mythographical tradition (e.g. the 2C CE Bibliotheca, falsely attributed to Apollodorus of Athens) The first, which may be termed the Panyasisian form, knows only of a quarrel between two goddesses (Aphrodite and Persephone) for the affections of the infant Adonis. Zeus or Calliope decrees that Adonis should spend part of the year in the upperworld with one, and part of the year in the lowerworld with the other. This tradition of bilocation (similar to that connected with Persephone and, perhaps, Dumuzi) has no suggestion of death and rebirth. The second, more familiar Ovidian form narrates Adonis's death by a boar and his commemoration by Aphrodite in a flower. There is no suggestion of Adonis rising. The first version lacks an account of Adonis's death; the second emphasizes the goddess's mourning and the fragility of the flower that perpetuates his memory. Even when the two versions are combined, Adonis's alternation between the upper and lower worlds precedes his death.

The practice of addressing a statue "as if alive" is no proof of belief in resurrection; rather, that is the common presupposition of any cultic activity in the Mediterranean world that uses images.

Considerably later, the Christian writers Origen and Jerome, commenting on Ezk 8:14, and Cyril of Alexandria and Procopious of Gaza, commenting on Isa 18:1, clearly report joyous festivities on the third day to celebrate Adonis (identified with Tammuz) having been "raised from the dead". Whether this represents an interpretatio Christiana or whether late third- and fourth-century forms of the Adonis cult themselves developed a dying and rising mythology (possibility in imitation of the Christian myth) cannot be determined. This pattern will recur for many of the figures considered: an indigenous mythology and ritual focusing on the deities death and rituals of lamentation, followed by a later Christian report adding the element nowhere found in the earlier native sources, that the god was resurrected.

[Osiris] did not return to his former mode of existence but rather journeyed to the underworld, where he became the powerful lord of the dead. In

no sense can Osiris be said to have "risen" in the sense required by the dying and rising pattern.

*The myth [of Inanna] emphasizes the inalterable power of the realm of the dead, not triumph over it. No one ascends from the land of the dead unless someone takes his or her place. The pattern of alternation—half a year below, half a year above—is familiar from other myths of the underworld in which there is no question of the presence of a dying and rising deity (e.g. Persephone, as in Ovid, *Fasti* 4:613-4, or the youthful Adonis as described above), and is related, as well, to wider folkloristic themes of death delayed if a substitute can be found.*

*As the above examples make plain the category of dying and rising deities is exceedingly dubious. It has been based largely on Christian interest and tenuous evidence. As such, the category is of more interest to the history of scholarship than the history of religions. "Dying and Rising Gods", *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., 2005), 4:2535-39.*

*A word must be said here about the connection often made between the mysteries and the idea of "dying and rising divinities," who are linked to the vegetation cycle...In addition to an uninhibited use of terminology (e.g. resurrection is usually understood in the biblical and Christian sense), the chief defect of this theory is its utter neglect of source criticism...As we know today, there is no evidence at all that any of these gods was thought of as "rising" in any proper sense of the term...The often only fragmentary mythology centering on these divinities told of the disappearance or stay of the god in the lower world, where he lived on (as lord of the lower world or, in the case of Osiris, as judge of the dead)... "Mystery Religions," *ibid.*, 9:6328.*

Carrier's snow machine

Jonathan McLatchie recently debated Richard Carrier:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCcq8G-WzJM>

This, in turn, generated an impromptu debate between yours truly and Richard Carrier on Facebook.

CARRIER

I don't even consider the evangelical to be the mainstream. It's a position of extreme bias. Mainstream is centrist: undogmatic believers, and nonbelievers, with full credentials. You can't be a literalist or an inerrantist, and be mainstream. You can't be a dogmatist, either. But even by that definition of mainstream, it remains the case that the widest mainstream view is that Paul believed Jesus was an earth person (and met his biological brothers, for example), in the same way he probably believed Moses was (although the mainstream view now is that there was no Moses, or that we can't assert with any confidence that there was; and that used not to be the case; the consensus changed in the decades after being challenged in the 1970s; I'm arguing that needs to happen again; and there are at least ten qualified experts who agree this challenge to the old consensus on Jesus at least needs to be taken seriously and included among the many other contradictory but viable options entertained by the mainstream).

HAYS

Amusing to see Carrier's self-incriminating attack on "dogmatists," given the fact that Carrier is a secular

dogmatist.

CARRIER

The number of experts on my side only argues against the claim that no experts agree with me. Although I'm not aware of any astronomers (as in actual Ph.D.s in astronomy) who believe in a flat earth. So that analogy seems implausible. My situation is more analogous to the 1970s when the historicity of Moses was challenged. It will take decades to see if it goes the same way.

HAYS

Jonathan McLatchie's analogy was not to flat-earthers but young-earth creationists.

CARRIER

Oh, right! Wait...Who are the Ph.D.s in relevant sciences who are young earthers?

HAYS

E.g. Kurt Wise, Todd Wood, John Byl, Andrew Snelling, Jonathan Sarfati, John C. Sanford, Jason Lisle, &c.

CHAN

Nathaniel Jeanson, David Menton, Danny Faulkner

BUKOWSKI

Leonard Brand, John Baumgardner, and Walt Brown as well would be prominent names.

CAM

After Carrier gives some examples of Acts unreliability, including an example of unexpected content in Acts given what we read from Paul himself in Galatians, the following ensues...

HAYS

i) The only irony is that Cam doesn't know what a contradiction is.

ii) In his opening gambit, Carrier says this is the competing theory of the origins of Christianity that he's advancing:

"Decades" before the Gospels get written you have the letters of Paul, the "authentic letters" of Paul (50s AD).

Notice his assumption that the Gospels were written "decades" later than the 50s.

"Paul repeatedly says the teachings of Jesus came by revelation after his death."

But Paul doesn't say that's the case in general. Rather, Paul says that he (Paul) was a recipient of divine revelation.

"Just as Paul believed Satan was a historical person who fought a war in heaven and was cast down, yet still not becoming a person on earth."

Yet Carrier tells us that he's confining himself to the seven "authentic" letters of Paul. Where does Paul present that cosmic narrative in the seven "authentic" letters (i.e. Romans, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 1-2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon)?

"So also Paul may have believed the sacrificial drama played out by Jesus which reversed the fall of Satan and undid the effects of the fall of Satan was similarly not on earth. This parallel to Satan, a sort of anti-Satan."

That's more Johannine than Pauline. The axial structure of Paul's soteriology is Adam/Christ rather than Satan/Christ.

"We know Paul and the early Jews and Christians of his day believed things like castles and gardens existed in the sky and the heavens and that battles and burials took place there."

i) Is *that* what they believed? Or are those picturesque metaphors?

ii) Notice how Carrier jumps from the seven "authentic" letters of Paul to imputing views to Paul that can't be documented from the seven "authentic" letters.

iii) What's the evidence that Paul and the early Jews and Christians of his day believed that "burials" took place in the sky?

Carrier mentions the Osiris cult. What are the dates of the sources Carrier is alluding to?

CARRIER

Read the book. Nothing you say here accurately represents or considers what I argue in it.

HAYS

Richard, I'm responding to *your own* statements in the debate. Do you think you misrepresented your position in the debate?

CARRIER

Five minutes of conversation, and you assume you know all the bases and arguments for my statements, and how I use them to argue the conclusion? Just stop being lazy and read the book.

HAYS

i) It's striking how many dubious claims you make so early in the debate. So, yes, I'm entitled to correct you as the debate proceeds. And, once again, you have this bizarre notion that it's unfair to judge your position by your debate. If you don't think a debate can properly represent your position, don't agree to have a public debate. You went on the show of your own volition.

ii) Carrier appeals to the Ascension of Isaiah. Larry Hurtado says

"the dates proposed by scholars range from the latter decades of the first century down into the third century, with

most nowadays favoring a date in the second century" [while Hurtado inclines to the middle to late second century date]." **Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity, 595.**

This raises questions about Carrier's comparative methodology. Why does he limit himself to the seven allegedly earliest Pauline letters, from the mid-1C, but then reaches for a work that's at least a century later, give or take? Does Carrier have any consistent criteria?

CARRIER

Hurtado is not being honest with you about the dating of the Ascension of Isaiah. He is conflating different redactions. You should consult the actual literature on it. Like I did. I cite all the leading scholarship on it and my dating is based on that scholarship without deviation.

Also, if you actually would read my book instead of gullibly believing whatever dishonest people tell you is in it, you would know I don't use the earliest reconstructed redaction of the Ascension of Isaiah as anything but a late first-early second century text. Just as all experts do. And accordingly I don't use it as evidence of Pauline era Christianity. But of Christianity coterminous with the same communities writing the canonical Gospels. I make no bolder claim for it than that. I also give it extremely little weight as evidence. It gets a factor of barely 1.1; good evidence warrants a 5 or 10 or more; I assign the reference to brothers in Paul, a

factor of 2...in favor of historicity! So please actually read my book before making claims about it.

HAYS

Richard, you're letting your overactive imagination get the best of you. I didn't cite or quote anyone commenting on your book. Rather, quoting Hurtado on the dating of the Ascension of Isaiah.

CARRIER

And I'm telling you, you either misunderstood him, or he is misleading you. Because the statement you quote from him is literally false as given. Charitably I can only assume he is conflating the different redactions (or you are). You would know this, if you'd consult the actual literature on the text. Which I cite and summarize in my book. Educate yourself.

HAYS

i) Richard, you voluntarily entered into a public debate on Unbelievable. You now act as though it's improper to assess your own statements in that debate. If you have such a low opinion of your performance in that debate, who am I to disagree with the failing grade you gave yourself.

ii) I don't grant that you're more expert than Hurtado. You then make the contradictory claim that I misunderstood him and what he said is literally false. Which is it?

CARRIER

I'm not claiming to be an expert on it.

HAYS

i) Hurtado discusses different recensions. That doesn't save your bacon.

ii) Carrier alleges that according to Heb 9, *everything* on earth has copies in heaven. But Heb 9 makes no such sweeping claim.

There's a pattern to Carrier's style of argument. A cumulative effect of falsehoods, exaggerations, and half-truths.

CARRIER

I also cite the Ascension of Isaiah confirming the point. And give several examples from Jewish legend and lore. I don't just rely on Hebrews. Hebrews is referencing that tradition when it says "the copies of the things in the heavens" are on earth. And Jewish teachings on the heavens confirm that: at every level, there is a copy of Jerusalem, for example, and the temple, and gardens, castles, even tombs and graves (even Adam is buried in outer space). This is well established, it is not simply based on Hebrews. So please actually consult my book before believing whatever someone tells you is or isn't in it.

HAYS

i) Richard, the contextual scope of Heb 8-9 is the tabernacle and sacrificial cultus. *That's it.*

ii) One of your deceptive or slipshod tactics is to cite a proof-text that doesn't in fact prove what you impute to it,

then attempt to salvage your original appeal by padding that with something extraneous to the prooftext . But that's a backdoor admission that your prooftext fails to make your point.

iii) In addition, it's anachronistic to use the Ascension of Isaiah to supplement Hebrews.

iv) Finally, you have this paranoid notion that I rely on what critics say about your precious book. But everything I've said in this comment thread is in direct response to your *self-representations* in the debate.

CARRIER

I just told you I prove the point with numerous sources and examples. Hebrews merely references the tradition. The tradition is widely established by other evidence. Please pay attention to what I am saying. It is tedious if you just ignore my words and keep ranting as if I didn't just explain this to you.

HAYS

i) Since the scope of Heb 8-9 is explicitly restrictive, there's no textual warrant for your assertion that it's referencing a tradition with an unrestricted scope.

ii) In addition, you can't legitimately claim that Hebrews is referencing a tradition that's only attested in a later source. You need to cite evidence prior to or contemporaneous with Hebrews to even attempt that comparison.

CARRIER

Yes, there is. The tradition is widely attested. There is no reason to believe the author of Hebrews held to a different tradition than other Jews who wrote about copies of things between heaven and earth. Nor does it matter. Hebrews attests all I need for the actual point I use it for in OHJ (which requires no "wide" reading; the wide reading is based on extensive other evidence). Please just read the book. You clearly don't know what you are talking about.

HAYS

1. Once again, Richard, I'm responding to the evidence that you adduce in your debate and your replies to me. So that must mean you don't know what you're talking about.

2. Like what, Philo? If so, Hebrews moves in a different conceptual orbit than Philo.

3. Carrier says the Gospel writers are "cribbing" from the letters of Paul to construct a family for Jesus. But Luke is the only Gospel that shows any telltale affinity with Paul, which is unsurprising if they were confidants.

4. In the debate, Carrier alleges that Acts misdates Theudas.

i) Why does Carrier think Josephus is more reliable than Luke on the dating of Theudas?

ii) He says Luke uses Josephus as a source. But under that (dubious) postulate, why would Luke be at odds with Josephus if Josephus was his source of information?

iii) Carrier commits an elementary blunder by failing to distinguish between the narrator and a character in the

narrative. It's Gamaliel who makes the statement about Theudas. Luke simply quotes Gamaliel's speech. Assuming for argument's sake that Gamaliel is mistaken, a historian doesn't make a mistake by quoting a historical figure who makes a mistake. If, say, a war historian quotes rosy projections by McNamara regarding the Vietnam war, it's not the historian who's in error. Rather, he's accurately reporting what McNamara said.

5. In his debate, Carrier vaguely compares the death and resurrection of Christ to the Osiris cult. Plutarch summarizes the Osiris cult in §§12-21 here:

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis_and_Osiris*/A.html

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis_and_Osiris*/B.html

Ask yourself if that narrative bears any genealogical resemblance to the Gospels.

6. One of Carrier's tactics is to crank up his snow machine and bury the listener/reader in a blizzard of factoids.

i) One ploy is how he fabricates homogenous "traditions" by promiscuously conglomerating disparate sources. Take his appeal to Heb 8-9. In his book he devotes several pages to Philo. But the author of Hebrews isn't operating with a Platonic paradigm. His orientation is eschatological rather than Platonic. It's a dynamic contrast between what's past and provisional compared to the consummation.

ii) In addition, it would be antithetical for the author of Hebrews to suppose that everything on earth has an exemplary heavenly counterpart. That would put pagan

shrines on a par with the tabernacle, since they'd all have heavenly archetypes. But the tabernacle stands in contrast to pagan shrines.

The author of Hebrews is simply glossing the fact that the tabernacle had a divine design (Exod 25:40). It would be counterproductive for him to say the same thing about heathen temples.

iii) Carrier's methodology is to cobble together a pastiche from unrelated sources that reflect divergent conceptual schemes, then apply that cookie-cutter to Paul and Hebrews.

6. Carrier alleges a contradiction between Gal 1:22 and Acts 8. By contrast, here's what one commentator has to say:

How could Paul be unknown by sight to the very churches he had persecuted? Neither Gal 1:22 nor Acts 8:3, however, indicates any persecuting activity in the Judea regions outside Jerusalem. Acts suggests that the earliest days of the Christian movement remained limited to Jerusalem. By the time Paul writes to the Galatians, the movement had significantly grown and spread well beyond Jerusalem to Judea and afar. Many Jerusalem Christians at this later point in time would not know Paul by

sight. Paul also refers to the Jerusalem "church" in the singular as the object of his persecuting activity (Gal 1:13), as opposed to the Judean "churches" or "assemblies" in the plural (1:22). He apparently focused his activity on the members of this one body of believers in Jerusalem, this one "church". Note Luke's report of Paul's activity in the Jerusalem area in Acts 7:58, his association with the Jerusalem high priest in Acts 9:1-2, and his plan to bring the Christian believers from Damascus back to Jerusalem, his base of operation (Acts 9:2; Acts 22:5). In Gal 1:23 the adverb "only" offers a limitation or exception to the ignorance of Paul mentioned in 1:22: The Judeans had received a report about him. Since the Judean churches are receiving a report about the one who had persecuted "us" in 1:23, from whom did that report originate if not the Jerusalem church, the very group that had formerly suffered his persecution? The Jerusalem church likely informed the Judea

churches about Paul's identity and activity. Paul focused his persecuting activity on major urban centers (Jerusalem, with plans for Damascus), A. Das, Galatians (Concordia 2014), 144.

De Boer (Galatians, 101) advocating a different approach here: "Paul was unknown to the churches of Judea in the years following his first visit to Jerusalem, after which he went to the districts of Syria and Cilicia. Paul was from then on and for more than a decade personally unknown to the Jewish Christian churches in Judea, including the one in Jerusalem." The focus, for de Boer, is on the time between the first and second Jerusalem visits. Paul did not have contact with Jerusalem during that time. Ibid. 144n137.

Here's how another commentator explains Gal 1:22:

This statement is included to emphasize the limited time Paul spent in Palestine. Most of the believers in Judea did not know Paul personally. Judea as constituted as a Roman province when Galatians was written and included both Galilee and Samaria. Therefore, Paul refers here to a rather large area. What we have here is a generalization, for it is likely that some believers knew him personally from his days in Jerusalem. The point is that the majority of believers in Palestine and Jerusalem were unacquainted with him. T. Schreiner, Galatians (Zondervan 2010), 112.

As Witherington insightfully points out, this statement stands in tension with not only Acts 8:3 but also Gal 1:13, for in the latter text Paul says he persecuted the Jewish church, which sits awkwardly with the idea that they did not know him (Galatians, 124). Therefore, since we find the same tension within Galatians that

we also find between Acts and Gal 1:22, it is likely that the alleged contradiction between what we read here and in Acts can be reconciled. Ibid. 112n23.

7. Carrier alleges that Paul (in Galatians) had to persuade Peter to accept his Torah-free Gospel and it took years to convince him, whereas in Acts, Peter already agreed with Paul before they ever met (based on Peter's vision).

But Galatians says no such thing. The flashpoint of disagreement between Peter and Paul in Galatians isn't theological. Rather, Peter suffered a loss of nerve.

8. Carrier says Acts "erases" Paul's mission to Arabia (Gal 1:17). He says Acts "parks" Paul in Damascus, then has him escaping from Damascus a few verses later. It's weird to insert a 3-year sojourn in Arabia where they're trying to kill him immediately as soon as he converts, he's able to get away, do a whole mission in Arabia for three years, come back to Damascus, suddenly he's trapped in Damascus and has to escape from Damascus.

i) Carrier fails to make allowance for narrative compression in Acts.

ii) Paul's missionary activity makes enemies. He does what he can get away with for as long as he can in one place (Damascus), then when that gets too hot, he shifts to a different mission field, does what he can there, which antagonizes the local officials, then he swings back to Damascus after a cooling off period, but some people are still out to get in. It's a life on the run. That's quite realistic.

iii) There's a parallel between Acts 9:23-24 and 2 Cor 11:32-33, although Luke may be telescoping two events into one. Cf. P. Barnett, **PAUL: MISSIONARY OF JESUS** (Eerdmans 2008), 80n9.

CARRIER

Okay, now you're just going off the rails into fundamentalism. I follow actual historical methods. Not whatever you are doing.

HAYS

That's not a refutation.

CARRIER

It kind of is. There are those of us who follow legitimate methods and those who don't. We need not heed the opinions of those who don't. Precisely because their methods are invalid.

HAYS

Well, Richard, I didn't present an opinion—I presented an argument. I responded to you on your own grounds. But it's fine with me that you bottom out when your challenge is met.

As for "fundamentalism," I prefer my "fundamentalism" to your fanaticism. To paraphrase Santayana, evangelistic atheists like Carrier redouble their efforts to promote their aimless worldview.

JONATHAN

Richard, how is it an illegitimate method to point out that you have failed to convincingly demonstrate a contradiction?

Carrier's allegorical method

i) In this post I'm going to quote and comment on chap. 10 of Richard Carrier's **ON THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS** (Sheffield 2014). He keeps daring critics to read his book. And he did that with me on Facebook. Fine. I'm happy to meet the challenge.

That said, responding to his book is tedious because it's a jungle packed with dead wood. You have to carpet-bomb his book with Agent Orange to clear out all the dead wood, and once the defoliant has done its job, you discover that it was nothing but dead wood.

Although I've read other chapters, I'll comment on chap. 10 because that's the central chapter of his magnum opus for Christ mythicism. The excerpts constitute representative samples of Carrier's methodology. I may do another post as a mopping up operation, but this post will focus on chap. 10.

If the four Gospels are true accounts, then at one stroke that proves Christianity and disproves atheism. That moots everything else in Carrier's overstuffed book.

ii) One preliminary observation. Carrier routinely assumes that if various features or incidents in the life of Christ have OT parallels, that goes to show that the Gospel rewrote an OT story to make it a story about Jesus. Carrier acts as though OT parallels ipso facto disprove the historicity of the Gospels.

This is amusing because Christians have always made a point of documenting OT parallels. It's not as if Carrier is

drawing our attention to something neglected or damaging.

iii) The fact that Jesus fulfills OT prophecy confirms rather than undercuts the historicity of the Gospels. In addition, typology is based on the principle that there's a God who directs the course of history, a God who prearranges some events to foreshadow later events. The similarities are by design. As an atheist, Carrier rejects that, but typology is entirely consistent with historicity. There's nothing about typology which implies that the antitype is fictitious. That's not an implication of typology, but atheism. Given atheism, then we wouldn't expect history to have these mirror images.

vi) I'd add that even apart from typology, if OT prophets performed miracles, then it's to be expected that Jesus will perform similar or greater miracles. If Jesus is the Son of God, he's not going to do less than OT prophets. So it's consistent with the historicity of the Gospels that Jesus perform the same kinds of miracles as OT prophets.

And now to Carrier:

A good example of how Mark is creating fiction about Jesus can be seen in the appearance of a previously unmentioned insurrectionist named Barabbas in his crucifixion narrative...This is surely myth, not fact. No Roman magistrate (least of all the infamously ruthless Pilate), would let a murderous rebel go free, and no

such Roman ceremony is attested as ever having existed; nor is it at all plausible [402-03]

i) But as one scholar explains:

*It is frequently assumed that Barabbas was a Jewish freedom fighter (whether Zealot, Sicarius, or another faction), but we are not told such, and it is debatable whether such groups were organized as early as the year 30. Even if they were, we do not know that Barabbas was associated with them. J. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans 2015), 677.*

ii) Pilate's ruthlessness is neither here nor there. The Passover was a time when Jerusalem swelled with pilgrims. That made it a powder keg for unrest. For his own job security, Pilate had every incentive to placate the lynch mob.

iii) Pilate was trapped by his own question when he got a different answer than he anticipated. At that point it was too late to backpedal on the open-ended offer without fear of reprisal.

iv) Historians credit many events based on a single source. Corroboration isn't essential or even possible in many cases. And the Barabbas incident is multiply-attested in all four Gospels. Sure, Carrier thinks Mark is fictional while the other three rely on Mark, but that's a circular appeal since he's using his theory to interpret the evidence, then appealing to the theory-laden evidence, filtered through his theory, to confirm his theory.

v) Scholars have documented analogous amnesty customs. Cf. C. Evans, **MARK 8:27-16:20** (Nelson 2001), 479-80; C. Keener, **THE GOSPEL OF JOHN** (Hendrickson 2003), 2:1115-17. We don't require an exact parallel since local variations are to be expected. This is on a much smaller scale than other examples, and as one scholar notes, "the annual release of a single prisoner is a very modest concession compared with many political amnesties," R. T. France, **THE GOSPEL OF MARK** (Eerdmans 2002), 629.

vi) Finally, Carrier has a faulty notion of how corroboration works. The function of corroboration is not to attest every single claim a source makes, but to provide sufficient attestation to establish the reliability of the source. If it's trustworthy where corroborative evidence is available, then it's presumptively trustworthy where corroborative evidence is absent. If there's good evidence for the source, then the source becomes evidentiary in its own right.

vii) Apropos (vi), appeal to corroborative evidence is somewhat circular. For instance, you can't use Josephus as the benchmark to confirm or disconfirm Luke, for how do you corroborate Josephus? The point, rather, is that two independent streams which bear witness to the same event are more likely to be true precisely because they agree,

which is an odd coincidence if there was no underlying event to produce the agreement. They share the same outlook because they're looking at the same event. That's the simplest explanation.

Barabbas, in reality a very unusual name, means 'son of the Father' in Aramaic, and we know Jesus was deliberately styled the 'son of the Father' himself [403]

In terms of connotations or folk etymology, it means "son of a teacher" as well as "son of a father". Cf. J. Edwards, **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE** (Eerdmans 2015), 676; R. T. France, **THE GOSPEL OF MARK** (Eerdmans 2002), 630n20. So Carrier's claim is slanted by appeal to selective evidence.

Adding weight to this conclusion is manuscript evidence that the story either acquired or originally had the name 'Jesus Barabbas' [403]

But it makes a significant difference whether that's the original reading or a scribal interpolation. The best witnesses don't include the forename ("Jesus").

This is one of Carrier's tactics. He builds a case base on the cumulative falsehoods and half-truths. To the uninformed reader, the result is impressive. But if you take it apart, it falls apart.

This literary fiction of the dense lackeys is adapted either from Homer's similarly unrealistic depiction of the fickleness and incomprehension of Odysseus's crew or from Exodus's equally unrealistic depiction of the fickleness and incomprehension of the Jews-most likely both (as I suggested before) [411]

That illustrates Carrier's extremely loose appeal to "parallels". Which is it—Exodus or the Odyssey?

And the story of a woman being healed of a bizarre malady and Jesus just 'mystically' knowing that had happened is not remotely realistic. Nor is a resurrection of a dead girl by a single touch and command [411]

It's unrealistic given atheism, but what makes *that* the standard of comparison?

Moses calls a magical tree to appear that makes a bitter pool drinkable, at which he says if they obey God's commandments God will inflict no diseases on them, 'for I am Jehovah who heals you'(Exod. 15.22- 27) [415-16]

Here's what the text actually says:

And he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord pointed out to him a stick, and he flung it into the water, and the water turned sweet (Exod 15:25, Victor Hamilton trans.)

- i)** Moses doesn't call for a magic tree to appear. Moses doesn't request a magic tree. He simply calls on God for assistance.
- ii)** Moreover, there's no indication that it appears out of thin air. Rather, Yahweh simply directs Moses to pick up a particular twig lying on the ground.
- iii)** More to the point, Carrier's argument depends on the presence of a "tree" in both cases, but as commentators explain, the word has a wide semantic range: "tree, brambles, cut pieces of wood" (Garrett, 413), "stick/branch/twig" (Hamilton, 239-40,42). So Carrier's comparison turns on a very specific detail which isn't sustainable across the two texts.

*The woman also flowed with blood,
while the rock flowed with water [417]*

Another example of what passes for a parallel in Carrier's slack methodology.

In Mark's second sequence he draws on the magical tree episode. Which explains the otherwise very odd detail that the blind man of Bethsaida (8.22-26) sees trees at first instead of men (Mk 8.24), just as Moses did; and to cure the deaf mute, Jesus looks to heaven and cries out, just as Moses must cry out to God in heaven, who shows him the magical tree. (I must wonder if a lost tradition held that the tree was revealed from the heavens and thus Moses was looking up at it.) In both cases, while Moses must put the tree into the water to drink it, Jesus must put spit onto the afflicted to open their eyes, ears or tongue. The magical tree episode also concludes with the declaration, 'if you will diligently hear the voice of the Lord your God, and

will do what is pleasing in his sight, and will give ear to his commandments' then God will heal you (Exod. 15.26), in each case supplying inspiration for Jesus to heal eyes, ears and tongue (to restore the mute's 'voice'). Thus, Mark shows he has consciously created these double narrative sequences [418]

So Moses purifying the unpotable water by tossing a twig into the water is supposed to parallel Jesus anointing the blind man's eyes with spittle to heal him? Carrier constantly operates with this type of free association.

Road Narrative

Jesus comes from Galilee . . . (Mk 1.9)

. . . then enters the wilderness to battle Satan (Mk 1.12-13)

Jesus goes to Galilee . . . (Mk 16.7)

. . . after having left the wilderness [the land of the dead] having defeated Satan [421]

Carrier fabricates a parallel by glossing the wilderness as the "land of the dead". He imports that into his prooftext.

The heavens are torn (schizo, Mk 1.10)

*The temple curtain is torn (schizo, Mk 15.38),
symbol of the barrier between earth and heaven
[422]*

Was it the outer curtain between the courtyard and the sanctuary—or the inner curtain between sanctuary and the inner sanctum? Hard to say. And that affects the symbolism.

*Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus (to pneuma . .
.katabainon eis auton, 'the pneuma . . . descended
upon him', Mk 1.10)*

*Holy Spirit departs from Jesus (exepneusen, 'he
exhaled the pneuma', Mk 15.37) [422]*

Notice the slippery equivocation. Pneuma has more than one meaning. In Mk 14:37, to stop breathing is a traditional sign of death. You take your last breath. Indeed, "expire" becomes an idiom for the moment of death. That's not the "Holy Spirit" departing from Jesus. Rather, that's the loss of a vital sign. In the ancient world, that was the most common, identifiable evidence of death.

In fact the centurion says God's claim is now 'true' because of the witness of the Holy Spirit ('when the centurion saw how he exhaled the spirit...' [423]

Piggybacks on the same equivocation (see above).

Jesus is symbolically eaten in place of the Passover lamb (at the Last Supper, he declares the food and drink there to be his body and blood; ordinarily, they would at that time be eating the Passover lamb: Mk 14.16-17, 14.22-24)...the parallel of the Last Supper as a symbolic Passover consumption of the Lord [424]

Carrier states that truism as if he discovered a subtle telltale clue that the account is fictitious. You have to wonder how his mind works.

However, since Mark narrates that Jesus is hung on the cross exactly three hours after sunrise (Mk 15.25), and exactly three hours later darkness covers the

earth (Mk 15.33), and exactly three hours after that Jesus dies (Mk 15.34) [424n74]

Mark doesn't narrate that these were "exact" three hour intervals. Rather, before the advent of modern clocks, it was common to subdivide the day into parts of a day. A spread rather than an exact figure. It wasn't possible to be precise.

Thus Mark has Jesus rise from the dead on Sunday, the firstfruits of the resurrected, symbolically on the very Day of Firstfruits itself [425]

How providential!

Indeed, since executions would not be performed on holy days, Mark's narrative has no historical credibility. Likewise trials for capital crimes had to be conducted over the course of two days and could not be conducted on or even interrupted by a Sabbath or holy day, nor ever conducted at night [425]

i) As if corrupt authorities never break the rules in kangaroo court proceedings.

ii) More to the point, this isn't a trial, but a hastily convened grand jury to gather incriminating which they can refer to the Procurator.

On the original Passover, the angel of death 'passes over' those who are protected by the lamb's blood and kills the 'firstborn sons' of those who are not; in Mark, the firstborn son (Jesus) is rescued from death (as evidenced by his empty tomb), and his blood protects those who share in it [426]

Notice Carrier's utterly artificial parallels.

i) At the original Passover, paschal blood protects people inside their huts from the angel of death outside their huts. But the shed blood of Jesus doesn't protect Jesus inside the tomb from an angel of death outside the tomb. There is no angel of death in the Gospel accounts.

ii) And even if there were, an angel couldn't kill him since he's already dead! The tomb contains a corpse, while his soul is with the Father.

iii) His blood wasn't painted on the outside of the tomb.

iv) No angel could kill the Son of God.

For this purpose it does not matter whether the seder traditions later developed were post-temple. The coincidences of the features to follow demonstrates that those elements at least preceded the Jewish war (as otherwise those coincidences are hard to explain) [427n79]

That's viciously circular. Appealing to anachronistic customs to establish coincidences, then appealing to resultant coincidences to establish the relevance of anachronistic customs.

Of course, that scene is hardly believable: the temple grounds were enormous, occupying many acres (the temple as a whole occupied nearly forty acres, and a large portion of that, at least ten acres, was devoted to public space), extensively populated (there would have been hundreds of merchants and moneychangers there), and heavily guarded by an armed force deployed to prevent just this sort of thing.⁹⁴ They

would have killed Jesus on the spot. So the story is obviously fiction even on that point alone [431-32]

i) There's no reason to think Jesus cleared the entire complex. It's a symbolic action. An enacted synecdoche.

ii) How could armed guards kill the Son of God? Armed guards are no match for omnipotence.

We saw Mark do this before, when he took the tale of the raising of Jairus's twelve-year-old daughter and wrapped that around a symbolically related story of the woman who had bled for twelve years [434]

What we have is an urgent request made to Jesus, and while he's on his way, that's interrupted by a sick woman. That's quite realistic. Jesus was constantly accosted wherever he went by desperate people. A crowd shadows him from dawn to dusk.

As Robert Funk says,

[These] scenes in Mark, repeated almost word-for-word in Matthew, make sense only in retrospect, in the context of a

movement now already some years old. From that distance, it was plausible for some storyteller to relate how the [four men] decided on the spur of the moment to leave their jobs and become itinerant followers of Jesus. [These] are thus not actual scenes but the product of an imagination informed by the subsequent course of events . . . [and perhaps] stylized from constant repetition [435-36]

Funk assumes that Jesus and the disciples were perfect strangers before he called them, but Mark's Gospel begins in medias res with the public ministry of Christ. That doesn't mean he had no history with the men in question. But that backstory isn't part of Mark's account.

Joseph of Arimathea is not just a fictive recreation of Priam, who in Homer seeks the body of Hector (as MacDonald shows), but also a type of Joseph the Patriarch, who in Gen. 50.4-6 asks Pharaoh for permission to bury Jacob (i.e. Israel), and lays him in the cave-tomb Jacob had hewn, just like the tomb in which the parallel Joseph lays Jesus.

Thus, Mark derived the burier's name as 'Joseph' [438-39]

Yet another example of Carrier's slipshod methodology, where he contrives parallels by seizing on random, peripheral details from disparate sources. This says nothing about the Gospels and everything about Carrier's fervid imagination, which he projects onto the text.

'Joseph from Arimathea, a prominent council-member, who was himself also awaiting [or accepting or receiving] the kingdom of God', even though it is never explained why he gets involved in the story or what became of him (later Gospels try to make sense of this by adding minor details: see Mt. 27.57; Lk. 23.50-51; Jn 19.38). He exists only as a literary device, instantly produced on the stage when he is needed, without explanation or introduction, and then instantly removed when his role is done, just as inexplicably, never to be heard of again (not even in Acts: see Chapter 9, §3) [439n108]

i) He appears and disappears at this juncture in part because this is when he had occasion to intervene. There's only so much he can do.

ii) Moreover, since Mark isn't writing a history of the church, he doesn't narrate Joseph's subsequent career.

iii) Stop and think about all the people in the course of a lifetime you only meet once or just a few times? A bank clerk. A 7/11 cashier. A bagger at the supermarket. A gas station attendant. A receptionist, nurse, or physician at the ER. A substitute teacher. A plumber. A policeman. And so on and so forth. There's nothing unusual or unrealistic about crossing paths with someone once in a lifetime. That happens hundreds or thousands of times.

Another double parallel is how Mark patterns the disciples after the Jews in the Exodus, who are likewise implausibly fickle and stupid, never understanding anything even after repeatedly witnessing Moses perform incredible miracles just like the disciples with Jesus), but also after the crew of Odysseus, who are likewise fickle and stupid. Which explains the strangely excessive role of sea travel and sailors (the leading disciples are all fisher men and a large chunk of the story occurs at

sea), which gives Mark end less opportunities to build deliberate allusions to themes developed in the Odyssey...This in turn casts doubt on the historicity of Jesus' status as a carpenter. Odysseus was also famously a carpenter, having built his own marital bed (a fact that plays a key role in the plot) and the doorways of his palace, and even building his own boat to escape Calypso's island [440]

The comparison with Odysseus is specious enough, but Carrier makes his reconstruction even more Rococo by splicing that together with a Mosaic comparison.

This connects with the entire 'wedding' theme in Christianity (see Element 48), in which Jesus is the groom and the church his bride (the New Israel), the heiress to the preceding world order (the Old Israel). Which parallels a similar wedding theme in the Odyssey, where the suitors are hoping to become Penelope's new husband; but her true husband,

Odysseus, returns like a thief in the night to strike them down, all the while moving among them and conversing with them, yet they do not know who he is. He appears as a lowly vagabond and storyteller just like Jesus does in Mark), but all the while he is the very king himself. With Jesus the analog of Odysseus, the Jewish elite become the analog of the suitors, confirming a consistent message of Mark's Gospel: like the suitors, the Jewish elite are greedy, conniving, immoral and undeserving-and will soon be destroyed by God and replaced by the true king, whom they do not know, even though he is standing before them [442]

See the pattern to Carrier's methodology? He strings together papier-mâché parallels of his own contrivance. It's a window into Carrier's unbridled, undisciplined imagination. He lifts incidental words or plotlines out of context, from unrelated sources, then weaves them together into a "parallel". In his next example he devotes pages to concocting parallels between Simon of Cyrene, Alexander the Great, and Musonius Rufus. Carrier is so spellbound by his self-image of brilliance that he's flatters himself by

drawing intricate connections that only exist in his own head. His mind is like a nautilus shell that curves in on itself, increasingly lost as it curls in ever deeper to pursue the twists and turns of mental fantasies.

It may seem strange to include such a complex hidden message with so sparse a remark, but it's obvious the Gospel authors often did this. As we saw before, there is surely some esoteric meaning to the 'twelve years of bleeding' and the 'twelve years of age' in the Jairus narrative [450]

Notice, once again, how Carrier lacks the critical detachment to distinguish his circular reasoning from what the Gospel authors obviously did. He takes it as self-evident that Mark intended some esoteric affinity between a woman with chronic bleeding and an adolescent girl, based on one numerical variable. Because, you know, in real life, twelve of something never happens more than once.

Even the names of Jesus' family members are a likely fabrication...If someone were to rattle off five random names to just sound like a typical family (like we used to do with the phrase 'every Tom, Dick and Harry'), and one that was especially

evocative of Jewish biblical heritage, it would look exactly like this list: the most common of all names (Simon, our 'John Doe') and the most common names of the time that were evocative of the OT (Jacob, Joseph, Jesus and Judah). In other words, this looks exactly like a made-up list[453-54]

It's funny to see how Carrier is oblivious to his chronic circular reasoning. Why were they such common names? Because 1C Palestinian Jews liked to name their boys after OT founders and heroes. So how would the popularity of their names make it unlikely that Mary and Joseph named their kids after famous OT Jews? What does it say about Carrier's conspiratorial mindset that he has such backwards logic? Is it unrealistic when parents name their kids after the most popular baby names for boys and girls? No. It feeds itself. Because the names are already popular, parents are more likely to use those names, which in turn, makes the names even more popular. To take a religious comparison, consider the impact of Islam or Catholicism on the traditional choice of baby names in those cultures.

Mark [Mk 6:1-6] has Jesus effectively renounce his family and declare only those who follow him his brethren- thereby deliberately reversing the story of Moses' family (also duly named)

coming to see him, another example of a fictional family visiting a fictional hero in a narrative treated as historical, all just to make a symbolic point [454-55]

How do opposites prove a parallel? If you already knew that the story of Moses lies in the background, and if you already knew that Mark's narrative strategy was to reverse that story, that would be one thing, but since Carrier can't very well begin with those assumptions as a given, how does he derive his conclusion? Once again, Carrier's conclusion is surreptitiously feeding into back into the very assumptions that drive his conclusion, like a causal loop. But as always, he's too captivated by his own cleverness to perceive the fallacy.

But the changes are the point. While Proculus receives his gospel on the road to Rome, Cleopas receives his gospel on the road from Jerusalem: so while the old story suggests 'all roads lead to Rome', the new story suggests all roads lead from Jerusalem. While Romulus appears in awesome glory, befitting the awesome glory of Rome's dominion and the very visible empire he promises, Jesus appears in disguise, hidden, just as

the kingdom he promises is hidden, and which, like Jesus, becomes visible (and thus knowable) only in the communion of believers. Luke has thus transvalued the Romans' founding myth: unlike the Romans, their resurrected hero promises a hidden spiritual kingdom originating from Jerusalem on high. And just as the glorious visage of Romulus is what confirmed to Proculus that what he said was true, so it is the powerful word of the gospel that confirms to Cleopas that what Jesus said was true. Luke thus rewrites the story to communicate how Christian values differ from mainstream Roman values.¹⁹⁷ This is a classic hallmark of mythmaking (as we saw in the example from Homer and Virgil in §2) [482]

i) Carrier has been using the "transvalued" escape clause for years. Problem is, if you're comparing two stories that are so unlike, how do you differentiate stories that are so unlike because they're independent of each other from stories that are unlike because one transvalues the other? Based on Carrier's rubbery procedure, why can't we claim

parallels between any two vaguely similar stories, then chalk up the massive differences to transvaluation?

ii) Apropos (i), if you already knew that one story was reworking another story, then you could sometimes appeal to transvaluation to account for differences, but how do you determine in the first place that these are interrelated stories, given the massive differences? If, for instance, you had information about one of the authors, apart from the story, then you might be aware of his sources and agenda. But if all you've got is two stories, you lack that independent frame of reference to make prior assumptions about the author's sources or his agenda.

iii) The example of Homer and Virgil is subversive to Carrier's thesis. Sure, there are cases where one author reworks sources. Virgil does that with Homer. Milton and Dante do that with classical mythology. But one problem with that example is that in the case of Homer and Virgil, we're dealing with sustained, explicit similarities. In addition, we know a fair amount about Virgil, Milton, and Dante apart from their epic poems. We know about their education. Of course they were steeped in the Classics. Likewise, as ambitious poets, there's a one-upmanship where they try to do Homer one better. Then there's the chauvinism, in which Virgil is manifestly laboring to produce a national mythos to pass the torch from Greece to Rome. But Carrier has none of those clues when he approaches the four Gospels. He thinks the Gospels are anonymous. So, by his own reckoning, there's no background information about the writers. And while the Aeneid is a conspicuous continuation of the Iliad, there's nothing analogous in the Gospels, with regard to Greco-Roman mythology. Rather, the Gospel story picks up from OT history. It resumes that story.

This obsessive focus on 'signs' (in other words, 'proof') is unique to John and characterizes a lot of what he has done to change up the story [490]

Why do the Synoptic Gospels even bother to record the miracles and exorcisms of Christ if they have no evidential value? But of course they do.

That Jesus' second visit to Cana occurs on the third day is discernible from the text: he spends 'two days' with the Samaritans (Jn 4.40, the number of days Jesus would later reside in the land of the dead; he even dies at the very hour that he meets the first Samaritan, at the 'sixth hour', 4.6 deliberately echoing 19.14, thus making his descent into Samaria and return a metaphor for his death and resurrection)... [493]

Which assumes, apparently, that the Johannine narrator didn't treat Samaria as a real place—but just an extended metaphor. Is that what Carrier is trying to say? What is there in Jn 4 to suggest that Christ's excursion into Samaria represents a descent into the land of the dead? Does Jn 4

employ stock netherworld imagery and personnel—a la Isa 14 or Inanna's Descent?

The irony of Carrier is that for all his arcane erudition, his hermeneutical system is interchangeable with the homespun typology and numerology of a backwoods preacher like Harold Camping. If only he had saved himself the student loan bills.

The first miracle at Cana, John's only 'new' miracle for Jesus (every other has precedents in the other Gospels), is a perfect example of this.²²¹ It reifies the Word of God in the book of Exodus, where Aaron 'did the signs in the sight of the people, and the people believed' (Exod. 4.30-31), the basic model for John's entire Gospel. And here in particular, God had told Moses he will give him three signs to perform, such that if they don't believe after the first two signs, they will believe after the last (Exod. 4.1 -9). That last miracle God explains to him thus:

If they will not believe even after these two signs, nor listen to you, then you shall take some of the water from the river, and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you took out of the river shall become blood upon the ground (Exod. 4.9).

So the last miracle Moses was to perform was to turn water into blood (in other words, water into wine). John has Jesus perform this as his first miracle, thus starting where Moses left off, and turning the last into the first [497]

i) To begin with, this assumes that wine stands for blood in Jn 2. But there's nothing in that pericope to justify his sacramental interpretation. Even the pericope of the Last Supper (Jn 13) is striking for the lack of sacramentalism. If it weren't for the Synoptic Gospels or 1 Corinthians, a reader wouldn't even recognize Jn 13 as inaugurating the Eucharist, but rather, a seder-style meal suited to the Jewish calendar.

ii) It's a wedding feast. People drink wine. That's a mundane reality. Clean, safe drinking water wasn't readily available in that part of the world—no fluoridation or indoor plumbing!—so wine was a staple beverage, even apart from festivities.

iii) Hebrew uses the same word for "blood" and the color "red". Cf. D. Stuart, **EXODUS** (B&H 2006), 199. Therefore, Carrier's parallel is vitiated by equivocation.

iv) Moreover, was 1C communion wine white wine or red wine?

Indeed the one scene is an antitype of the other: at Cana his mother gives a command to Jesus, but at the cross Jesus gives a command to his mother; at Cana his mother says to do whatever he says,

and at the cross Jesus says what to do; at Cana his mother asks Jesus to give them wine from water; and at the cross he gives them blood with water; at Cana Jesus asks what he has to do with her, and at the cross he says he has nothing to do with her (transferring her kinship); at Cana he says his hour is not yet come, and at the cross it has come [497-98]

Notice Carrier's selective evidence:

i) It's not just on the cross that Jesus tells people what to do. He does that throughout the Fourth Gospel.

ii) It's not just at Cana that his hour hadn't come. That's a recurring theme in the Fourth Gospel, in the ramp up to Holy Week.

iii) Jesus doesn't give anyone bloody water. He simply bleeds out on the cross. And the narrator uses a folk medical description of the postmortem effusion.

iv) Jesus doesn't cease having anything to do with his mother. He simply entrusts her earthly care to his most reliable disciple.

Note also that when Aaron performs the water-to-blood miracle for the Egyptians,

water in 'stone pots' is also transformed (Exod. 7.19); the pots in John's miracle are also made of stone (Jn 2.6) [498n222]

This is one of Carrier's many slippery parallels. But let's compare the actual incidents, back-to-back:

14 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. 15 Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. 16 And you shall say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness.” But so far, you have not obeyed. 17 Thus says the Lord, “By this you shall know that I am the Lord: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. 18 The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.””” 19 And the Lord said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and

their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’” (Exod 7:14-19).

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” 4 And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” 5 His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

6 Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. 8 And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. 9 When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk

freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” 11 This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him (Jn 2:1-11).

i) Do those look like parallel accounts to you? These are two different events.

ii) Carrier arbitrarily isolates a single verse apiece, disregarding the entire context of each. One concerns a Jewish wedding in a Palestinian village, the other concerns a confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh in the royal court. One has fine wine, the other rotting fish.

iii) And even in that respect, the "parallel" details are actually quite dissimilar:

‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’ (Exod 7:19).

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification (Jn 2:6)

That's a parallel? They only thing they have in common is red liquid in stone pots. But in Exodus, the red liquid isn't confined to stone pots. It's in the Nile, tributaries, canals,

and wooden containers. And in neither account is the red liquid wine.

He also got several of the ideas for it from a similar tale of miraculous provisions told of Elijah in I Kgs 17.8-24 [498]

Really? Should we provide back-to-back quotes for comparative purposes?

An extensive case has also been made that John's wedding at Cana is modeled after a wedding in Esther I: Roger Aus, 'The Wedding Feast at Cana (John 2.1-11), and Ahasuerus' Wedding Feast in Judaic Traditions on Esther I ', in Water into Wine and the Beheading of John the Baptist: Early Jewish-Christian Interpretation of Esther 1 in John 2:1-11 and Mark 6:17-29 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 1-37. The parallels are intriguing but inconclusive (it thus remains a possibility, perhaps true but unprovable). Aus also discusses the pagan parallels (of Dionysian pots

miraculously producing wine, a frequently performed miracle in ancient temples), pp. 34-37 [499n222]

So Carrier has now proposed no fewer than four "parallels", unrelated to each other, that are supposedly related to Jn 2: the plague of blood, Elijah's multiplication of food, the wedding of Esther, and the cult of Dionysus. That miscellany shows you how random the alleged connections are. When the putative sources are that diverse, when it could be one, maybe two, maybe three maybe four, and which one, which two, which three?—Carrier is filtering Jn 2 through an extraneous interpretive grid. That's something he superimposes willy-nilly on the text.

Why Cana? We can only speculate. No previous Gospel mentions anything ever happening there, whereas John deliberately frames a whole literary sequence with two incredible events there, so the selection of Cana is clearly an invention of John. There was a Cana (Josephus camped there: Life 86), but its selection by John was probably mytho-symbolic. The tale of the Syrophenician woman in Mk 7.25- 30 had become the tale of the Canaanite woman (Kananaiia,

nearly the same word that would be used of someone 'from Cana') in Mt. 15.22-28. This was a tale of the faith of a foreign woman earning God's grace (and in which a demon is cast out of the woman's daughter as she requested), which has certain parallels with the Cana-to-Cana sequence in John (which is also about faith earning a reward, and adapts the foreign-woman theme into the encounter with the Samaritan woman; note that John deletes all exorcism scenes from Jesus' story). John may have chosen to frame the Samaritan encounter with events at Cana to create a parallel between the beginning, end, and middle (the latter to remind us of the woman 'from Cana' in Matthew and its parallel message). Another possibility are certain parallels with Joseph's feats of dream interpretation in Genesis 40, where Joseph interprets the dreams of a 'master of wine' (archioinochos) and a 'master breadmaker' (archisitopoiios), just as John's story features a 'master of

the feast' (archilriklinos), which combines both roles-both stories involve an actual feast where something eventful happens 'on the third day'. In the OT tale Joseph explains to the breadmaster that 'the three baskets' of bread in his dream represent 'three days' (ta tria kana treis hemerai: Gen. 40.18) after which he would be crucified (40.19), while the other of the two men (the winemaster who dreams of creating wine from three vines) will be saved. The word used here for 'baskets' in the Septuagint is kana (the plural of kaneon), the exact same spelling of the town of Cana (in John: Kana) 499.n223

Just look at that incredibly convoluted backstory. And not just one, but two divergent explanations.

What about a simpler explanation: John says the wedding happened in Cana because...the wedding happened in Cana! But that would deprive Carrier of the opportunity to flex his ingenuity. Notice how Carrier repristinates all the worst excesses of the allegorical method. It's no wonder that he likes to quote Origen.

We're also told the Beloved Disciple was the first to see the burial cloths Jesus had cast off in his now-empty tomb—and Lazarus had been wrapped in burial cloths also cast off at his resurrection. And so it is he who is the first to believe Jesus had risen (Jn 20.8).²²⁸ In both accounts the peculiar detail of the deathly veil is mentioned (the soudarion, a napkin covering the face of the dead), and in both accounts this is distinguished from the burial wrappings, and in both accounts we find references to being bound or unbound by these (as a metaphor for being bound by or freed from death), and in both accounts we're given a vivid picture of these burial wrappings and their disposition [501]

For Jesus we're told 'the linen cloths [soudarion]' were in the tomb and 'the napkin was on his head, which was not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in one place' (Jn 20.6-7); for Lazarus we're told he walked out of the tomb 'bound hand and foot with grave-clothes [keiriai], and his face was bound about with a napkin [soudarion]', and Jesus told those present to 'loose him and let him go' (Jn 11.44)... [501-02n229]

Which is what we'd expect if the narrator witnessed both events. He'd see Lazarus stagger out of the tomb, struggling with the burial cloths. And he'd see the empty tomb of Jesus, with nothing left but scattered burial cloths. That would be unforgettable. Trace details would stick in the mind.

The final proof of this is the fact that John has invented this Lazarus tale to reverse and thus 'refute' Luke's parable of Lazarus.²³² The reification of imaginary people into real people is a major marker of mythmaking. And here we have just that. There is in fact only one other mention of any Lazarus in the Gospels: the fictional Lazarus in a parable told by Jesus in Lk. 16.19-31 (both facts are astonishing given that Lazarus was the third most common male Jewish name) [503]

How is it astonishing that two different accounts have a figure with the same name if that's the third most common male Jewish name? Isn't that the opposite of "astonishing"? If a name is that popular, then it's hardly surprising if different accounts have different participants who sometimes share the same name. Once again, what does it say about the mentality which Carrier has assiduously

cultivated that what's commonplace is so "astonishing" that it demands a special explanation?

Key to this parable is that this fictional Lazarus does not rise from the dead, and that even if he did, it would convince no one, and therefore it won't be done. This is thus another expanded exercise in making the repeated point that Jesus will not perform signs because they will not persuade anyone (as I surveyed earlier). Notice what happens in John: he reverses the message of Luke's parable, by having Jesus actually raise this Lazarus from the dead, which actually convinces many people to turn and be saved, the very thing Luke's Jesus said wouldn't work. In fact, just as the rejected request in Luke's parable imagined Lazarus going to people and convincing them, John's Lazarus is then cited as a witness to the crucifixion, empty tomb and resurrection of Jesus, and is so cited specifically to convince people-again what Luke's Jesus said wouldn't work. John has thus reified a fictional character and integrated him into his version of the story in order to argue against that particular message in Luke, even to the point of claiming this fictional Lazarus is the eyewitness John is using as a

source.235 In addition to the evidence already just adduced that Lazarus is the Beloved, we can now see that the idea of the Beloved's reclining 'on Jesus' bosom' (Jn 13.23) references the fact that the Lazarus of Luke's parable was reclining 'on Abraham's bosom' (Lk. 16.22-23), thus John clearly meant them to be one and the same [504]

Thus reversing Luke's parable again: Abraham was asked but refused to raise Lazarus and send him as a sign; yet when Jesus was asked, he did what Abraham refused. Jesus is thus now sitting in the place of Abraham, deciding who rises from the dead [504n236]

i) To begin with, the whole raison d'être for his labyrinthian explanation is the utterly "astonishing" fact that Luke and John have two different figures with the same name, even though, by Carrier's own admission, that was the third most common name for Jewish men—so the Johannine Lazarus can't be a real person! Therefore, the narrator recast the fictional protagonist in the Lukan parable!

Instead of contenting himself with a mundane, straightforward explanation, he acts as though what's to be expected is instead so counterintuitive that he dives down the rabbit hole and pops out in Wonderland. For Carrier, what's predictable is naturally inexplicable.

Lazarus isn't the only character John invents. He also invented Nicodemus (whose name means 'Victory for the People') [505n237]

Does Carrier think the narrator invented the Gurion clan? Cf. Richard Bauckham, "**NICODEMUS AND THE GURION FAMILY**," JTS 46 (1996) 1-37.

Perhaps Carrier will retort that:

However much John colors his account with historical trivia about old Jerusalem, he is still just making all this up [506]

Yet in the very same book, Carrier says John's Gospel

could have been written as late as the 140s (some argue even later) or as early as the 100s (provided Luke was written in the 90s) [268-69]

So how can the narrator be so knowledgeable about pre-70 historical trivia?

And why does Carrier infer that Nicodemus is a fictional character because his name means something? Many Greek and Hebrew names mean something. Does he think every ancient figure with a meaningful Greek or Hebrew name was fictitious?

We already know John was fond of number symbolism-many instances of curious numbers appear in his narrative, from the number and size of the pots at Cana (2.6) to the number of years it took to build the Jerusalem temple (2.20) to the number of stadium lengths the disciples had rowed before Jesus walked on the water (6.19), and much else besides. A famous example is that of the paralyzed man cured at Bethesda, who had been paralyzed for 'thirty-eight years' (5.5), and thus was beginning the thirty-ninth year of his infirmity when he was cured and 'took up his bed and walked' (5.9), at which the Jews rebuked him because 'it is not lawful for you to pick up your bed' on the Sabbath (5.10). As it happens, 'picking up your bed and moving it' on the Sabbath is the thirty-

*ninth prohibition of labors in the
Mishnah, the last of the 'forty less one'
prohibited acts ('he who transports an
object from one domain to another')
[506]*

To the contrary, those are the kinds of ancillary details you find in oral history. Eyewitnesses have lots of incidental information at their fingertips.

Romulus

In his book **On the HISTORICITY OF JESUS** (Sheffield 2014), one of Carrier's showcase examples is his claim that the Synoptic Jesus is modeled on Romulus. He discusses this at length in two different chapters. But ironically, Carrier himself is guilty of legendary embellishment. Carrier confabulates a legend about Jesus as a variation on Romulus by how Carrier selectively summarizes his sources, redacts his sources, and indulges in equivocations. Let's begin with Carrier's claims:

Knowing the background of the Romulus myths and rituals drastically changes what we will consider possible or likely in the case of Jesus, and yet that's just one single item [58]

In Plutarch's biography of Romulus, the founder of Rome, we are told he was the son of god, born of a virgin; an attempt is made to kill him as a baby, and he is saved, and raised by a poor family, becoming a lowly shepherd; then as a man he becomes beloved by the people, hailed as king, and killed by the conniving elite; then he rises from the dead, appears to a friend to tell the good news to his people, and ascends to heaven to rule from on high. Just like Jesus.

Plutarch also tells us about annual public ceremonies that were still being performed, which celebrated the day Romulus ascended to heaven. The sacred story told at this event went basically as follows: at the end of his life, amid rumors he was murdered by a conspiracy of the Senate Just as Jesus was 'murdered' by a conspiracy of the Jews-in fact by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish equivalent of the Senate), the sun went dark Just as it did when Jesus died), and Romulus's body vanished Just as Jesus' did). The people wanted to search for him but the Senate told them not to, 'for he had risen to join the gods' (much as a mysterious young man tells the women in Mark's Gospel). Most went away happy, hoping for good things from their new god, but 'some doubted' Just as all later Gospels say of Jesus: Mt. 28. 1 7; Lk. 24. 1 1 ; Jn 20.24-25; even Mk 16.8 implies this). Soon after, Proculus, a close friend of Romulus, reported that he met Romulus 'on the road' between Rome and a nearby town and asked him, 'Why have you abandoned us?', to which Romulus replied that he had been a god all along but had come down to earth and become incarnate to establish a great kingdom, and now had to return to his home in heaven (pretty much as

happens to Cleopas in Lk. 24.13-32; see Chapter 10, §6). Then Romulus told his friend to tell the Romans that if they are virtuous they will have all worldly power. '

Plutarch tells us that the annual Roman ceremony of the Romulan ascent involved a recitation of the names of those who fled his vanishing in fear, and the acting out of their fear and flight in public, a scene suspiciously paralleling the pre-redacted ending of Mark's Gospel (at 16.8).² Which would make sense of his otherwise bizarre ending—we are then to assume what followed his story is just what followed the story he is emulating: an appearance of the Lord, delivering the gospel, which is then proclaimed to the people (the very thing Mark tells us to anticipate: 14.28 and 16.7). In fact, Livy's account, just like Mark's, emphasizes that 'fear and bereavement' kept the people 'silent for a long time', and only later did they proclaim Romulus 'God, Son of God, King, and Father', thus matching Mark's 'they said nothing to anyone', yet obviously assuming that somehow word got out.

It certainly seems as if Mark is fashioning Jesus into the new Romulus, with a new, superior message,

establishing a new, superior kingdom. This Romulan tale looks a lot like a skeletal model for the passion narrative: a great man, founder of a great kingdom, despite coming from lowly origins and of suspect parentage, is actually an incarnated son of god, but dies as a result of a conspiracy of the ruling council, then a darkness covers the land at his death and his body vanishes, at which those who followed him flee in fear just like the Gospel women, Mk 16.8; and men, Mk 14.50-52), and like them, too, we look for his body but are told he is not here, he has risen; and some doubt, but then the risen god 'appears' to select followers to deliver his gospel.³ [56-57]

Luke converts this glorious appearance tale into a hidden god narrative (a reversal that befits how Christianity was also inverting the message of Romulus: promising, at least in the meantime, a hidden spiritual kingdom rather than a visible earthly one: 2 Cor. 4.18; Rom. 14. 17), but otherwise the details are essentially the same... [56-57n1]

But the Gospels conform to the Romulus model most specifically...when taken altogether the

Romulus and Jesus death-and-resurrection narratives contain all of the following parallels:

- 1. The hero is the son of God.*
- 2. His death is accompanied by prodigies.*
- 3. The land is covered in darkness.*
- 4. The hero's corpse goes missing.*
- 5. The hero receives a new immortal body, superior to the one he had.*
- 6. His resurrection body has on occasion a bright and shining appearance.*
- 7. After his resurrection he meets with a follower on a road from the city.*
- 8. A speech is given from a summit or high place prior to ascending.*
- 9. An inspired message of resurrection or 'translation to heaven' is delivered to a witness.*
- 10. There is a 'great commission' (an instruction to future followers).*

11. The hero physically ascends to heaven in his new divine body.

12. He is taken up into a cloud.

13. There is an explicit role given to eyewitness testimony (even naming the witnesses).

14. Witnesses are frightened by his appearance and/or disappearance.

15. Some witnesses flee.

16. Claims are made of 'dubious alternative accounts' (which claims were obviously fabricated for Romulus, there never having been a true account to begin with).

17. All of this occurs outside of a nearby (but central) city.

18. His followers are initially in sorrow over the hero's death.

19. But his post-resurrection story leads to eventual belief, homage and rejoicing.

20. The hero is deified and cult subsequently paid to him (in the same manner as a god).

Some of the parallels could be coincidental (e.g. resurrected bodies being associated with radiance was itself a common trope, both within Judaism [226-28])

That looks impressive! However, Carrier's argument relies on a twofold comparison: whether his parallels actually match the Gospels and whether his parallels actually match the legends of Romulus. Before proceeding, let's quote the versions of the Romulus legend in Livy and Plutarch:

4. But the Fates were resolved, as I suppose, upon the founding of this great City, and the beginning of the mightiest of empires, next after that of Heaven. [2] The Vestal was ravished, and having given birth to twin sons, named Mars as the father of her doubtful offspring, whether actually so believing, or because it seemed less wrong if a god [p. 19] were the author of her fault. [3] But neither gods nor men protected the mother herself or her babes from the king's cruelty; the priestess he ordered to be manacled and cast into prison, the children to be committed to the river. [4] It happened by singular good fortune that the Tiber having spread beyond its banks into stagnant pools afforded nowhere any access to the regular channel of the river, and the

men who brought the twins were led to hope that being infants they might be drowned, no matter how sluggish the stream. [5] So they made shift to discharge the king's command, by exposing the babes at the nearest point of the overflow, where the fig-tree Ruminialis —formerly, they say, called Romularis —now stands. [6] In those days this was a wild and uninhabited region. The story persists that when the floating basket in which the children had been exposed was left high and dry by the receding water, a she-wolf, coming down out of the surrounding hills to slake her thirst, turned her steps towards the cry of the infants, and with her teats gave them suck so gently, that the keeper of the royal flock found her licking them with her tongue. [7] Tradition assigns to this man the name of Faustulus, and adds that he carried the twins to his hut and gave them to his wife Larentia to rear. Some think that Larentia, having been free with her favours, had got the name of “she-wolf” among the shepherds, and that this gave rise to this marvellous story.¹ [8] The boys, thus born and reared, had no sooner attained to youth than they began —yet without neglecting the farmstead or the flocks —to range the glades of the mountains

for game. [9] Having in this way gained both strength and resolution, they would now not only face wild beasts, but would attack robbers laden with their spoils, and divide up what they took from them among the shepherds, with whom they shared their toils and pranks, while their band of young men grew larger every day. Livy, History of Rome, 1.4.

Others say it was Roma, a daughter of the Trojan woman I have mentioned, who was wedded to Latinus the son of Telemachus and bore him Romulus; others that Aemilia, the daughter of Aeneas and Lavinia, bore him to Mars; and others still rehearse what is altogether fabulous concerning his p95 origin. For instance, they say that Tarchetius, king of the Albans, who was most lawless and cruel, was visited with a strange phantom in his house, namely, a phallus rising out of the hearth and remaining there many days. 4 Now there was an oracle of Tethys in Tuscany, from which there was brought to Tarchetius a response that a virgin must have intercourse with this phantom, and she should bear a son most illustrious for his valour, and of surpassing good fortune and

strength. Tarchetius, accordingly, told the prophecy to one of his daughters, and bade her consort with the phantom; but she disdained to do so, and sent a handmaid in to it.

And when the handmaid became the mother of twin children by the phantom, Tarchetius gave them to a certain Teratius with orders to destroy them. ⁶ This man, however, carried them to the river-side and laid them down there. Then a she-wolf visited the babes and gave them suck, while all sorts of birds brought morsels of food and put them into their mouths, until a cow-herd spied them, conquered his amazement, ventured to come to them, and took the children home with him. Thus they were saved, and when they were grown up, they set upon Tarchetius and overcame him. At any rate, this is what a certain Promathion says, who compiled a history of Italy.

and fearing lest that brother's daughter should have children, made her a priestess of Vesta, bound to live unwedded and a virgin all her days. ³ Her name is variously given as Ilia, or Rhea, or Silvia. Not long after this, she was discovered to be with

child, contrary to the established law for the Vestals.

Obeying the king's orders, the servant put the babes into a trough and went down towards the river, purposing to cast them in; but when he saw that the stream was much swollen and violent, he was afraid to go close up to it, and setting his burden now near the bank, went his way. 5 Then the overflow of the swollen river took and bore up the trough, floating it gently along, and carried it down to a fairly smooth spot which is now called Kermalus, but formerly Germanus, perhaps because brothers are called "germani."

4 1 Now there was a wild fig-tree hard by, which they called Ruminalis, either from Romulus, as is generally thought, or because cud-chewing, or ruminating, animals spent the noon-tide there for the sake of the shade, or best of all, from the suckling of the babes there; for the ancient Romans called the teat "ruma," and a certain goddess, who is thought to preside over the rearing of young children, is still called Rumilia, in sacrificing to whom no wine is used, and libations of milk are poured over her victims. 2 Here, then, the babes lay,

and the she-wolf of story here gave them suck,⁴ and a woodpecker came to help in feeding them and to watch over them. Plutarch, The Life of Romulus.

16. After these immortal achievements, Romulus held a review of his army at the 'Caprae Palus' in the Campus Martius. A violent thunder storm suddenly arose and enveloped the king in so dense a cloud that he was quite invisible to the assembly. From that hour Romulus was no longer seen on earth. [2] When the fears of the Roman youth were allayed by the return of bright, calm sun-shine after such fearful weather, they saw that the royal seat was vacant. Whilst they fully believed the assertion of the Senators, who had been standing close to him, that he had been snatched away to heaven by a whirlwind, still, like men suddenly bereaved, fear and grief kept them for some time speechless. [3] At length, after a few had taken the initiative, the whole of those present hailed Romulus as 'a god, the son of a god, the King and Father of the City of Rome.' They put up supplications for his grace and favour, and prayed that he would be propitious to his children and save and protect them. [4] I

believe, however, that even then there were some who secretly hinted that he had been torn limb from limb by the senators—a tradition to this effect, though certainly a very dim one, has filtered down to us. [5] The other, which I follow, has been the prevailing one, due, no doubt, to the admiration felt for the man and the apprehensions excited by his disappearance. This generally accepted belief was strengthened by one man's clever device. The tradition runs that Proculus Julius, a man whose authority had weight in matters of even the gravest importance, seeing how deeply the community felt the loss of the king, and how incensed they were against the senators, came forward into the assembly and said: 'Quirites! [6] at break of dawn, today, the Father of this City suddenly descended from heaven and appeared to me. [7] Whilst, thrilled with awe, I stood rapt before him in deepest reverence, praying that I might be pardoned for gazing upon him, 'Go,' said he, 'tell the Romans that it is the will of heaven that my Rome should be the head of all the world. Let them henceforth cultivate the arts of war, and let them know assuredly, and hand down the knowledge to posterity, that no human might can withstand the

arms of Rome.” [8] It is marvellous what credit was given to this man's story, and how the grief of the people and the army was soothed by the belief which had been created in the immortality of Romulus. Livy, History of Rome, 1.16.

...whereas Romulus disappeared suddenly, and no portion of his body or fragment of his clothing remained to be seen. But some conjectured that the senators, convened in the temple of Vulcan, fell upon him and slew him, then cut his body in pieces, put each a portion into the folds of his robe, and so carried him away. ⁶ Others think that it was neither in the temple of Vulcan nor when the senators alone were present that he disappeared, but that he was holding an assembly of the people outside the city near the so-called Goat's Marsh,⁵⁸ when suddenly strange and unaccountable disorders with incredible changes filled the air; the light of the sun failed, and night came down upon them, not with peace and quiet, but with awful peals of thunder and furious blasts driving rain from every quarter, ⁷ during which the multitude dispersed and fled, but the nobles gathered closely together; and when the

storm had ceased, and the sun shone out, and the multitude, now gathered together again in the same place as before, anxiously sought for their king...

Julius Proculus by name,⁵⁹ went into the forum and solemnly swore by the most sacred emblems before all the people that, as he was travelling on the road, he had seen Romulus coming to meet him, fair and stately to the eye as never before, and arrayed in bright and shining armour. 2 He himself, then, affrighted at the sight, had said: "O King, what possessed thee, or what purpose hadst thou, that thou hast left us patricians a prey to unjust and wicked accusations, and the whole city sorrowing without end at the loss of its father?" Whereupon Romulus had replied: "It was the pleasure of the gods, O Proculus, from whom I came, that I should be with mankind only a short time, and that after founding a city destined to be the greatest on earth for empire and glory, I should dwell again in heaven. So farewell, and tell the Romans that if they practise self-restraint, and add to it valour, they will reach the utmost heights of human power.

And I will be your propitious deity, Quirinus."
Plutarch, The Life of Romulus.

Now let's go back and compare Carrier's "parallels" with the source material.

1. HIGH CARD

Notice Carrier's statement that "the Gospels conform to the Romulus model most specifically." So by his own admission, Romulus is his strongest example of Jesus (allegedly) conforming to the archetypal hero/dying-and-rising-savior-god. That's his high card. All his other examples will be weaker.

2. THE HERO IS THE SON OF GOD

That's misleading. There are two "heroes": Romulus and Remus. But Jesus doesn't have a twin brother.

3. BORN OF A VIRGIN

That's equivocal on multiple grounds:

i) There's nothing supernatural about a virgin becoming a mother when she's impregnated by physical intercourse. She was a virgin at the time she first had sexual intercourse. And the child is her firstborn. In Greco-Roman mythology, gods were physical, humanoid beings with sex organs. They beget or conceive children through sexual intercourse.

In Matthew and Luke, Mary is a virgin mother in a very specialized sense. She conceives Jesus apart from sexual intercourse with a man or male god. That's the point of contrast.

ii) Livy and Plutarch have multiple versions of how Romulus and Remus were conceived. Carrier artificially singles out one version to suit his agenda.

iii) According to one version, the twins were conceived by a handmaid who had sexual intercourse with a phantom phallus. Doesn't say if the handmaid was a virgin. And even if she was, Mary didn't conceive Jesus by having intercourse with a floating, disembodied phallus. So much for that "parallel".

iv) According to another version, the mother of the twins was a Vestal virgin. She conceived the twins when Mars, the Roman God of war, raped her. Forcible intercourse.

v) Finally, Carrier is cheating by changing the Rank-Raglan criterion, even though he says that's his standard of comparison. But according to the original list, the hero's mother is a "*royal* virgin". But of course, Mary was a peasant girl.

4. RAISED BY A POOR FAMILY

A misleading comparison. Jesus was raised by his birth mother and stepfather. Romulus and Remus were foundlings, suckled by a she-wolf, and adopted by a goatherd. Very different "family".

5. BECOMING A LOWLY SHEPHERD

Jesus didn't become a literal shepherd. Rather, he's a metaphorical shepherd—among many other theological metaphors.

6. PROCULUS MET ROMULUS 'ON THE ROAD' BETWEEN ROME AND A NEARBY TOWN AND ASKED HIM, 'WHY HAVE YOU ABANDONED US?', TO WHICH ROMULUS REPLIED THAT HE HAD BEEN A GOD ALL ALONG BUT HAD COME DOWN TO EARTH AND BECOME INCARNATE TO ESTABLISH A GREAT KINGDOM, AND NOW HAD TO RETURN TO HIS HOME IN HEAVEN (PRETTY MUCH AS HAPPENS TO CLEOPAS IN LK. 24.13-32).

i) Although the Synoptics may well reflect a "hidden-God" motif, you already have that in Jewish sources, as Carrier admits.

ii) Carrier suppresses elements of Luke's resurrection account that don't fit the comparison. Lk 24:36-42 stresses the physicality of Christ's reappearance. Carrier gives a truncated version of Luke.

7. THOSE WHO FLED HIS VANISHING IN FEAR, AND THE ACTING OUT OF THEIR FEAR AND FLIGHT IN PUBLIC, A SCENE SUSPICIOUSLY PARALLELING THE PRE-REDACTED ENDING OF MARK'S GOSPEL (AT 16.8)

In the accounts of Romulus (Livy/Plutarch), people flee from the terrifying thunderstorm. They take shelter.

In Mk 16, the women run away after seeing the empty tomb and the angel—not from witnessing the Risen Christ. So

those are different kinds of events.

8. DARKNESS COVERS THE LAND AT HIS DEATH

That's equivocal:

i) In the accounts of Romulus, the purpose of the thunderstorm is to enable Romulus to slip away under cover of darkness.

In the crucifixion accounts, Jesus hasn't vanished after the darkness dissipates. His body remains visible on the cross.

ii) The darkness has its background, not in Romulus mythos, but OT precedent, like the plague of darkness (Exod 10:21-22) and eschatological judgment (e.g. Amos 8:9-10; Joel 1).

9. HIS DEATH IS ACCOMPANIED BY PRODIGIES

10. THE HERO'S CORPSE GOES MISSING

11. THE HERO RECEIVES A NEW IMMORTAL BODY, SUPERIOR TO THE ONE HE HAD

In the accounts of Livy and Plutarch, as I read them, Romulus never died. Rather, he disappears from view when the thunderstorm makes everything too dark to see. And that's the function of the thunderstorm. It enables him to exit the scene undetected.

12. HIS RESURRECTION BODY HAS ON OCCASION A BRIGHT AND SHINING APPEARANCE

i) Since Romulus never died, he can't be resurrected.

ii) Moreover, it isn't the *body* of Romulus that's bright and shiny upon his reappearance, but his *armor*.

iii) In the Gospels, the Risen Christ doesn't have a luminous appearance. He only has a luminous appearance outside the Gospels (i.e. the Christophanies of Acts 9 and Rev 1).

13. AN INSPIRED MESSAGE OF RESURRECTION OR 'TRANSLATION TO HEAVEN'

Even if we view the "translation" as equivalent to an ascension, it's not analogous to the ascension of Christ inasmuch as that presupposes the Resurrection, which—in turn—presupposes the death of Christ.

14. THE HERO PHYSICALLY ASCENDS TO HEAVEN IN HIS NEW DIVINE BODY

Romulus doesn't have a new body. And Christ doesn't have a "divine" body, but an immortal body.

15. HE IS TAKEN UP INTO A CLOUD

i) Romulus is camouflaged by the thunderstorm. But that's before his reappearance rather than after his reappearance.

That's different from the role of the "cloud" in the Ascension, which is post-Resurrection.

ii) In context, the "cloud" that envelops the Risen Christ isn't a natural cloud or thundercloud but the Shekinah. So that has its background, not in the Romulus mythos, but OT narratives about the Exodus, tabernacle, and temple.

16. ALL OF THIS OCCURS OUTSIDE OF A NEARBY (BUT CENTRAL) CITY

The Resurrection appearances take place in more than one location: Jerusalem, Emmaus, Galilee.

17. THE HERO IS DEIFIED AND CULT SUBSEQUENTLY PAID TO HIM (IN THE SAME MANNER AS A GOD)

But according to Carrier, Romulus always was a god. A god in disguise.

Those are the major parallels that Carrier labored to draw. The rest is filler.

Art imitates life

I'm continuing my analysis of Richard Carrier's **ON THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS** (Sheffield 2014).

Analogously, the mythical Abraham is conveniently named ('father of many') in Gen. 17.5 (and his original name, Abram, 'exalted father'. is no less convenient). similarly anticipating what he would become in the future. which doesn't tend to happen in the real world [240n9]

i) To begin with, do we even have Abraham's original name? Or do we have a Hebrew cognate? Abraham didn't speak Hebrew. His parents didn't give him a Hebrew name. He has a Hebrew name because the OT is written in Hebrew. But presumably that's a translation.

ii) More to the point, a name that forecasts a future destiny is, indeed, improbable in a godless universe, but of course, that's hardly the viewpoint of the Pentateuchal narrator. Rather, the Pentateuch depicts a God who is orchestrating events behind-the-scenes to their appointed end. History as a series of divinely-planned events. As such, there's no incongruity within the narrative viewpoint of figure who has a prescient name.

That should make us suspicious from the start. Isn't his name abnormally convenient? The 'Christ' part was assigned by those who believed he was the messiah, and thus not accidental. But what are the odds that his birth name would be 'Savior', and then he would be hailed as the Savior? Are historical men who are worshiped as savior gods usually so conveniently named? [240]

But according to Matthew and Luke, both his parents had angelic revelations regarding the future destiny of Jesus. Of course, Carrier is an atheist, but the point is that there's nothing inconsistent with his having a "convenient" name given the Jewish outlook of the Synoptics.

We would then add the evidence that Jesus was a godman...So there is no getting around the fact that if the ratio of conveniently named mythical godmen to conveniently named historical godmen is 2 to 1 or greater, then the prior probability that Jesus is historical is 33% or less.

But this is a hypothetical reference class ('all conveniently named god men'). We don't have any

clear or statistically solid data about the frequency of historical to nonhistorical persons in that class; I merely guessed (albeit reasonably, based on our total background knowledge that coincidences are rarer in actual fact than in human invention) that the ratio of mythical persons to historical persons in that class is 2 to 1 or greater, and therefore the prior probability that a person in that class is historical is 1 in 3 or less...The fact is, it's simply less likely that a historical man would be conveniently named Savior and then become a savior, than that a mythical man created to be a savior would be conveniently named Savior [241-42]

Even if we tried to work the question from the probability of any Jew actually being named Jesus (which is roughly 1 in 26),¹³ in comparison to the probability of any savior god being named Savior (among that god's many names, and Jesus also had many names, from Christ to Lord to Emmanuel), we'd end up even worse off. Because probably most savior gods were called Savior (soter in Greek), I'd say that ratio is closer to 1 in 2, and that is over ten times more likely than 1 in 26, not just two times more likely as we were suggesting before [242]

No matter how you chew on it, no matter what numbers you put in, with these ratios you always end up with the same prior probability that Jesus was an actual historical man: just 33% at best [244]

That's such a simplistic way to frame the issue. Suppose I drive a friend to the airport. Say, Dallas-Forth Worth airport. And suppose I'm a classic car buff. I own a 1963 Aston-Martin DB5, like James Bond drove in *Goldfinger*.

I park my car in the DFW garage and walk my friend into the terminal. When I drive home, what's the reference class for my car? From what I've read, the capacity of the DFW airport parking garage has 39,988 spaces. Does that mean the reference class is 39,988 parked cars? What are the odds that I will drive any particular car home, out of 39,988 parked cars? What are the odds that I will pick a car in that numbered slot, out of 39,988 slots? What are the odds I will pick a car of that year, make, model, and color. Not to mention that this is a very rare car, c. 2018. How many other car models are far more likely to be in the garage?

So is it just a wild, lucky coincidence that I drive the same car home that I drove to the airport? The sheer mathematical odds, the abstract reference class, is totally irrelevant to which car I drove home. There's only one live option. Carrier acts as though this is a random calculation, like flipping a coin or throwing dice. But that's completely artificial.

Carrier approaches the text from presuppositions that are alien to the text. But who made atheism the frame of

reference for background knowledge and prior probability? He's free to speak for himself, but it's not something he's entitled to impose that paradigm on any one else.

Counting as the Rank-Raglan reference class all heroes who score above half the total criteria, we have fourteen members (besides Jesus, who makes fifteen); we can ascertain that those are the only members (or at least, there are no other known historical persons who are members; and adding mythical persons would only make the ensuing argument stronger, by reducing the prior probability that any member of the class was historical); and we can conclude with reasonable certainty that none of those fourteen members were ever historical persons—all of them are mythical. That means a historical Jesus is literally unique among all Rank-Raglan heroes. So to assume he was the sole exception in human history would be a rather extraordinary claim [242]

i) Carrier recycles an old strategy: identify (alleged) mythemes in the Gospels, then use their presence to reclassify Jesus as a variation on the perennial hero archetype or the "dying-and-rising savior god" trope.

Of course, if you actually compare the Gospels to stories about Romulus, Osiris et al., there are drastic differences. However, proponents contend there's a generic skeletal plot which all these types of stories exemplify. Yes, there may be dramatic differences, yet they share the same basic plot outline and plot devices. And it's the nature of the genre to have endless variations. So proponents can always explain away the differences consistent with their theory. They isolate and abstract a recognizable, oft-repeated core plot and stock characters.

There is, however, a basic fallacy in the comparative methodology. Consider different movie genres and TV dramas, viz. westerns, war movies, road movies, disaster flicks, buddy flicks, coming-of-age, police dramas, courtroom dramas, hospital dramas, private-eye, gangster, high school, family reunion, small-town America, generation gap, vigilante/vengeance, underdog sports.

Genre movies and TV dramas have very repetitious plots. Formulaic variations on the same stock characters and shorelines. And, of course, that's fictional. However, it's not fictional because it's repetitious. To the contrary, it's repetitious because it's factual. Art imitates life. Those genres are parasitic on history, social life, the lifecycle, &c. The tropes happen in real life. Life is repetitious. Repetition with variation.

So even if the life of Christ has parallels with fictional tropes and legendary figures, this doesn't create the slightest presumption that the Gospels are fictional. For fiction is a

second-order artifact that borrows from the world around us. And that includes the paranormal or supernatural. Those originate in firsthand experience. They may undergo legendary embellishment, or have fictional counterparts, yet they don't originate in the imagination, but encounters with real entities and events.

Of course, atheists deny it, but this shows you that the question can't be settled by appeal to comparative mythology, for the deeper question is the kind of world we live in, whether things like that actually happen, and the evidence. That can't be prejudged by comparative mythology.

ii) Even from a secular standpoint, if you're going to critique a position, it's often necessary to cultivate critical sympathy by adopting the opposing viewpoint for the sake of argument, then tracing out the ramifications of that position if it were true. What if the Incarnation really happened? If so, wouldn't God Incarnate be expected to exhibit traits of the hero archetype? He's not going to be an ordinary human being. Both by nature and mission, he will be extraordinary.

iii) Why should the Rank-Raglan mythotype be the benchmark for assessing the historical Jesus? It's an arbitrarily selective list. What makes those figures the right frame of reference?

Instead of that, what about a plausibility structure that takes supernaturalism into account? Evidence for the Christian faith isn't confined to ancient documents. While the documentary basis (Scripture) is foundational, Christianity is a living religion with ongoing evidence. Consider modern miracles, answered prayer, revelatory dreams and visions, as well as apparitions of the dead. Has

Carrier made any effort to canvas the best examples? What we find probable, improbable, possible, impossible, credible, or incredible is context-dependent. Carrier is not entitled to take his atheism for granted when persuading readers to view the NT through his ethnocentric filter.

iv) In addition, Carrier fudges on the Rank-Raglan criteria. He tinkers with it to convert it to a custom-made strainer to yield the desired results. It's not the evidence that's driving his position; rather, he creates a grid to force the evidence to match his preconceived theory. Let's conclude with two reviewers:

*But the Rank-Raglan hero-type scale is a rather strange device employed by Carrier (and other mythicists), undoubtedly used to further tilt the scale in favor of mythicism.¹¹² The immediate question that comes to mind in surveying Carrier's reference class for Jesus is why the Rank-Raglan hero-type? Criticized for being Euro-centric and male-centric, these holistic-comparative theories have been almost universally rejected by scholars of folklore and mythology, who instead opt for theories of myth that center on the myths' immediate cultural, political, and social settings. Nevertheless, if a general point of reference for Jesus is required, why does Carrier not use Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* as his*

reference class?¹¹³ Is it because Campbell's system is so general and universal it would fit almost any figure or story (hence the term monomyth)? Why does Carrier preference a hybrid Rank-Raglan's scale of 22 patterns, over Rank's original 12? Could it be because Rank's original list includes the hero's parents having 'difficulty in conception', the hero as an infant being 'suckled by a female animal or humble woman', to eventually grow up and take 'revenge against his father'?¹¹⁴ Why not Jan De Vries' heroic biographical sequence or Dean A. Miller's characteristics of a Quest Hero?¹¹⁵ I can deduce that it is because other comparative mythological scales, being either too general or too rigid, would not suit his ends.

Furthermore, Carrier changes Raglan's traditional list and does not inform his readers how and why he is doing this. For example, Carrier changes the specificity of the 'hero's mother is a royal virgin', to the more ambiguous 'the hero's mother is a virgin'.¹¹⁶ He modifies that the hero's 'father is a king' to the far more open 'father is a king or the heir of a king' in order to include Jesus' claimed Davidic lineage.¹¹⁷ He also excludes from his scale

that the attempt on the hero's life at birth is 'usually by his father or his maternal grandfather'. Carrier adds the qualifying 'one or more foster-parents' when the hero is spirited away to a faraway country, while Raglan only states 'foster-parents'.¹¹⁸ A significant change Carrier makes is that the hero is only 'crowned, hailed or becomes king' whereas Raglan states that the hero 'becomes king'.¹¹⁹ Another important change made by Carrier is that the hero's 'body turns up missing' whereas Raglan's list has that the 'body is not buried'.¹²⁰ After examination, it is clear that Carrier has modified Raglan's qualifications in order to make this archetypal hero model better fit the Jesus tradition.

Per Carrier's assessment of the Rank-Raglan hero-type applied to Jesus, Mark's Jesus scores 14 and Matthew's Jesus scores 20. But according to the traditional Raglan heroic archetype, Mark's Jesus scores 7 or 8, and Matthew's Jesus scores 8 or 9, producing a result that is less than 11 (the required result, according to Carrier's methodology, to firmly place Jesus in the same reference class as Oedipus, Moses, Theseus, Dionysus, Romulus, Perseus,

*Hercules, Zeus, Bellerophon, Jason, Osiris, Pelops, Asclepius, and Joseph, son of Jacob).*¹²² Even so, Carrier's faulty Rank-Raglan hero-type is most on display when compared to the non-canonical gospels. These texts contain some of the most legendary and extraordinary tales about the life of Jesus and are produced much later than the earliest gospels, and yet they score remarkably low on Carrier's Rank- Raglan hero-type scale.¹²³

*Even if Jesus' life merited a 20 out of 22 on the Rank-Raglan hero-type list (which it does not, as I have shown), this does not confirm his place amongst other mythological figures of antiquity. As the late folklorist Alan Dundes pointed out, mythicists' employment of this analysis does not have much to do with whether Jesus existed; it is merely an exercise in literary and psycho- analytic comparisons.*¹²⁴ *The traditions of Jesus conforming to these legendary patterns does not negate his historicity any more than the legends connected with Alexander the Great, Augustus Caesar, and Apollonius of Tyana denies theirs. Daniel N. Gullotta, "On Richard Carrier's Doubts: A Response to Richard Carrier's On the Historicity of Jesus: Why*

We Might Have Reason for Doubt,” Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus 15 (2017): 341-44.

The attempt to see patterns and archetypes in fairy tales and folklore is closely linked, in its origins, to Freudian psychoanalysis, Otto Rank having been one of Freud’s disciples at the time when he wrote The Myth of the Birth of the Hero. Indeed, Alan Dundes, in a study that focuses on this aspect of the approach, notes that Freud himself wrote a section of Rank’s book.[2] We must also keep in mind that the era which produced these works is one in which parallelomania (to use Samuel Sandmel’s famous phrase) often ruled the day, in ways that have subsequently been criticized so severely by scholars as to leave their validity in doubt.[3] This is not to suggest that a list of typical elements may not have a certain usefulness. But we should not assume that it does, and must ask critical questions about whether superficial similarities are being noted which obscure more substantive differences, and whether the scale is designed precisely to allow a claim to be made about the similarity of Biblical and Greek stories.[4]

The vagueness of the points on the list, and their applicability to many historical individuals, must be noted. If someone is a king, they will by definition fit a number of points: they will be descended from a king, become king, and make laws. Numerous kings and potential heirs to the throne have had the experience of being exiled, either by a close relative who is a competing heir, or by imperial powers who were prone to take members of the royal family hostage. And so the scale is focused on royal figures, and such figures have been the focus of not only the extremes of historical and fantastical storytelling, but also a range of genres in between, including historical fiction and mythologized history. And so it is appropriate to approach with some skepticism the attempt to use this scale to determine historicity, something that it was not created to do.

In our earliest sources, Jesus fits at most four of these in a fairly precise way – on the list given above, these are points 5, 9, and 19, and presumably we can include 18 as well, although crucifixion was hardly a mysterious way of dying in the first century, and so it depends what one means

by “mysterious.” It is only in subsequent sources – and sometimes significantly later – that we find other elements added. On the basis of a modified version of the scale above, ignoring differences between earlier and later sources, Carrier gives Jesus a rank of 20. My reckoning would put him at 9, allowing for some stretching (e.g. descent from David is not the same thing as having one’s father be king), and focusing mainly on the New Testament sources - but generously allowing an additional point because there is a tomb of Jesus in Japan.[6] And so Carrier’s claim about Jesus getting a nearly perfect score seems to be simply false.

Carrier claims that people who rank that high or close to that high are consistently mythological figures. He also claims that it does not matter whether a person is depicted in this way in our earliest sources or is only conformed to the type later. These claims are not self-evident, and seem to in fact be at odds with the evidence which we will summarize below.

Not only do the typical lists of heroes include both undoubtedly ahistorical and clearly historical figures, but Otto Rank’s book begins with Sargon I.

[7] Raglan gave Muhammad 17 points.[8] Thomas J. Sienkewicz' web page on the hero pattern includes both Czar Nicholas II and Harry Potter, the former getting 14 points while the latter a mere 8. [9] Alexander the Great and Kim-Jong Il have also been discussed in relation to their depiction in a manner that connects with many points on the scale.[10] The fact that the hero figure in view with respect to this scale is a royal one should make obvious that many fictional non-royal figures will score low on the scale, while historical rulers will start off with a number of points automatically.

<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/12/mcg388023.shtml>

"Schizotypals"

I continue my romp through Richard Carrier's diatribe **ON THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS** (Sheffield 2014). In chap. 4, he makes the following claims:

Christianity began as a charismatic cult in which many of its leaders and members displayed evidence of schizotypal personalities. They naturally and regularly hallucinated (seeing visions and hearing voices), often believed their dreams were divine communications, achieved trance states, practiced glossolalia, and were (or so we're told) highly susceptible to psychosomatic illnesses (like 'possession' and hysterical blindness, muteness and paralysis).¹⁵⁹ These phenomena have been extensively documented in modern charismatic cults within numerous religious traditions, and their underlying sociology, anthropology and psychology are reasonably well understood (in addition to what follows, see also Element 29).

For example, we know the first Christians regularly practiced glossolalia. Acts 2 mythologizes this phenomenon, depicting the first Christians 'speaking in tongues' in the middle of Jerusalem as

if this actually meant miraculously speaking foreign languages fluently that they were never taught, when in fact we know 'speaking in tongues' actually meant (as it does now) babbling in random syllables, which no one could really understand except special interpreters who were 'inspired' by the holy spirit to miraculously understand and translate for their congregation. We know this because Paul tells us so (in 1 Corinthians 14; in fact the phenomenon is addressed throughout 1 Corinthians 12-14). Thus Acts has taken this real phenomenon and exaggerated it into a legendary power. But we know from Paul it operated differently. And in fact, the phenomenon Paul describes is known across the world, in countless cultures and religious traditions, and has been extensively studied.¹⁶⁰ When we see in antiquity a phenomenon we've documented scientifically as commonly occurring in various cultures, it's far more likely to be the same phenomenon than something entirely new yet coincidentally identical. We must therefore conclude the first Christians had some social and anthropological similarities to other cults that practice glossolalia.

Acts represents this as a recurring practice in the church: Acts 10.46; 19.6 (confirmed in Mk 16.17); and in 1 Cor. 14.18, Paul himself says he spoke in tongues more than anyone, and throughout that chapter makes clear it was so commonly happening to others in his churches that he had to set up rules to govern it. And as for glossolalia, so for the other phenomena Paul reports as regularly practiced by the first Christians. The most important of which for our purposes was hallucination (visual and auditory). Humans are actually biologically predisposed to hallucinate. The neurophysiology of hallucination is built-in and thus must have evolved for some useful function (or as a side-effect of something else that did).

Normals can hallucinate when exposed to triggers. The most common of which is sleep paralysis (where normals hallucinate at the threshold between being asleep and awake); but the most familiar are pharmaceuticals (many drugs induce hallucination, including several that were not only available in antiquity but known in antiquity), while the most culturally transmitted are trance behaviors.¹⁶³ Extreme fatigue, heat, illness,

fasting, grief and sleep or sensory deprivation ('incubation') can all induce hallucination in normals. And by the time of Christianity, cultural practices had long developed to intentionally trigger hallucination, including fasting and sensory or sleep deprivation, but more typically rhythmic prayer or chanting or the use of music or dance to induce an ecstatic state (Paul alludes to singing and prayer as likely trance-inducing behaviors in his congregations in 1 Cor. 14.12-15; see also Acts 16.25; Eph. 5.19; and Col. 3.16; which might suggest also dance, as in other cultures whirling or spinning are known triggers). Fasting (i.e., starving) is also attested within the church.

Accordingly, in antiquity, where schizotypals would routinely be regarded as prophets and holy men (and not seen as insane, as they are in modern cultures), we can expect schizotypals will actually gravitate into religious cults that socially integrate them or even grant them influence and status. The availability of niches of strong social support for schizotypals would explain why in antiquity there were few reported cases of psychosis (and why hallucination was not regarded as a major index of

insanity except when wholly crippling or conjoined with fever), and why miracles and visions (not just Christian and Jewish, but pagan as well) were so frequently reported and widely believed to be genuine. Obviously schizotypals would prefer the company of people who take them seriously.

And yet even non-schizotypals can become regular trance hallucinators within cults and cultures that encourage and develop their capacities in this regard. Even in hostile cultures (like our own), normals find themselves hallucinating with remarkable frequency, particularly within the context of religious assumptions and expectations (Christians hallucinate Christ; Buddhists hallucinate Buddha), and psychological priming (UFO enthusiasts hallucinate encounters with aliens; the bereaved hallucinate encounters with the recently deceased).

Many members of a cult will claim to have seen or heard things, when in fact they didn't, and pretend to go along, because (a) they want to belong (and this is the only way to fulfill their desire to fit in), or they need the benefits the community provides (such as food, shelter, love, companionship), or (for

reasons of dysphoria or dissonance outside the cult) they want to believe its claims are true because they are ultimately comforting (such as giving their lives hope or meaning that they did not previously have), or they want the power and influence that being a revered spiritual leader affords them (if they can be adequately convincing and also effective at winning support). These psychological motivations can be quite powerful, and have certainly been documented to compel people to engage in conforming behavior in other contexts, so it can surely happen in this context as well. These members will pick up all the social cues and simply agree with everyone, to both fit in and convince themselves. which if sustained can even alter their memory so that they honestly believe they saw or heard things they didn't (or else they will delusionally refuse to acknowledge, even to themselves, that they didn't).

We should expect this same social phenomenon in the original church, which is why only apostles 'saw the Lord', as that is what it was to be an apostle: to be one whom the Lord chose to reveal himself (1 Cor. 9.1; 15.5-8; Gal. 1.11-12; note how Gal. 1.8

indicates that revelations from lesser divinities couldn't make one an apostle). This also explains why their number was limited. The Lord might still communicate to lower ranking members through intermediaries (angels and benevolent spirits), but you dare not claim to have 'seen the Lord'...

All of this provides considerable background support to what several scholars have already argued: that the origin of Christianity can be attributed to hallucinations (actual or pretended) of the risen Jesus. The prior probability of this conclusion is already extremely high, given the background evidence just surveyed; and the consequent probabilities strongly favor it as well, given the evidence we can find in the NT.¹⁸¹ Christian fundamentalists are really the only ones who do not accept this as basically an established fact by now.

Thus, in Acts 2, we see the entire church hallucinating floating tongues of fire and then babbling in tongues in a mass ecstatic trance. In Acts 7, in the middle of the Sanhedrin court, Stephen hallucinates Jesus floating up in the sky, but no one else there sees it. In Acts 9, Paul

hallucinates a booming voice and a beaming light from heaven (and suffers hysterical blindness as a result); and Ananias hallucinates an entire conversation with God. In Acts 10, Cornelius hallucinates a conversation with an angel, and Peter falls into a trance and hallucinates an entire cosmic dinner scene in the sky. In Acts 16, Paul hallucinates a revelation of a man who tells him where to travel (this story probably drawing in one way or another on Paul's own mention of receiving such a revelation in Gal. 2.2). In Acts 27, Paul hallucinates a conversation with an angel. Many Christians receive spirit communications ('prophecy'), as indicated in Acts 19.6 and 21.9-10- and Acts 2.17, which quotes Joel 2.28-31 as being fulfilled in the church: 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams'.

Paul confirms this general picture firsthand. In Gal. 1.11-12, Paul says he learned the gospel only from a hallucinated encounter with Jesus (a 'revelation') whom he experienced 'within' himself (Gal. 1.16). He confirms this in Rom. 16.25-26, where Paul says,

'My gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ is according to a revelation'. 183 The other apostles received their information from revelations as well. 'Unto us', Paul says (meaning the apostles), 'God revealed [the secrets of the gospel] through the Spirit' (1 Cor. 2.10). And in 1 Cor. 15.1-8 Paul says, 'the gospel I preached' (which in Galatians and Romans he confirms came only by revelation) is the same gospel Peter and the others preached (this is the whole gist of Galatians 1 and 2: see discussion in Chapter 11), who also experienced special isolated visions of the Christ just like Paul's, which again was the qualifying requirement to be an apostle (1 Cor. 9.1: 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?').

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul says he and others have many glorious 'visions and revelations of the Lord', and among these he includes hallucinated trips to heaven where the hallucinator hears and sees strange things, much like the entire book of Revelation, which is a veritable acid trip, an extended hallucination of the bizzarrest kind, an example of the kind of thing going on all the time in the early churches (even despite the fact that that

particular example is probably wholly fabricated). Paul then goes on to relate in that same chapter a whole two-way conversation he had with God, demonstrating that he not only heard voices but conversed with them; he also says he experiences an 'abundance of revelations' (2 Cor. 12.7). And in 1 Cor. 14.6, Paul says 'what use am I to you, unless I speak to you by way of a revelation, or knowledge [gnosis, meaning spiritual knowledge], or prophesying, or teaching?'

Similarly, the fact that Christians regarded as inspired scripture such books as Daniel, which depict authoritative information coming from God through both visions and dreams, entails that Christians believed authoritative information came from God through visions and dreams (otherwise they would not deem such books as honest or reliable, much less scripture). They could therefore see their own visions and dreams as communications from God, too. Thus, even if books such as Revelation are fabricated, as symbolic discourses on the times, they still represent themselves as genuine hallucinatory experiences.

i) Over the years, Triablogue has posted copious documentation for the veridicality of phenomena that Carrier breezily denies. In this post I'm just scratching the surface.

ii) Because Carrier is attempting to prove that Jesus never existed, he's committed to redefining all eyewitness accounts of Jesus as hallucinations.

iii) Carrier appeals to the pseudoscience of evolutionary psychology to discount all dreams and visions as hallucinatory. A beautifully unverifiable, unfalsifiable theory, because it's so elastic: "and thus must have evolved for some useful function (or as a side-effect of something else that did)."

iv) In the footnotes, Carrier cites some people in support of his contentions who, in fact, don't share his outlook, viz. Felicitas Goodman, Gordon Fee, William James, Phillip Wiebe.

v) Carrier acts as though 1C Christians were Whirling Dervishes intoning Gregorian chant.

vi) Carrier hatches a conspiracy theory wherein the 1C Christian movement was a magnet for psychotics and schizotypals. Carrier has a lively imagination for Just-So stories.

vii) Carrier disregards the different contexts of 1 Cor 15:1-8 and Gal 1:11-12. In the former, Paul is appealing to publicly available evidence because he's addressing churchgoers who doubt the physical resurrection of Christ. In the latter, Paul is appealing to his firsthand revelatory experience because he's vindicating his divine commission. In the former, Paul appeals to testimonial evidence to

establish a fact about Jesus. That's a different issue than he's making in Gal 1-2, where he's talking about himself, to his independent authority.

viii) In Acts 2, the observers don't literally see "tongues of fire". Rather, Luke uses "tongues" as a pun for xenoglossy. The description is poetic—Luke uses a simile—so it's hard to tell what the event actually looked like, although it has affinities with theophanic storms in the OT.

ix) There's evidence that xenoglossy is an ongoing, albeit rather rare phenomenon. Cf. Del Tarr, **THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD: A LINGUIST LOOKS AT THE MYSTERY OF TONGUES** (Springfield, Mo.: Access, 2010); Jordan May, **GLOBAL WITNESSES TO PENTECOST: THE TESTIMONY OF "OTHER TONGUES"** (Cleveland, Tenn.: CPT Press, 2013). So that's not mythological.

x) Since we don't have tape-recordings of 1C Corinthian glossolalia, we can't directly compare that to tongues in the modern charismatic movement. Hence, we can't identify the modern phenomenon with Paul's description.

xi) I doubt there's a uniform explanation for alien abduction stories. Some "abductees" are undoubtedly nothing more than publicity seekers. There is, however, some evidence linking the phenomenon to old hag syndrome. In that event, some alien abduction stories may recount genuine encounters, only these are occultic entities which "abductees" reinterpret in science fiction categories. Cf. Hufford, D. **THE TERROR THAT COMES IN THE NIGHT: AN EXPERIENCE-CENTERED STUDY OF SUPERNATURAL ASSAULT**

TRADITIONS (University of Pennsylvania Press; 2nd ed. 1989); "Sleep Paralysis as Spiritual Experience," **TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHIATRY** 42/1 (March 2005), 11-45; "Visionary Spiritual Experiences in an Enchanted World," **ANTHROPOLOGY & HUMANISM** 35/2 (November, 2010), 142-158.

xii) No doubt some people hallucinate, and hallucinations can be induced. That, however, fails to debunk all such reports, for it depends on your understanding of the mind/body problem. On the receiver/filter theory of the brain, induced states of altered consciousness can sometimes access an objective reality that's normally screened out by the brain. Cf. M. Beauregard, **BRAIN WARS** (HarperOne 2012).

xiii) Carrier takes for granted that revelatory dreams and visions are hallucinatory. No doubt some are. But there's evidence for veridical revelatory dreams and visions. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/11/premonitions.html>

xiv) Unlike Carrier, I don't dismiss all reported apparitions of the dead as hallucinatory. Indeed, there's evidence that some-crisis apparitions-are veridical encounters. Same with some hauntings and poltergeists. For instance, P. Wiebe, **GOD AND OTHER SPIRITS** (Oxford 2004).

xv) Even secular-trained psychiatrists refer some patients to clergymen for exorcism, because they exhibit symptoms of possession that are naturally inexplicable. For instance:

Peck, M. **GLIMPSES OF THE DEVIL** (Free Press 2005)

<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/04/health/exorcism-doctor/index.html>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/01/as-a-psychiatrist-i-diagnose-mental-illness-and-sometimes-demonic-possession/>

xvi) As an atheist, Carrier naturally dismisses sincere claims to hear an audible voice from God as psychotic or hallucinatory, but again, there's evidence that sometimes that's the real McCoy.

xvii) Dreams and visions of Jesus aren't confined to Christians. They include Jews and Muslims who are predisposed to be hostile to the Christian faith. For instance:

<http://denverseminary.edu/resources/news-and-articles/a-wind-in-the-house-of-islam/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2015/06/03/dreams-and-visions-the-muslim-encounter-with-isa/>

Corn gods

Continuing my analysis of Richard Carrier's *On the Historicity of Jesus* (Sheffield 2014). I'll comment on a section from chap 5,

Incarnate sons (or daughters) of a god who died and then rose from their deaths to become living gods granting salvation to their worshipers were a common and peculiar feature of pagan religion when Christianity arose...

i) Heathen deities are typically physical, and frequently humanoid beings to begin with, so they can't become what they already are. Some of them are shapeshifters (e.g. Proteus), but that's changing from one physical form to another. Heathen deities are modeled on the world. Modeled on human society and animals. They personify natural forces and natural cycles. Often they come into being through sexual reproduction. They can be killed. A fundamentally immanent and anthropomorphic view of deity.

ii) Carrier fails to distinguish between incarnation/resurrection, apotheosis/translation, and descending/reascending from the Netherworld. But those are categorically distinct.

...so much so that influence from paganism is the only plausible explanation for how a Jewish sect such as Christianity came to adopt the idea (again, Element 11). For example, you won't find this trend in ancient China. No such gods are found there.

i) But there's a first time for anything. After that the idea sometimes catches on. Carrier constantly appeals to Ianna's Descent. Well, was that original, or was adopted from a previous myth, which copied an earlier myth, and so and so forth? Carrier's argument generates an infinite regress, as if there can't be an original idea that spawns imitators.

ii) Since the life of Christ involves unique historical particulars, there's no presumption that every pre-Christian culture should have a similar narrative in its indigenous mythology.

iii) And Carrier's comparison is riddled with his trademark equivocations. That isn't just the view of Christian apologists. Consider the assessment of a standard secular reference work:

The category of dying and rising gods, once a major topic of scholarly investigation, must now be understood to have been largely a misnomer based

on imaginative reconstructions and exceedingly late or highly ambiguous texts.

There are two major forms of the Adonis myth, only brought together in late mythographical tradition (e.g. the 2C CE Bibliotheca, falsely attributed to Apollodorus of Athens) The first, which may be termed the Panyasisian form, knows only of a quarrel between two goddesses (Aphrodite and Persephone) for the affections of the infant Adonis. Zeus or Calliope decrees that Adonis should spend part of the year in the upperworld with one, and part of the year in the lowerworld with the other. This tradition of bilocation (similar to that connected with Persephone and, perhaps, Dumuzi) has no suggestion of death and rebirth. The second, more familiar Ovidian form narrates Adonis's death by a boar and his commemoration by Aphrodite in a flower. There is no suggestion of Adonis rising. The first version lacks an account of Adonis's death; the second emphasizes the goddess's mourning and the fragility of the flower that perpetuates his memory. Even when the two versions are combined, Adonis's alternation between the upper and lower worlds precedes his death.

The practice of addressing a statue "as if alive" is no proof of belief in resurrection; rather, that is the common presupposition of any cultic activity in the Mediterranean world that uses images.

Considerably later, the Christian writers Origen and Jerome, commenting on Ezk 8:14, and Cyril of Alexandria and Procopious of Gaza, commenting on Isa 18:1, clearly report joyous festivities on the third day to celebrate Adonis (identified with Tammuz) having been "raised from the dead". Whether this represents an interpretatio Christiana or whether late third- and fourth-century forms of the Adonis cult themselves developed a dying and rising mythology (possibility in imitation of the Christian myth) cannot be determined. This pattern will recur for many of the figures considered: an indigenous mythology and ritual focusing on the deities death and rituals of lamentation, followed by a later Christian report adding the element nowhere found in the earlier native sources, that the god was resurrected.

[Osiris] did not return to his former mode of existence but rather journeyed to the underworld, where he became the powerful lord of the dead. In

no sense can Osiris be said to have "risen" in the sense required by the dying and rising pattern.

*The myth [of Inanna] emphasizes the inalterable power of the realm of the dead, not triumph over it. No one ascends from the land of the dead unless someone takes his or her place. The pattern of alternation—half a year below, half a year above—is familiar from other myths of the underworld in which there is no question of the presence of a dying and rising deity (e.g. Persephone, as in Ovid, *Fasti* 4:613-4, or the youthful Adonis as described above), and is related, as well, to wider folkloristic themes of death delayed if a substitute can be found.*

*As the above examples make plain the category of dying and rising deities is exceedingly dubious. It has been based largely on Christian interest and tenuous evidence. As such, the category is of more interest to the history of scholarship than the history of religions. "Dying and Rising Gods", *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., 2005), 4:2535-39.*

*A word must be said here about the connection often made between the mysteries and the idea of "dying and rising divinities," who are linked to the vegetation cycle...In addition to an uninhibited use of terminology (e.g. resurrection is usually understood in the biblical and Christian sense), the chief defect of this theory is its utter neglect of source criticism...As we know today, there is no evidence at all that any of these gods was thought of as "rising" in any proper sense of the term...The often only fragmentary mythology centering on these divinities told of the disappearance or stay of the god in the lower world, where he lived on (as lord of the lower world or, in the case of Osiris, as judge of the dead)... "Mystery Religions," *ibid.*, 9:6328.*

Back to Carrier:

In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr wrote the following:

When we say that the Logos, who is the firstborn of God, Jesus Christ our teacher, was produced without sexual union, and was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascended to heaven, we propound nothing new or different from what you believe regarding those whom you call Sons of God. [In fact] . . . if anybody objects that [our god] was crucified, this is in common with the sons of Zeus (as you call them) who suffered, as previously listed. Since their fatal sufferings are all narrated as not similar but different, so his unique passion should not seem to be any worse-

Thus even Christians acknowledged the ubiquity of the dying-and-rising son-of-god theme in their surrounding pagan culture, and recognized it as a common theme even when every story differed in details from every other (on that being how syncretism works...

As a Christian apologist in a pagan culture, Justin is seeking common ground for the sake of argument. Of course Greco-Roman mythology contains examples of pagan gods who suffer, who die, are sometimes restored to life, sometimes resume their place in Olympus. That's because pagan gods are scaled up versions of human men and women as well as

pagan social mores. Promiscuous gods. Bickering gods. Rival divinities who murder each other to usurp the throne.

Plutarch is explicit about the cosmic version of the Osiris myth: he says Osiris actually incarnates and actually dies (albeit in outer space; but he dies, too, as Plutarch admits, also in the myth that places his death on earth at a single time in history) and is actually restored to life in a new supernatural body just as Jesus was, as Paul thoroughly explains in 1 Cor. 15).

i) Jesus doesn't have a "new supernatural body". Rather, he has an immortal version of the same body he died in.

ii) Osiris remained captive in the Netherworld. He never left the realm of the dead.

Speaking of the entire genre of incarnated dying-and-rising gods, Plutarch writes:

Now we hear the theologians affirming and reciting, sometimes in verse and sometimes in prose, that God is deathless and eternal in his nature, but due to some predestined design and

reason, he undergoes transformations of his person, and at one time enkindles his nature into fire and makes it entirely like everything else, and at another time he undergoes all sorts of changes in his forms and his passions and powers, even as the universe does today, but he is still called by the best known of his names. The more enlightened, however, concealing from the masses this transformation into fire, call him Apollo because of his solitary state, and Thus Plutarch attests to there being many historical narratives of pagan gods becoming incarnate and dying, their corpses vanishing, and rising from the dead, which are meant to allegorize what is really going on, which (as he implies here and explains elsewhere) is more cosmic in nature (see Element 14).

There's a lot going on in that tract:

- i)** A syncretistic impulse to merge the different pantheons of different cultures in the Roman Empire.
- ii)** Recognition that some gods, religious narratives, and fertility cults personify or allegorize natural forces and agricultural cycles.
- iii)** The philosophical issue of how to harmonize the one and the many, change and persistence.

iv) Plutarch's description is pantheistic and animistic.

v) Why suppose Plutarch's philosophical reflection is in anyway representative of how NT writers thought about matters?