

The Infidel Delusion

by

**Patrick Chan, Jason Engwer, Steve Hays
& Paul Manata**

Editor's Note

The following consists of work penned by multiple authors. While proof-reading has been done, it was decided at an early stage that each section would be independent of the others in terms of style and presentation. To that end, readers will notice that some authors have used footnotes while others have put their sources in parentheses at the end of a quotation. Furthermore, some may list full bibliographical information in a citation whereas others may abbreviate their citation. We have decided not to “standardize” these across the entire book, so as to keep more of the original style and authorial voice intact.

With some limited variance, the order in which the authors submitted material was: Steve Hays followed by Jason Engwer, then Patrick Chan, concluding with Paul Manata. While each writer penned his section on his own, later writers were able to have read some of the early drafts penned by previous writers, so there are a few references within this volume to other authors of this work.

Finally, many sources cited in this work consist of internet URLs. I have personally verified that each of these links is working as of July 18, 2010.

With that, it is my pleasure to present *The Infidel Delusion*.

— Peter Pike

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Introductions

Steve Hays

A. Raising the Bar

This is a review of *The Christian Delusion*,¹ edited by John Loftus. According to Michael Martin, who wrote a blurb for this book, “John Loftus and his distinguished colleagues have produced arguably the best critique of the Christian faith the world has ever known.”

Well, in that event, if *The Christian Delusion* turns out to be just another white elephant in the overcrowded zoo of militant atheism, then that’s a vindication of the Christian faith.

B. Who Cares?

According to James McGrath, who wrote a blurb for *The Christian Delusion*: “Christians who wish to critically examine and reflect on their beliefs will benefit from the outsider perspectives offered here. I join with its authors in encouraging you to dare to doubt. If you follow that courageous path, you may at times draw the wrong conclusions. If you do not, you will certainly be wrong at least as often.”

But does that really makes sense?

i) To begin with, courage is only a virtue if there are moral absolutes. Yet the contributor to *The Christian Delusion* who wrote the chapter on secular ethics denies moral realism. And other contributors also subscribe to moral relativism or—which comes to the same thing—cultural relativism.

So, in that case, why be courageous? If there’s no such thing as objective morality, then there’s no moral duty to be courageous—or epistemic duty to avoid wrong conclusions.

ii) Likewise, from an atheistic standpoint, what does it matter if you draw the right conclusions or the wrong conclusions? Suppose, for the sake of argument, that atheism is true. There is no heaven or hell. This is it.

In the mortuary lie two corpses: the corpse of Billy Graham and the corpse of Hector Avalos. Suppose the clinical pathologist removes the brain of each decedent, and puts each brain in separate jars of formaldehyde.

¹ J. Loftus, ed. *The Christian Delusion* (Prometheus Books 2010).

In one jar floats the brain of Hector Avalos. The necrotic brain of a man with a doctorate from Harvard. In the other jar floats the brain of Billy Graham. The necrotic brain of a Christian evangelist.

In one jar floats the brain of an atheist, in the other jar the brain of an evangelist. You can't tell which is which by looking at the jars. If the jars were switched or mislabeled, you couldn't tell the Christian brain from the atheist brain.

If you dissected the atheist brain, you couldn't tell that it belonged to an atheist. If you dissected the Christian brain, you couldn't tell that it belonged to a Christian.

From a secular perspective, the atheist brain drew the right conclusions while the Christian brain drew the wrong conclusions. When it was still alive, the brain of Hector Avalos disapproved of what Billy Graham's brain believed.

So there you have it—a dead disapproving brain! My dead brain is better than your dead brain! (On second thought, I guess a dead brain can't disapprove of anything anymore.)

Okay, so tell me why I should care which is which? Someday that will be your brain or my brain floating in the formaldehyde. What difference does it make if your dead brain drew the right conclusions while my dead brain drew the wrong conclusions? What difference does it make if your brain disapproved of my brain? At that point it makes no difference to either one of us.

Perhaps you'd say that while it makes no difference after we're dead, it makes a big difference while we're alive. And what difference would that be?

For one thing, how I think the trip will end certainly affects my capacity to enjoy the trip. Given a choice, it's better to end well even if I begin badly, than to end badly even if I begin well.

Suppose I win a free ticket to a tropical resort. There I will be treated to every sensuous pleasure. But suppose I have a premonition. Suppose I know that at the end of my vacation I'll be kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured for months on end.

Wouldn't that ominous presentiment spoil the anticipation of the whole vacation? How could I enjoy the tropical resort with that foreboding finale in view?

If, as a good little atheist, I know that when I die I'll just be a dead brain floating in formaldehyde, then that does, indeed, make a difference to my outlook in life. A depressing difference.

Do I think that's a reason to be a Christian? No.

It is, however, a reason to appreciate the fundamental asymmetry between the truth-claims of Christianity and atheism. It's a reason not to wax noble about the "courage" to

be an atheist.

And it's a reason not to go down that road in the first place. Not to take that fork in the road. For, by definition, atheism is a wrong turn. Even if atheism were "right," it is still a wrong turn.

Atheism is not a viable option. If you're a seeker or a doubter, don't waste your time on atheism. Rather, explore the other option which, if true, offers you more than a brain in a jar—alongside rows of other dead brains—neatly labeled and arranged on the dusty shelves of a steel cabinet in a storage room.

When atheists write books like *The Christian Delusion*, that very exercise illustrates the folly of atheism. Their incorrigible intellectual obtusity.

C. We're Review

In the introduction, Loftus tells us that "Richard Carrier did a yeomen's job with peer-reviewed comments on each one of the chapters, which has made this a better book" (17).

"Peer reviewed"? That's a pretty self-serving definition of peer review. Considering the fact that Carrier is a militant apostate and co-contributor to *The Christian Delusion*, he's hardly an impartial referee. Rather, this is making a team member the umpire. It comes as no surprise, then, that Carrier always calls the ball in favor of his own teammates. Loftus has redefined "peer review" as "we're review"—we review each other!

D. Credentials

i) *The Christian Delusion* makes a point of highlighting which contributors have doctorates. And it does the same thing with the blurbs.

This suggests the importance which it assigns to academic credentials. Yet, not all of the contributors have doctorates (Babinski, Loftus, Tobin).

If the point of highlighting advanced degrees is to show that a contributor is qualified to speak to the issue, then does the lack of such credentials mean a contributor is not qualified to speak to the issue?

ii) On a related note, not all of the contributors are writing within their field of expertise. For example, Avalos has a chapter entitled "Yahweh is a Moral Monster." However, Avalos doesn't have a doctorate in ethics or bioethics.

Likewise, Avalos has a chapter on "Atheism Was Not the Cause of the Holocaust." However, Avalos doesn't have a doctorate in modern European history.

Likewise, Jason Long has a chapter on "The Malleability of the Human Mind." However, Long doesn't have a doctorate in neurology.

So, once again, are relevant academic credentials important or unimportant?

E. Standards

The natural audience for *The Christian Delusion* consists of like-minded atheists. However, a number of folks who wrote blurbs for the book say Christians have a duty to read it as well. For instance, Allison says “Defenders of the faith will do believer and unbeliever alike a disservice if they do not rise to the challenge and wrestle with the thought-provoking arguments of Loftus and company.”

And Knopp says, “in this book he has prepared a buffet with other notable atheistic chefs that ‘honest Christians’ dare not ignore. Many will simply refuse the menu because of its perceived poisonous entrées. But Christians need to chew on what these cooks are serving, even though much may be hard to swallow or difficult to digest.”

If, however, *The Christian Delusion* is directed at believers as well as unbelievers, then the contributors can’t simply take their own methods and assumptions for granted. They can’t treat their own social mores as the default position. They can’t treat secular moral realism as the default position. They can’t treat methodological naturalism as the default position. And so on.

If the contributors are attempting to persuade Christians to abandon their faith, then the contributors must justify their operating assumptions. Otherwise, the whole exercise is question-begging and unconvincing from the get-go.

Jason Engwer

We live in a complicated universe. No worldview has an easy answer for every question. There are advantages to complexity, though. The depth of human relationships makes life more enjoyable in some ways, but more difficult in other ways. The complexities of language are an advantage in some contexts and a disadvantage in others. Life involves a lot of tradeoffs. One thing is gained at the expense of something else. Any belief system can be made to look bad by inordinately focusing on some elements of it while neglecting others.

To put *The Christian Delusion* in perspective, think about what issues the book does and doesn't address. Much of what you'd expect such a book to cover is there: the problem of evil, the alleged gullibility of ancient people, supposed errors in the Bible, etc. But what *isn't* there? And does the book adequately deal with what it does address?

When the Biblical documents argue for the Divine origin of Judaism, then Christianity, they do so largely on the basis of prophecy. Biblical authors and many of the most prominent figures in Biblical history are referred to as *prophets*, and the New Testament has much to say about *fulfillment*. When twenty-first-century critics write a book against Christianity that's more than four hundred pages long, with chapters focusing on topics like the malleability of the human mind and atheism's role in the Holocaust, how much do they say about prophecy? Not much. There's one chapter that focuses on a small portion of Biblical prophecy, arguing that Jesus was a failed apocalyptic prophet, but there's little coverage of the subject elsewhere. And the best Christian arguments for fulfilled prophecy are ignored.

The Biblical documents also have much to say about the reliability of historical testimony and the evidence of eyewitness testimony in particular. The highest church office, that of apostle, required its holders to be eyewitnesses, and the most prominent churches in early post-apostolic history were ones that had been in close contact with at least one of the apostles. In the late first century, First Clement 63 refers to old Christians who had been in the Christian communities of that day since youth, a reminder of the presence of witnesses who could have observed the sort of corruptions in early Christianity that the authors of *The Christian Delusion* allege. Polycarp, at least a contemporary of the apostles and probably one of their close disciples, lived into the second half of the second century. Likewise, early Jewish and Gentile opponents of Christianity, especially Jewish opponents, would have passed on information about the religion from generation to generation. It's not as though the enemies of Christianity would have waited until the second century or later to start coming up with arguments to use against the religion. Nor would we expect widespread memory losses or widespread apathy about the claims Christians were making among the early enemies of Christianity. Likewise, docetists would have had an interest in noting if Jesus never even *seemed* to exist on earth, early heretical groups who opposed Paul would have had an interest in noting that several of the letters attributed to him didn't arise until after his death, etc.

Are the historical claims made by the authors of *The Christian Delusion* evidenced in the historical record in the manner we would expect? For example, Richard Carrier argues that the gospel of Mark was written in a non-historical genre (303). Do the early Christian and non-Christian sources interpret the document in that manner? Or when John Loftus suggests that a false date for Jesus' second coming was a prominent teaching of Jesus and His earliest followers, do the early enemies of Christianity seem to be aware of such a falsification of the religion?

What we find, again and again, is that the extra-Biblical and early post-Biblical evidence is largely contrary to the theories put forward by the authors of *The Christian Delusion*, and such evidence is frequently neglected by those authors. When they argue against a traditional authorship attribution of a Biblical book or argue for an alternative interpretation of what the New Testament says about Jesus' resurrection, for example, they do so with highly speculative theories that neglect or even entirely ignore large strands of relevant data.

The authors of *The Christian Delusion* are aware of the significance of the evidence I'm referring to. They sometimes appeal to it themselves, though not enough and in a misleadingly selective way. John Loftus cites the eschatological beliefs of post-apostolic Christians in support of his own reading of the Bible, for example (335). He even appeals to sources as late as Lactantius and some information about the Montanists preserved by Epiphanius. Paul Tobin, like other critics of Luke's census, appeals to sources who wrote around a century or more after the purported event (163). Richard Carrier refers to the significance of what non-Christian sources thought of Christianity, but he doesn't say much beyond telling us that he wants sources "observing the originating events of the Christian religion" (297). *The Christian Delusion* doesn't show much interest in some of the most significant evidence we have. You won't find much consideration of the patristic evidence or the arguments of Christianity's early opponents.

It could be argued that we can't trust sources like the church fathers and the early opponents of Christianity, since ancient people were so ignorant and undiscerning. That sort of objection based on the alleged gullibility of ancient sources is common in skeptical circles, and it's a prominent part of *The Christian Delusion*. John Loftus tells us that Christianity comes from "an ancient superstitious people" (86). Paul Tobin dismisses the purported witnesses of the resurrection as "a few ill-educated, first-century Galilean peasants" (172). Robert Price refers to "ancient credulity" (279-280).

I've had many discussions about this issue with the editor of *The Christian Delusion*, John Loftus.² I've directed him to Glenn Miller's treatment of this subject.³ I've pointed out that a witness to an empty tomb, for example, could be ignorant of modern chemistry or superstitious in some of his beliefs on other subjects, yet be credible in what he reports about that tomb. Modern law courts don't dismiss the testimony of a witness to a murder just because he's illiterate, carries a good luck charm in his pocket, or believes in horoscopes. Yet, neither John Loftus' material in *The Christian Delusion* nor the material of

² <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/07/were-ancient-people-gullible-enough-to.html>

³ <http://www.christian-thinktank.com/mqfx.html>

the other contributors makes much of an effort to interact with Christian counterarguments concerning the alleged gullibility of ancient people. You won't find a detailed interaction with something like Glenn Miller's article on the subject or Richard Bauckham's material on eyewitness testimony.

Something you will find, however, is frequent appeal to scholarly majorities on issues like Biblical authorship (154, 166, 302). Yet, the contributors to the book sometimes disagree with scholarly majorities. Some of the contributors are even supportive of the view that Jesus didn't exist, a position rejected by the vast majority of modern scholarship. John Loftus, in the process of discussing Biblical eschatology, gives an example of how modern scholarship can change significantly even within a short period of time (322-323). The authors of *The Christian Delusion* often appeal to scholarly majorities without giving their readers much reason to agree with the majority and without interacting much, if at all, with the minority. And much of that majority scholarship relies on the sort of highly speculative theorizing I described above, in which a lot of the relevant evidence is neglected.

At some points in my reading of John Loftus' introduction to the book, I thought to myself, "He sounds like a Roman Catholic." The book frequently criticizes the Bible for being unclear, and it's often suggested that we can't reliably discern what scripture means (17-19, 52, 378). Everything from pro-homosexual to Nazi interpretations of the Bible are cited, and it's often suggested that we can't reach a reliable conclusion about which interpretation is correct and which isn't. Yet, the authors of *The Christian Delusion* often tell us what scripture means and why it's supposedly wrong. They sometimes refer to scripture (and other sources) as clear even on disputed points, if what's supposedly clear is something they want to criticize. For example, while discussing Biblical and extra-Biblical sources related to the census of Luke 2, Paul Tobin uses terms like "clincher", "unassailable", "inescapable", and "insurmountable" (161, 163), even to describe interpretations that are disputed. John Loftus approvingly cites Paul Copan's comments about what scripture "clearly" says on a disputed matter, and he then comments that Copan is "surely" right (246). Loftus' argument in chapter 12 depends on his own interpretation of the eschatology of the gospels, which he acknowledges to be a disputed issue (333).

It would have been helpful if we had been told up front about the rejection of objective moral standards by contributors like Hector Avalos and David Eller rather than hearing of it so late in the book (232, 358). That way, the frequent moral pronouncements we get from the book's contributors could have been held in better perspective.

I'll have more to say about these and other issues as my review of the book unfolds. These introductory comments are just an outline of why I consider the book a failure.

There is a lot that's good about the book, though. I disagree with some of the decisions about what topics to cover and to what extent to cover them, but most of the topic selection makes sense. I think animal suffering is a significant issue that's often neglected, for example. The book is generally well-written, and I didn't notice many typographical, spelling, or grammatical errors. A lot of the criticism of modern and past Christians is

warranted. Contributors like David Eller and Valerie Tarico are correct in noting the cultural and shallow nature of many people's alleged commitment to Christianity. There's a lot of valuable information in the book, like Richard Carrier's material on the history of science, in spite of the presence of other content that's not helpful.

Paul Manata

On his blog, Richard Carrier noted that the fifteen chapters that combine to make *The Christian Delusion* are “sufficient to establish that Christianity is a delusion.” However, one of Dr. Carrier’s co-authors, David Eller, tells us that there is “no such thing as Christianity, only Christianities” (26). The editor of the book agrees (196); both of them think there are *thousands* of Christianities. So the book Carrier lauds on his blog states that there is no such thing as Christianity, and since Carrier thinks fifteen chapters sufficient to show that thousands of Christianities are a delusion, we might want to think twice about the proper functioning of Carrier’s inductively aimed cognitive faculties.

Apart from this hiccup, Carrier is likewise wrong about his claim. Why Carrier would think a load of self-refuting chapters, exercises in confirmation bias, and childish snickering and giggling is sufficient to refute Christianity is beyond me. Beyond that, the last two chapters have no bearing on whether Christianity is a delusion. Christianity’s sane status is *logically consistent* with these claims: (1) Atheism is not the cause of the holocaust and (2) Christianity is not responsible for the rise of modern science. When you add the chapters that argue that Christianity is false because God didn’t make chocolate milk oceans with soil made from Oreo cookie crumbs (obviously, the beach is made of Nilla Wafers, not Oreos) (ch.9), chapters that argue for alethic and epistemic relativism and social constructionism (chs. 1-4), chapters that argue that we don’t know what the Bible means (chs. 6, 7) conjoined with chapters that tell us what the Bible means (chs. 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12), and chapters that affirm moral relativism (chs. 8, 13) combined with chapters that feign moral outrage at the Bible (ch. 8, 9, 14), then you have something sufficient to show that *you’re* stuck in a delusion: *The Infidel Delusion*.

Reviewing this book was hard because it was so bad. At times I just wanted to stop and relieve myself with bamboo shoots under my finger nails. I guess “review” isn’t really correct. My contribution to this joint “review” is more critical. I don’t just disagree with the authors and point out what relevant information they have ignored, but I get into some lengthy polemics too. I spend the most time on chapters 1 - 4, since my co-reviewers left me the most to pick up on in these chapters. I did not review chapters 10 and 11 because there were hardly any scraps left and my co-reviewers are far more competent than I am in those areas.

The best part of *The Christian Delusion* was that it pointed out that Christians have compromised and confused their unique religion with passing fads of culture. (Of course, Christians have made these criticisms too, and they have been making them longer and in a stronger form.) The worst parts were those parts meant to be substantive. These were some of the most poorly argued material I have ever seen. I know with a high degree of probability that the atheists who blurbed this book, like Michael Martin and Graham Oppy, did not read it. If they did, that’s embarrassing for them. Most of the time, and at crucial moments, arguments were not given, the reader was merely given a footnote refutation (assert and then send someone elsewhere to go look it up). Also, the authors did not engage the best representatives or arguments the other side could give, showing that the book is an exercise in confirmation bias. Skeptics were unquestioningly appealed to, hav-

ing a “thus-sayeth” kind of authority. Free thinkers and skeptics ought not like this exercise in dogmatic pulpit pounding.

That this lengthy review of ours destroys *The Christian Delusion* can be demonstrated by looking at another claim Carrier made on his blog. Of the argument in chapter 4, John Loftus’s “The Outsider Test for Faith Revisited,” Carrier says: “It’s the lynch pin of the whole book, the fulcrum on which every other chapter does Christianity in” [sic] (<http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2010/04/christian-delusion.html>). Since Carrier says this, and I’m sure humble John Loftus doesn’t disagree, and since our book review lays waste to his “outsider test for faith,” Carrier *must* say that we have laid waste to the entire book.

At the end of the day, *The Christian Delusion* is not a worry for the Christian. It is a paper tiger. Its authors stand on the mountain top, beating their chests and waving their swords in victory. They fail to realize that the battle is going on down in the valley below them and their sword is made of tinfoil. If you are looking for a serious critique of the Christian faith, *The Christian Delusion* is not the place to go. However, it is a good book for Christian fathers to use if they need lightweight material to teach their fifth-graders how to do apologetics. Of course this may offend the authors of the book. If so, they might want to think twice about (a) writing a book where believers are called idiots and foolish and dumb, and their God is called “stupid,” and (b) writing a book with such weak and self-refuting content as is found in *The Christian Delusion*.

Part 1: Why Infidelity Fails

A Review of Chapter One

Steve Hays

I. Self-Refuting Cultural Relativism

1. In chap. 1, Eller says, “One of the great mysteries is why, despite the best arguments against it, religion survives. After all, every argument in support of religion has been shown to be inconclusive or demonstrably false, yet religion persists...” (25).

Nothing like a topic sentence that blatantly begs the question. But wasn't The Christian Delusion supposed to disprove the Christian faith?

2. Eller says, “with the help of the missiologists, we have solved the mystery at the opening of this chapter...” (44).

Since the mystery assumes what he needs to prove, that's a solution to a pseudoproblem.

“Christians are not easily reasoned out of religion since they are not usually reasoned into it...they are not so much indoctrinated as enculturated...Like a pair of glasses, humans see with culture, but they do not usually see culture” (44).

But, of course, that solution, if valid, is a universal solvent which dissolves atheism as well as theism. For unbelievers are just as subject to the forces of social conditioning as believers.

Eller forgot to wear rubber gloves when he tried to pour acid on the Christian faith. As a result, he himself is now smarting from third-degree burns.

Jason Engwer

A Christian can agree with David Eller that culture has highly influenced Christianity and that Christianity has highly influenced culture. The disagreement is over the degree of influence. Is Eller right to claim that Christianity is “just” a cultural phenomenon (26)?

He makes that assertion, but he doesn’t demonstrate it. Yet, he tells us that he’ll “show” it (26). Judged by the objective he sets for his own chapter, he fails. It’s not as though his chapter demonstrates the falsity and strictly cultural nature of belief in prophecy fulfillment, Jesus’ resurrection, and other evidence Christians cite to argue for the Divine origin of their religion.

But Eller is right in much of what he says along the way. Since culture was initiated through God’s creation of the first humans and the characteristics He gave them and their surrounding universe, and since culture has been molded along the way by His revelation and His activity in history, for example, we would expect Christianity to be highly integrated with culture. From a Christian perspective, God often works through natural means, means that are part of the nature He created. But it’s not as though Eller has proven that every convert to Christianity who claims to have been influenced by a vision, a supernatural dream, a Divine orchestration of circumstances, or some other supernatural process is mistaken. Eller set the goal for his chapter too high, and that’s his fault.

Eller’s claim that Christianity makes “no sense at all” to outsiders (29) is vague. Surely he isn’t claiming that Christians and non-Christians have nothing in common. And since Christianity claims to have a revelation from God that involves specific historical individuals, specific commandments given by God, etc., we wouldn’t *expect* people unfamiliar with that revelation or unconvinced by the evidence for it to agree with all of the specifics involved. If you arrive at such specifics by means of accepting a particular view of Divine revelation, then why expect people who haven’t accepted that view to agree with its contents?

I think it’s significant that while Eller rightly notes such a high degree of Christian influence on Western society and the United States in particular (33), John Loftus highlights the religious pluralism of modern America (90), and Hector Avalos highlights the West’s secularism (219). Such notions can be compatible with each other, but comments like those of Loftus and Avalos should be taken with Eller’s qualification in mind. There has been some pluralizing and secularizing of Western cultures in modern times, but there’s still been, and is, a large Christian influence.

Eller’s claim that the December 25 date for celebrating Jesus’ birth “was borrowed from previous religions like Mithraism” (40-41) is dubious.⁴ He goes on to say that there’s no basis for December 25 in scripture (41), but why would there need to be?

⁴ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/12/december-25-and-paganism.html>

Paul Manata

In what hindsight might declare to be an embarrassing gaffe, David Eller opens up a book purporting to show “The *Christian* Delusion” with the claim that there is “no such thing as Christianity but rather Christianities” (26). Of course, the book represents itself as showing that Christianity *as such* is a delusion, and this in fifteen chapters. Apparently there are some essential beliefs various Christians hold to such that there can be something like the *Christian* delusion. If not, then I dare say fifteen chapters is nowhere near the inductive accumulation needed to show that all these thousands of “Christianities” are deluded. But surely the retort is, “The belief that there is anything like Christianity (singular) is one of the delusions; for you see, there are only Christianities (plural).” In that case, perhaps I should take a seat and politely whistle until the authors get around to showing that *my* Christianity is deluded.

No doubt this would be considered rude and the authors of the book would feel slighted. They might say, “Why, the Resurrection was critiqued and Jesus’ life was shown to be best classified as myth. And you see, you just can’t be considered a good card-carrying Christian if you don’t hold these beliefs.” It is rather like pointing out that though there are many ducks (plural) on the pond, there is something that unites them such that we can classify them all as instances of duck (singular) and distinguish them from, say, the fish swimming in the pond. So there turns out to be such a thing a Christianity after all. I mean, surely the authors would cry foul if I said that nothing in their book showed that Christianity is a delusion for I hold no belief that was addressed in the book. I could claim Christianity is the various beliefs about my local town, like the best fishing holes or the best place for happy hour, for instance. No doubt that would be met with an indignant David Eller, shouting, “No, no, no! *That’s* not Christianity.” Setting aside this slip of the lip, I will now offer some criticisms of Eller’s chapter.

It might be upsetting for those atheists who want to show that they can be moral and can provide a basis for morality without religion to learn that they’re simply, and quite ignorantly, regurgitating the Christian ethos they swim in.

[N]on-Christians living in Christian-dominated societies live a life permeated with Christian assumptions and premises. Christians and non-Christians alike are literally immersed in Christian cultural waters, and like fish they usually take for granted the water they swim in (33).

According to Eller, these “cultural waters” include *everything*. It “grounds and informs a particular view of reality” (29). So much for those atheists, like Richard Carrier, who, in the same volume, writes a chapter that Christianity is not responsible for modern science. If he were listening to Eller he would not have made this mistake. Eller gives us Cornelius Van Til on steroids. This is an admission to “borrowed capital” *in excelsis*!

Yet, it is not the odd view of Christianity that Eller holds that I’m going to comment on, tempting as it is (he’s been hornswoggled by some evangelicals into viewing Christianity in hyper-worldview terms, intimating that there are specifically Christian ways to turn

wrenches and pound nails). I mean, I would love to jump all over Eller for telling us that there is no such thing as Christianity (just Christianities) on page twenty-six, only to later tell us:

Christianity's disdain for the physical and bodily does not mean that Christianity is content to leave the body alone. Christianity, like all other religions, sets standards for how the body should be dressed, groomed, and treated.

He seems to be treating Christianity as a single religion that can be identified and demarcated from other religions by common themes. Not only that, he apparently doesn't think the Book of Genesis belongs to Christianity, for it is right from the start that God declares his *physical* creation to be *good*. Indeed, God gave us *bodies* and he will *physically* resurrect our *bodies*.

Eller constantly confuses what some Christians have said and done with Christianity *qua* revealed religion. That some Christians have thought the Bible has set standards for dressing and grooming and eating is about as profound as calling atheism a religion because John Loftus lectures us for eating meat rather than tofu. Further, Loftus tells us that atheism entails leftist politics, along with all of its trappings. Would Eller want to say that atheists can't be argued out of their religion? Just because Loftus thinks eating a Big Mac is cruel—even if he thinks his atheism entails that view—does not mean that atheism really does entail that view. Surely Eller can see this distinction.

Now, if he wants to *argue* that atheism entails these views, by all means, he should do so. If he wants to *argue* that Christianity entails details on what to wear, eat, and how to vote, then by all means, let him do so. But let us not have this sophomoric appeal to what some Christians have said or done be turned into an argument that *Christianity* is about these things just because the mere fact that some Christians have said the Bible tells us, say, to wear certain clothing. Surely, someone like Graham Oppy does not think me impious for not wearing my camel hair tunic while typing this review, does he? After all, it's at the cleaners.

No, not even these kinds of inanities Eller has peppered through the pages of his chapter are the subject of my critique. Neither will I waste time interacting with Eller's Johnny-come-lately indictment of "Christian" rap, rock music, video games, mega churches, Joel Osteen, and consumer-driven marketing strategies for a relevant and sexy church. These criticisms have been around for quite some time, and in more scathing form than Eller could ever muster. The best criticisms have come from Christians, like David Wells, Michael Horton, Darryl Hart, Christian Smith, and Mark Noll. It has been shown by writers like these that much of American Christianity counts more as American than Christian. Eller doesn't even engage that relevant literature. He offers nothing profound here.

Where Christianity does allow variations because of culture has already been found in the religion itself. The Westminster Confession of Faith recognizes that,

there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed (1.6).

Eller doesn't even mention the concepts of adiaphora and Christian liberty let alone engage them in a critical discussion. If he applied this reasoning to his own beliefs then he would not say that science, logic, and evidence are the "stock in trade" of the atheist (26). He would not act as if he's pointing out something interesting, unique, and devastating for the Christian faith.

Atheists are diverse. They are relativists and realists; libertarians, compatibilists and illusionists with respect to free will; conservatives and liberals; Dapper Dans and Steve Urkles. Atheists like John Loftus can say, "the only thing we can and should trust is the sciences" (Loftus 89), while trained atheistic scientists like Larry Zimmerman can say, "I personally do reject science as a privileged way of seeing the world" (Boghassian, *Fear of Knowledge*, Oxford, 2). Eller, an anthropologist, fails to let his readers know that many in the scientific community do not even consider anthropology and the other social sciences to be science. They lag behind the natural sciences in "sophistication and rigor" and need to "catch up" by "aping the methods of natural science." Social scientists have gone so far as to wonder whether the "methods of natural science are not necessarily appropriate for studying social phenomena" (Okasha, *Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 11, 124).

Eller doesn't mention the claims of Kuhnians, who argue that science is a social and cultural activity and that what scientists see is heavily dependent on background beliefs obtained from their culture or sub-culture. Eller doesn't mention anthropologists like Jonathan Marks who argues in his book *Why I Am Not a Scientist: Anthropology and Modern Knowledge* (University of California, 2009) that scientists often see what they want to see and that the peer review and test-and-check methods are nowhere near as objective as some naively suppose. Marks points out how politics and grant money drive scientific findings, causing evidence to be falsified or exaggerated. Eller fails to mention what atheistic sociologists have said about science and scientists:

Scientists are people who work in an unusual kind of local community. This community is characterized by high prestige, lengthy training and initiation, notoriously bad fashion choices, and expensive toys. But according to sociologists, it is still a community in which beliefs are established and defended via local norms that are human creations, maintained by social interaction (Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, The University of Chicago, 126).

For Eller to pretend his cultural claims about Christianity affect the positive epistemic status a Christian may have for her beliefs, while not bothering to let his readers know about the double-edged nature of this criticism, is simply an exercise in confirmation bias. For the "sociology of science in the latter part of the twentieth century [has] tended to

suggest an unusual *picture* of science. This is a picture in which science is controlled entirely by human collective choices and social interests” (Godfrey-Smith, 134). I would never think of devaluing science merely because of the wasteland of divergent beliefs many atheistic scientists hold to regarding the nature of science. Yet the implications of Eller’s post are devastating to science, while this Christian defends science against those very unsettling implications. That has to sting.

An unfortunate conclusion that can be inferred from the above is that Eller’s co-writers must either accept the evisceration of their esteemed trust in science, or they can hide Eller away in the closet, ashamed of his “critique” of Christianity. Or a third option: they can engage in confirmation bias and laud the epistemic vice of treating opposing beliefs to a double standard.

Everything Eller says of Christianity can be pushed back at him and his atheism. The contributors to *The Christian Delusion* worship science and adhere to a form of scientism, yet Eller doesn’t apply the identical “critique” he gives Christianity to his fellow contributors. For some reason, Eller doesn’t claim that when atheists and scientists recognize this “diversity, plasticity, and relativity” pointed out above, they “will see little merit in [atheism or science] . . .” (Eller 45). No, he exempts himself and his fellow contributors from his own criticisms, like a man who looks in the mirror and forgets his own image.

Come to think of it, there is nothing to critique in Eller’s chapter. If he could get outside his bubble and his fascination with confirming his biases, he’d note that Christians, like my fellow reviewers, are well aware of the different beliefs Christians have. We are aware of heretical cults that claim to be in the same line of descent. We are aware that some Christians try to baptize video games. We are aware of the snake dancers and poison drinkers. They exist. But their existence does nothing to determine the truth value of the propositions Christians confess. That Christians have made bad music and movies has no bearing on whether Jesus was a real, historical individual who is fully God and fully man, who came to earth, fulfilled the law, died, and was resurrected from the dead for the justification of His people. It has no bearing on whether the universe shows signs of intelligent design. It has no bearing on whether the universe was caused to exist by the intention of a personal first cause. It has no bearing on whether reasoning presupposes theism. It has no bearing on whether God is required to ground moral truths. It has no bearing on whether the conjunction of naturalism and evolution is self-defeating. That some Christians have grown up in Christian households and in a Christian culture has no bearing on the truth of the claims Christians make. Eller can *describe* how Christians have behaved and all the thousands of beliefs they have held all he wants, but let’s not pretend that it does anything to overturn the degree of warrant a Christian has for the truth of her beliefs. It’s something like *that* which is needed to show “the Christian delusion.”

A Review of Chapter Two

Steve Hays

II. Filtered Infidelity

1. Tarico says, “The problem is—research on human cognition suggests that I am neither fair-minded nor reasonable. None of us are. And it’s not just a matter of sloppy thinking. Our brains have built-in biases that stack the odds against objectivity... One of the strongest built-in mental distortions we have is called confirmation bias. Once we have a hunch about how things work, we seek information that fits what we already think. It’s like our minds set up filters—with contradictory evidence stuck in gray tones on the outside and the confirmatory evidence flowing through in bright and shining color... Bias is our default setting, and most of the distortions happen below the level of conscious awareness” (50-52).

Needless to say, this generates a dilemma for the atheist:

- i) If, on the one hand, we are hardwired to filter out counterevidence, then that undermines cognitive science. For cognitive science would also be prey to confirmation bias.
- ii) If, on the other hand, we waive the self-referential incoherence, then confirmation bias cuts equally against theism and atheism.

So why would this essay be included in a book critiquing the Christian faith? For this essay can be turned against the various contributors. Infidels are neither “fair-minded” nor “reasonable.” They have “built-in biases” that “stack the odds against objectivity.” They filter out evidence that falsifies their atheism. And this operates at a subliminal level, so it’s uncorrectable.

2. Tarico says, “When we overstate our ability to know, we play into the fundamentalist fallacy that certainty is possible” (55).

- i) And does her denial that certainty is possible play into the same fallacy? Is she certain that certainty is unattainable? But she can’t be certain that uncertainty is unattainable since, by her own admission, that’s fallacious.
- ii) Her claim that certainty is unattainable is only as certain as the cognitive science which underwrites her claim. But if certainty is unattainable, then cognitive science is uncertain, in which case she can’t invoke cognitive science to make blanket claims about the limits of certainty.

3. Tarico says, “Despite these limitations, cognitive research does offer what is rapidly becoming a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon of belief. More and more, we can explain Christian belief with the same set of principles that explain supernaturalism generally” (62).

i) Even if Christian belief had the same belief-forming mechanisms as other beliefs (e.g. our belief in the existence of an external world), how would that undermine Christianity? If God is the Creator, he designed our belief-forming mechanisms.

ii) Once again, her argument, if sound, cuts both ways. If it cuts against theism, it cuts against atheism.

iii) In addition, the question of why people believe what they do is secondary to the question of evidence. Invoking cognitive science doesn't explain away evidence for the Resurrection, any more than it can explain away evidence for gravity, or 9/11. Analyzing the psychodynamics of belief does nothing to address the objective challenges to atheism.

Jason Engwer

Valerie Tarico writes:

“Arriving at belief in an infallible God by way of an inerrant Bible requires an unwarranted belief in yourself....When we overstate our ability to know, we play into the fundamentalist fallacy that certainty is possible.” (53, 55)

She notes that beliefs are often formed by unreliable means (53-54).

But the existence of a false sense of certainty in some contexts doesn't prove that there can't be a true sense of certainty. And a Christian doesn't have to claim certainty in order to have faith (Mark 9:24 and its surrounding context). Trust is trust, even if its object is considered a probability rather than a certainty. Tarico isn't the only contributor to the book who misrepresents faith (78, 191).

She asks:

“How can a minister with a high school education - or a doctorate, for that matter - be convinced after two thousand years of theological blood feuds that he knows how God meant the book of Genesis to be interpreted?” (52)

She should pose that question to another contributor to the book, Edward Babinski, who suggests that he knows what cosmology Genesis teaches. A Christian could claim to have a supernatural certainty that comes from God concerning the Bible's meaning, but he could also arrive at conclusions about Genesis that he considers probable rather than certain, much like Babinski.

Tarico's suggestion that Paul's Damascus Road experience was “possibly a temporal lobe seizure” (62) is a grossly inadequate suggestion that doesn't even come close to explaining all of the relevant data.⁵

Like David Eller's earlier chapter, Tarico's chapter makes some good points that are worth considering, and her naturalistic explanation for Christian belief surely is an accurate assessment of many professing Christians. But there's no reason to think her explanation is exhaustive. The existence of spurious faith, or true faith partly brought about or altered by natural means, doesn't prove the nonexistence of reliable Christian faith.

⁵ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/07/pauls-conversion.html>

Patrick Chan

Dr. Valerie Tarico seeks to understand Christian religious belief and experience in light of cognitive science in order to call into question the objective veracity of Christian belief and Christianity itself.

Brain in a Vat

Pursuant to this she applies the scientific method to Christian religious belief and experience. Among several laudatory statements about modern science, she positively quotes that the scientific method has been called “what we know about how not to fool ourselves” (50).

But this is not necessarily true. For example, if Tarico is an atheist, evolutionist, and metaphysical naturalist, then it is quite possible her cognitive faculties are unreliable and thus she would not be able to make veridical observations in the first place. Her own beliefs would not necessarily have any correspondence to reality. Here she would need to address Alvin Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism for starters.⁶

Oddly enough, Charles Darwin had a similar notion⁷: “But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”

Speaking a bit more broadly, the scientific method, and in fact science as a whole, has its limitations. We might start with the demarcation problem, for instance, which pertains to the parameters of what qualifies as science vs. non-science or pseudoscience.

In fact, “science” covers many different areas of physical phenomena. Science could mean anything from dissecting a frog to understand its anatomy, peering at the starry skies through a telescope in order to identify celestial objects, looking at slides of a bacterial sample under a microscope, mixing chemicals in a test tube to get a specific reaction, studying chimpanzee behavior in Tanzania, colliding atomic particles together, looking at the physiology of the heart pumping blood to the rest of the body, replicating DNA, tagging birds to investigate seasonal migration patterns, using functional neuroimaging techniques to study brain behavior, or using thought-experiments about time, space, and motion to better understand the nature of gravity.

So how does one define “science” or decide what constitutes science and what does not? Is “science” best defined by empiricism? If so, then science begins with making an observation and then developing a hypothesis based on the observation. But there are inherent problems even in making a simple observation. How many observations will a scien-

⁶ Beilby J. (ed.). (2002). *Naturalism Defeated?: Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism*. New York: Cornell University Press.

⁷ <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-13230>

tist need to make before he can be certain the next observation will be the same or similar enough to his previous observation(s) such that he can formulate a hypothesis? For all the scientist knows, the next observation could be entirely different than the previous observation(s).⁸

Likewise, the scientist lacks epistemic certainty that what he perceives in his observation is necessarily veridical. At best, the observation is a sensory-mediated perception which may or may not correspond to the real external world.⁹ Given Tarico's beliefs, how will she surmount this in order to arrive at objective truth?

Related, there are debates over whether the scientist should always only assume methodological naturalism in conducting science. Also, there are difficulties determining certain features of the scientific method such as falsifiability and testability. Not to mention science must make several assumptions in order to properly function at all. First, it must assume the universe is ordered such that the scientist can discover causes of physical phenomena and formulate scientific theories of physical phenomena. There must be regularity for there to be predictability. In the same way, the principle of uniformity must be assumed for science to be as accurate as Tarico implies it is. If the speed of light is not constant, or if gravity operates differently in the Milky Way than in other galaxies, then science would be further limited. As well, scientific theories and laws must maintain throughout all time – past, present, and future.

Scientists cannot have absolute certainty that the scientific theory du jour will not someday become passé. Humoralism, luminiferous ether, the Piltdown man, and phlogiston have all come and gone. At best, there is a spectrum of relative certainty. Some scientific theories are, relatively speaking, more certain than other scientific theories. But no single theory is absolutely certain such that scientists can know the theory will not be superseded by a better theory in the future.

Or as philosopher William Lane Craig has put it, there at least five things which science cannot demonstrate¹⁰:

1. Logical truths.
2. Metaphysical truths (e.g. the existence of other minds, the external world, that the universe was not created five minutes ago with the appearance of age).
3. Ethical judgments.
4. Aesthetic judgments.
5. Science itself (e.g. the universal constancy of the speed of light).

I don't say all this to invalidate science or scientific theories or discoveries. Rather, I point these things out in order to show that science is hardly the be-all and end-all in the

⁸ Birkett K. (1997). *Unnatural Enemies: An introduction to science and Christianity*. Kingsford: Matthias Media.

⁹ Berkeley G. (1713). *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*;
<http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/stehays/PT.Hays.Why.Believe.apologetics.2.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkBD20edOco>

acquisition of true knowledge about the world around us that Tarico appears to wish for us to believe it is. Again, science has its limitations.

In short, Tarico must address the metascientific issues before she can use the scientific method to investigate phenomena including our cognitive faculties and processes. This is especially true given her atheism, among other things. She needs to put her own house in order before she can adequately mount a critique of Christianity.¹¹

Neurulation

Tarico all but argues that belief in God is nothing more than the byproduct of certain cognitive processes. She contends Christian religious beliefs and experiences can be explained by neuroscience and neuropsychology, and, as such, falsifies Christianity.

The problem is, if this is her argument, it commits the genetic fallacy: if one can explain the origin of a phenomenon (Christian religious belief), then the phenomenon is false. But if God exists and created humans, then it is possible God made our cognitive faculties function as they do. As Plantinga notes¹²: “To show that there are natural processes that produce religious belief does nothing, so far, to discredit it; perhaps God designed us in such a way that it is by virtue of those processes that we come to have knowledge of him.”

This point alone is enough to discredit Tarico’s entire argument. But we can say more.

Reductionism

Tarico references psychological and neurological studies on confirmation bias (inclination to favor data which confirms one’s preconceptions), confabulation (false memories which we believe true), and how humans are inclined to create narratives in order to explain the world around them. She cites hyperactive agency detection (over-attribution of events to conscious beings), apophenia (perception of meaningfulness in discrete phenomena), and the sense of knowing or feeling of certainty which she maintains stems from specific regions in the brain independent of regions where reasoning occurs. And Tarico mentions rare disorders such as the Capgras delusion (belief that a loved one has been replaced by an imposter) and prosopagnosia (the inability to recognize faces) as lending further credence to her argument. These are meant to support her argument that our belief in God is no more than a result of certain neurological processes, and hence the existence of God is no more than a human construct.

For the moment, let us grant the validity of each of the above. That is, let us grant that no psychologists or neuroscientists significantly dispute the fact that “normal,” healthy humans are prone to confirmation bias, confabulation, hyperactive agency detection, apophenia, feelings of certainty in spite of the evidence, and so forth. At this point, a reasonable question one might ask is, what is the *least* we can infer from all this? When one has

¹¹ For example, she might consider books by Del Ratzsch or Bas Van Fraassen.

¹² Plantinga A. (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 145.

made an inference, one might then proceed to build a case for other positions, building greater claims upon these lesser claims. Hence one logically moves from the least to the greater. But as I read her Tarico instead seems to ask, what is the *most* we can infer from all this? She bypasses the hard spade work of building reasonable arguments and jumps to what may or may not be a warranted conclusion, i.e. Christian religious belief is no more than a cognitive process.

Meditation over Mediation

What's more, Tarico jumps to the conclusion that, because it is possible cognitive processes *mediate* religious beliefs and experiences, then cognitive processes must *create* religious beliefs and experiences. However, "mediate" is not automatically identical to "create." At least Tarico has not built a reasonable case for why she thinks the former should somehow be correlated with the latter.

Turing Test

Another problem is, even if what Tarico argues is true, subjective feelings of certainty or uncertainty do nothing to invalidate objective truths. If one has a right temporal lobe lesion, and subsequently has a religious experience, does this mean Christianity is not objectively true? No. One would have to examine the objective evidence.

Take the reverse: feelings of uncertainty. Many Christians struggle with the assurance of salvation. Does this mean they are not genuine Christians? Not necessarily. One needs to examine objective evidences as well.

Artificial Intelligence

Tarico compares the human mind or brain to computers or information processing machines and the like. However, such language is ironic because, on the one hand, machines have been purposefully designed by humans using their higher cognitive faculties; but, on the other hand, as an atheist Tarico would presumably not accept that our brains were intentionally designed by an intelligent designer. From her perspective, the human brain might be a random happenstance in the universe, but it cannot be a deliberately manufactured machine like a computer.

Mind over Matter

More importantly, perhaps, not all neuroscientists would agree the neurophysiology of religious belief makes the existence of God no more than a figment of one's imagination. In fact, the cognitive and neural foundations of religious belief are hotly disputed among scientists and physicians, not to mention other academics such as philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists.

At a minimum, the theory that religion is a byproduct of cognitive processes is not the only or arguably best theory in town among academics. Another competitive theory post-

ulates that religion is a social-cultural adaptation which enabled our species to better bond in groups or communities and thus contributed to our survival. Of course, many subscribe to both theories simultaneously as the one theory does not preclude the other; the two are not mutually exclusive. But Tarico makes it seem as if the byproduct theory is the definitive theory. But as someone with an earned doctorate trained to seek objectivity, one would think Tarico ought to give more disclosure about the available competing theories.

To take another example about divergence of opinions regarding the neuropsychology of religion, a recent paper comments¹³: “Overall, these findings show a low degree of correspondence and no relationship to any proposed psychological architecture underlying religious belief.” Other scientists also using neuroimaging studies believe they have discovered significant cultural influences in human cognition¹⁴, which again could indicate that religious belief is not solely determined by the underlying neurophysiology. Similarly, neuroscientist Mario Beauregard, quantum physicist Henry Stapp, and psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz have published research and written books which would seem to contradict Tarico’s contentions¹⁵.

At any rate, the least inference we can draw from all this is that there is disagreement among working scientists familiar with the latest research over the contribution cognitive processes make in the formation of religious belief. This sits in contrast to Tarico’s chapter which makes it seem as if the matter was all but conclusively settled.

Other avenues which might be relevant and worth pursuing are studies of individuals who have had out-of-body experiences (OBEs) or near-death experiences (NDEs).

Free Your Mind

In a controversial neuroimaging-based study¹⁶, an African-American psychologist named Jennifer Richeson found “a positive correlation between racial bias scores and the recruitment of executive control regions [in the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex] upon exposure to black faces.”

She therefore concluded “our results suggest that individuals with high scores on subtle measures of racial bias may put forth additional effort to control their thoughts and beha-

¹³ Kapogiannis D., Barbey A., Su M., Zamboni G., Krueger F., & Grafman J. (2009). Cognitive and neural foundations of religious belief. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 106, 4876-4881.

¹⁴ Han S. & Northoff G. (2008). Culture-sensitive neural substrates of human cognition: a transcultural neuroimaging approach. *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience*, 9, 646-654.

¹⁵ Schwartz J., Stapp H., & Beauregard M. (2005). Quantum physics in neuroscience and psychology: a neurophysical model of mind-brain interaction. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 360, 1309-1327; Schwartz J. & Begley S. (2002). *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force*. New York: Reagan Books; Beauregard M. & O’Leary D. (2007); *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Case for the Existence of the Soul*. New York: HarperOne.

¹⁶ Richeson J., Baird A., Gordon H., Heatherton T., Wyland C., Trawalter S., & Shelton J. (2003). An fMRI investigation of the impact of interracial contact on executive function. *Nature: Neuroscience*, 6, 1323-1328.

vivors.” That is, Richeson believed that a certain region of the brain (i.e. the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex) showed high activity when looking at African-American faces because volunteers were exerting extra effort to keep themselves from racially prejudicial thoughts and actions.

Richeson’s conclusion was apparently met with a storm of controversy. But even if we ignore her conclusion, the fMRI scans do seem to show high activity in a certain region of the brain when looking at African-American faces which is positively correlated with racial bias scores.

As such, would this not mean it is possible we have found a “racism” part of the brain? If so, then would Tarico explain the history of racism (at least in regard to African-Americans) as due to an active right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex?

Jedi Mind Tricks

In a parenthetical comment, Tarico thinks it is possible the Apostle Paul’s Damascus Road experience is attributable to a temporal lobe seizure. There are several problems with this. Jason Engwer has pointed out resources which would help. Please refer to his chapter.

At the same time, I would like to note an additional problem: this assumes such an experience can in part be isolated to a particular region of the brain. Specifically, it assumes the temporal lobe is the most likely candidate for religious experiences. But as a pair of scientists summarize in their research on the mystical experiences of a certain group of nuns:

The main goal of this functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study was to identify the neural correlates of a mystical experience. The brain activity of Carmelite nuns was measured while they were subjectively in a state of union with God. This state was associated with significant loci of activation in the right medial orbitofrontal cortex, right middle temporal cortex, right inferior and superior parietal lobules, right caudate, left medial prefrontal cortex, left anterior cingulate cortex, left inferior parietal lobule, left insula, left caudate, and left brainstem. Other loci of activation were seen in the extra-striate visual cortex. These results suggest that mystical experiences are mediated by several brain regions and systems.¹⁷

In other words, religious experiences are not necessarily isolatable to a specific region of the brain. At the very least, the claim is open for debate.

¹⁷ Beauregard M. & Paquette V. (2006). Neural correlates of a mystical experience in Carmelite nuns. *Neuroscience Letters*, 405, 186-190.

Paul Manata

What better way to show that Christians are deluded than to enlist the aid of someone upset with Christians and other religious “zealots” for getting in the way of her self-described “spiritual journey in search of love and truth” (valerietarico.com home page, accessed 7/5/10). Though Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle might be upset with someone stealing their thunder, atheists such as cognitive scientists Paul and Pat Churchland might simply giggle at the grip folk-psychology has on fundamentalist village atheists. After reading Eller tell us “logic and evidence” are the stock atheists trade in, I wasn’t expecting to come across a chapter by someone on a spiritual vision quest inspired by the kind of koans you might have heard bandied about in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco back in the sixties. More than that, I certainly wasn’t expecting to see “Christian belief” in the chapter title considering Eller just told us that Christianity is not even about “beliefs” (26). On the other hand, Tarico does inform her readers that she is Italian. Same here. That means I better get started on the review before she yells “*non rompere!*” at me.

As mentioned, Tarico begins her chapter by contradicting Eller, claiming that Christianity is primarily a religion about right belief, orthodoxy. So far so good. She takes it as her job to look at Christian belief through the lens of cognitive science, to “understand the psychology of belief” (50). In doing so Tarico puts on the various hats of cognitive scientist, sociologist, religious studies major, and philosopher. This awkward jack of all trades approach makes for some very confusing reading. At times, it is painfully clear that Tarico dabbles in she knows not what. Other times, Tarico destroys the credibility of her entire chapter—indeed, the entire book.

For example, she writes that, “We humans are not rational about *anything*, let alone religion” (48, emphasis mine). Thus: for any x, if x is a subject of human thought, then for any human, y, y is irrational with respect to x. I leave it to the reader to plug into x *any* subject of human thought and see the dire outcomes that result. (If the reader is stuck, she can begin by plugging “cognitive science” in for x.)

There are several aspects of Tarico’s chapter that I would like to comment on more thoroughly but will only mention briefly. First, Tarico seems to endorse the “module” approach to the mind (57) but ignores the fact that the debate on the module/general-purpose-problem-solver view of the mind is still alive and well in cognitive science. However, “religious belief” has not been considered one of the modules. Perhaps she endorses something like Jerry Fodor’s approach in *The Modularity of Mind* (MIT 1993), where the mind is viewed as both. But then religious beliefs still would not be a module on his view because the operation of modules is *mandatory*. Since there are atheists, I don’t suspect they would want to endorse a modular view of religious beliefs. The problem with the opposite view is non-modular systems cannot be studied scientifically, according to Fodor.

Secondly, Tarico assumes that the characteristically mental is physical. That is, she assumes without argument that features of consciousness like thought, intentions, belief

content, and subjective reports are the proper subject of scientific study, being identical to, or a function of, brain states. But it seems very hard to say what a *belief* (for example) would be on this materialist understanding. In discussing Christian belief through the lens of cognitive science, Tarico construes beliefs as essentially having propositional *content*. But what would this mean on a materialist understanding of the mind? How do assemblages of neurons have content? What is it for them to have content? Indeed, much of what Tarico purports to be explaining seems to me to be outside the reach of scientific investigation. A materialist view of the mind can't give us a view of Christian belief through the lens of cognitive science because a materialist view of the mind can't give us a view of *belief* (if we assume content or semantics is a necessary feature of a belief).

What is it to give a physicalist or naturalistic explanation of Christian belief? Either naturalists like Tarico explain a phenomenon in terms of basic laws of physics; or, if they can't, they eliminate those things from their ontology. Since Tarico admits that Christians have beliefs and intentional attitudes, then she has to give a naturalistic account of how this is so. But since Tarico says God isn't a useful hypothesis, and since she thinks her naturalistic analysis can explain all the relevant data, then she "doesn't have need for that God hypothesis."

So that's her basic program: to give a "scientific" or "naturalistic" explanation of some event. What does that look like? (I rely on Edward Feser's *Philosophy of Mind* (One World, 2006) for some of what follows.) Well, even though there's disagreement among naturalist philosophers here I think something like this is pretty fair: naturalists repudiate the view that there could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation. Naturalist David Papineau believes that a robust naturalism holds a commitment to the completeness of physics such that a purely physical specification of the world, plus physical laws, will always explain what happens. This account will not include reference to mental entities that are not identical with, or realized by, certain non-mental properties. They view reality as consisting of nothing but the spatio-temporal system, and that system is closed. Nothing that is not part of the system can cause anything in the system to occur.

Okay, so what is this basic "stuff" that everything is made of or explained by? Well, it's not stuff like rocks, trees, tables and chairs. In one sense, none of these things exist as we observe it. All of these have been explained as a collection of molecules, atoms, electrons, protons, quarks, etc. So tables, chairs, trees, rocks and the like are made up of colorless, odorless, tasteless, particles. Therefore, the world we see isn't anything like how physics tells us things "really" are.

The book *The Christian Delusion* seems impenetrable to my hands, and it doesn't seem anything like a cloud. Yet science tells us that a cloud of sorts is exactly what this book is (ironically, this is true of its content too: intellectual fluff!). It's a cloud of unobserved particles, each occupying an extremely small volume of space with vast distances between particles. Thus this book, apparently solid and impenetrable, is mostly empty space. So science has taught us that our senses are basically all wrong. In the sense that

we see colors, taste flavors, feel texture, have auditory experience, this is not the touchstone of reality. That touchstone is the world of unobserved entities mentioned above.

We are doing what physicists call reductionism. The book is “nothing but” a collection of particles, and the appearance that it is something other than those particles is simply an illusion. Its properties are likewise reduced. So when I feel the book and sense its solidity, that sense is not something inherent in the book. What the book really is, is the state its molecules happen to be in when the field of force they generate repels the field of force associated with the collection of particles in my hand.

Everything real can be so reduced, and if it can't be then it's not real. In continuing this all-too-brief romp through the naturalist view I should point out that it follows from the above that only objective, third-person observational explanations of events matter. Any consideration of ultimately and irreducibly subjective, first-person accounts are not allowed. And to a certain extent this makes sense. When the scientist wants to give a scientific explanation of “hot” and “cold” he can't rely on private, subjective reports. If you stick your hand in freezing water, it feels like it is *burning*. If you take it out and stick it in lukewarm water it still feels hot for a while. Or if you place your left hand in a bucket of warm water and your right in a bucket of cool water, and after a few minutes you pull them out and place both of them both in a bucket of lukewarm water, the left hand would feel cool and the right would feel warm. There could also be other beings, aliens maybe, that feel cold for what we feel as hot. So to get at what “hot” and “cold” really mean, the scientist can't rely on subjective accounts. Thus, heat is defined in terms of objective, mind-independent facts. Facts about mean molecular kinetic energy and the like. And these objective, mind-independent facts are the sum of reality.

Remember, the “real” world is colorless, odorless, tasteless—and we can further add that it is purposeless, in the sense of teleology, and meaningless. That is to say, nothing is intrinsically meaningful. There may be what's called “derived” or “as-if” meaning, but nothing is irreducibly meaningful.

So the above is something of a whirlwind tour of the naturalist program of all phenomena. It follows from the above, then, that if something is irreducibly meaningful or subjective (and I use subjective simply to mean only directly verifiable by a subject, not in the sense of “relative”); that is, if some feature of common sense cannot be reduced to the above type explanation, then it is eliminated. It is as if you are packing for a trip and you try to shove as much as possible into your suitcase before you attempt to close it—perhaps by sitting on it or jumping up and down on it to get everything to fit—and some pant legs and shirt sleeves are left hanging out. One response would be to acknowledge: “Oh, I guess I can't fit everything into this suitcase.” But another response would be to take scissors and cut around the suitcase and say, “See, everything does fit.” In other words, you just eliminate anything that can't fit into the suitcase regardless of what it does to the items in the suitcase.

Now, to continue with this quick romp, there are arguments given by many in the philosophy of mind, or in the field of ethics, or in the field of metaphysics—and, by the way,

not all of these people are theists—that think there are features of the world that do not fit into the naturalist suitcase I mentioned earlier. I'll offer some real brief reasons why. Basically, it just seems that this is part of the essence or intrinsic nature of the mind, that it has these subjective features. My experiences of colors and felt pain are not things that are objective and mind independent. There's a certain "what it is like" for me to be in pain. When I am in pain, or experience a red flash, it's not as if a scientist can crawl inside my head and see the "what it is like" for me to feel that pain or experience that flash of red. This isn't to deny that he won't observe any neural activity, but the description of that will never include the "what it is like" for me to be in pain. You can't pinpoint the "pain." And it also seems that there is an "I" that is the center or seat of the experience. That is, there is a unity to the conscious experience. I have direct experience and evidence of these, what are referred to in the literature as "qualia." No one else does. You may have *indirect* evidence of my being in pain. For example, I may jump and shout after I slam my hand in a car door. That's *all* you have access to. I may be acting. And even if not, you still can't observe "what it is like" for me to be in pain. At best you reason inductively from what it is like *for you* to be in pain, to what it must be like *for me* to be in pain. But the private, subjective experience I have seems only accessible to me.

There are a few arguments establishing this. I'll quickly run through a couple. One developed by Ned Block is called the Chinese nation argument. Simply put, the argument takes a common materialist understanding of the mind, one that tries to reduce the above seemingly private and subjective experience and direct evidence to simply the communication of cells and nerves to neurons. And of course this is observable via third-person. This view is basically what is known as a "functionalist" account of the mind. It is probably the most popular materialist theory of the mind today. It claims, basically, that mental states are defined simply in terms of their causal relation. The upshot of all of this for the functionalist is that they need not identify the mind with the brain. The "identity theory of mind" has major problems and functionalism seems to avoid those problems. Entities other than the brain could fulfill the requirements, such as a computer or even aliens who do not have anything like what we call "brains." So a computer could, if the chips were arranged properly and as complexly, be said to have a "mind" so long as the proper causal relations were obtained.

At this point Block reasons: if the receiving and transmitting of information function of our neurons could be fulfilled by silicon chips, or any other properly arranged material structure playing the relevant causal roles, what if we had a huge group of people—the population of China, for example—and organized them to play the relevant roles of neurons, paralleling the interaction that goes on between them in the brain. They passed information back and forth, say, via cell phones. Now, say that a robot were made and hooked up by a radio transmitter to the Chinese. In the literature the robot has been dubbed, "China Head." This robot is complex and can receive information sent by the Chinese. So say that the Chinese have all been given relevant roles or functions to play such that if the robot gets kicked in the shin this send a signal up to a few hundred thousand Chinese. They call a few hundred thousand other Chinese and relay some relevant information. Those send signals to a few hundred thousand more Chinese, and ultimately a signal is sent down to the robot so that it yells "Ouch!" and rubs its shin. In none of this

was there anything like a “feeling” of pain. There was also not unified conscious experience of pain. The qualia, which is a feature of the mind, would be absent.

Another argument is called the Zombie argument—and incidentally all these arguments against materialist versions of the mind have been developed by atheists—and it states that it is broadly or logically conceivable that creatures known as Zombies exist. These creatures, by definition, have no conscious experience. They do not exhibit qualia in a mind, but they do have a brain. Thus a Zombie could exhibit the same behavioral, physical, and functional properties as we do yet lack any qualia. There would be no subjective experience of pain at all, yet the same neural activity would be taking place. This would mean that qualia would be something additional, over and above, anything physical.

Lastly, Frank Jackson has developed what is called The Knowledge Argument. Simply put: Say at some point in the future we have a complete physics, such that we know all there is to know about everything in terms of the laws of physics. Now say that there is a girl named Mary. Mary is raised in a black and white room and never subjected to a conscious experience of red, for example. But Mary is also taught everything there is to know about the world in terms of a physical picture. So she knows everything there is to know about colors. She knows that red is caused by light reflecting at 650 nanometers, this wavelength hits your optic nerves, in turn sending signals into your brain, activating such and such neurons firing at such and such rate, as well as everything else there is to know about “red” and the experience of it. Now, after 40 years, Mary is released. Upon being released she is given a shiny red apple. She sees red for the first time. She now knows “what it is like” to experience red. This would seem to be a new item of knowledge for her. But if it is, and if she knew everything there was to know about physics, then it would appear that the subjective experience and “felt” quality of seeing red is something over and above the physical world.

What does the above have to do specifically with Tarico’s claim about explaining Christian *belief*? Beliefs fall into the above camp too. For example, beliefs seem to be intrinsically intentional. Tarico repeatedly shows an ignorance of her own side of the debate. She pretends to be a knowledgeable scientist giving scientific explanations of events. But I maintain that she’s not doing that. You see, she appealed to things like “fear” in her analysis. She appealed to things like “propositional attitudes.” But *these things also* need to be given a good old naturalistic reducing!

A complete naturalistic account of Christian belief needs to talk about C-fibers firing at such and such a rate. This has *nothing to do* with beliefs or desires. In fact, Tarico should not even be appealing to those kinds of things since they, if they existed, are reducible to neurons. The neural structure would be the same, one would think, *regardless* of the propositional content associated with it. For example, to explain how an opera singer shattered the glass when she sang $2+2=4$ in a high C is not to appeal at all to the propositional content of her singing! The glass would have shattered even if she sang $2+2=5$. It’s not even clear to me how Tarico can explain how immaterial things such as propositional content can cause things to happen in the physical world (like a change in behavior, etc).

A complete naturalistic account doesn't refer to beliefs, religious or otherwise, then. It's not that "religion" or "God" caused anything here. And it's not as if some feature of folk-psychology (as atheist Paul Churchland called it) labeled "belief" caused Christian conversion experiences. But when this naturalizing is all done, do we have anything like a case against Christian "belief"? Religious belief doesn't cause anything—neural patterns do. And those patterns seemingly would be the same with our *without* that attendant propositional content associated with them. It's hard to see how Tarico can even avoid epiphenomenalism—the view that beliefs are causally inefficacious. And I have my doubts as to whether she even understands any of the implications of her own worldview. A rigorous and consistent naturalizing of the facts destroys her case, in my opinion. So when Tarico tries to bring out her big gun called scientific reduction, she behaves just like a cognitive fundy. She places her entire explanation in the realm of folk psychology.

Thirdly, Tarico admits to a radical relativism, holding a social constructivist approach to our view of reality (60). This of course means that the truth about Christians and their beliefs is simply a construction of Tarico's social circle. Indeed, many have worried that social constructivism leads to social solipsism (solipsism with a select "we" instead of an "I," what we might call *solusism*!). This claims that the truth about everything and every other social group is a construct of your own social group. Thus Tarico is really looking at the constructed beliefs of *her own* social group through the lens of cognitive science. If Tarico wants to avoid these absurdities, she needs to detail what her precise views on these matters are.

When it comes to putting on her philosopher's cap, Tarico is terribly confused. She says,

Philosophy assumes that if its arguments can be made logic-tight, then it will be persuasive. It assumes people can be compelled by reason. It assumes that we make moral decisions by doing some calculus that prioritizes harm avoidance or the greater good (51).

However, on *all* of these points, the majority of philosophers do not believe these things, and why would Tarico think they would believe these things? What does she mean by "logic tight"? A charitable assumption is that she means "logical validity." But why would Tarico think a philosopher would claim that a mere *valid* argument is, *ipso facto*, a *persuasive* argument? At best, an argument that persuades and compels is what philosophers would want to call a *cogent* argument (cf. A.P. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing*, Blackwell, 20-37). These are person relative, and the only reason they persuade and compel is because a person "sees" that they are valid *and* sound. It persuades and compels by definition.

Moreover, why doesn't Tarico complain about Eller? Eller claimed that "If...Christians would just be rational, would just *listen* and *think*...they would see the error of their ways" (25). It seems like someone thinks that reason and logic would compel those who heed its deliverances, pace Tarico. Indeed, even *Tarico* seems to indicate that if we would

“follow logic to its logical conclusion,” then we wouldn’t believe some of the silly things we do (54).

Another area of conceptually muddled thought is Tarico’s discussion of “knowledge,” “certainty,” a “feeling or sense of knowing,” and “knowing what we know.” She begins by asking “How do we know what is real? How do we know what we know?” From this Tarico immediately moves to the claim that we have “a *feeling or sense of knowing* that can get activated by evidence but can get activated in other ways as well.” This feeling or sense comes to us as “certainty and similar states of *knowing what we know*.” Certainty is defined as “a feeling not a proof of knowing.” These states “arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason” (54). Not only do these feelings of certainty and “knowing that we know” arise out of involuntary brain states that function independently of reason, but so does a “feeling of knowing.” All of these should be “thought of as one of our primary emotions.” From these claims Tarico concludes, “Given what I’ve said about knowing, how can anybody claim to know anything? We can’t, with certainty.” It is a “fallacy” to think that “certainty is possible” (48, 53-55).

Trying to untangle this mess is a yeoman’s task. First, Tarico makes these claims based on the studies of brain-damaged people and prisoners brainwashed in concentration camps. Then she asserts that, “from malfunctions like these we gain an understanding of normal brain function and how it shapes our day-to-day experience, including the experience of religion” (54). Really? How does that follow? Putting aside the highly contentious statements that scientific studies tell us about subjective *feelings*—a “something it is like” to know—the fact that we have to go off the *sparse* data of brain-damaged patients is precisely one of the problems in cognitive science (Okasha, *Philosophy of Science*, 115).

Secondly, if the causes of our feeling of certainty lead to the conclusion “we cannot know anything with certainty” then why don’t the same considerations lead to the conclusion “we can’t know anything”? Tarico switched from a “feeling of certainty” to “knowing for certain.” The former is psychological, the latter is epistemic. She said the problems with the former ruled out having the latter. If that move works, then so does the claim: our “feeling of knowing” arises out of involuntary brain functions means that we can’t know anything. Consistent is consistent.

Third, it is false to claim that we can’t know with certainty *on Tarico’s own terms*. She *defined* certainty as “a feeling of knowing” (48). Since certainty is, *by definition*, a feeling of knowing, and since she admits we have this feeling then, *per Tarico*, we *can* know with certainty. The only way for Tarico to avoid this is to jump ship in the middle of her conversation and switch from psychological certainty to epistemic (or philosophical) certainty. But then how does it follow that since, *arguendo*, psychological certainty arises from an unreliable cognitive mechanism that means epistemic certainty does too?

Fourth, in fact, Tarico is not only wrong that we can’t know anything with certainty on her own definition, she is wrong on the second sense she gives certainty too. We can have

epistemic certainty about some things. The stock pile may be small, but it's there. A paradigm case is that a person knows that she exists with epistemic certainty since it would be impossible for her to doubt her existence. Her existence is a necessary precondition for her doubting her existence. Similar cases include immediate mental reports such as, "I am feeling a pain" or "I am being appeared to redly."

Fifth, for all the confusion in her discussion, all Tarico is saying is that sometimes we feel like we know when we don't. Well, alert the media! Tarico claims that sometimes our feeling is "in line with the evidence" and sometimes (in the case of the dain-bramaged) it is not (53). So, just because we *think* we know that *p*, that does not entail that *necessarily* we know that *p*. But what of it? Not much that I can tell. A "logical might" doesn't entail an "epistemic might."

So, while it may be logically possible that I am wrong about some belief B, that doesn't mean that it has been shown that I might be wrong epistemically about B. To show that would require giving me reasons to think that I am wrong. Giving me reasons to suppose my beliefs are false or unwarranted. It should come as no surprise that mentioning some cases where psychotics or POWs have felt that they knew a proposition when they clearly didn't is nowhere near sufficient to serve as a defeater to my beliefs.

The final point I would like to make on Tarico's chapter deals with what she takes to be her main conclusion. She gives examples of various believers of different faiths who report similar conversion experiences. Now, putting aside the problematic and unChristian demand that one needs to experience certain things to "know they're saved," Tarico here engages in confirmation bias. She has a theory that conversion is explained fully naturalistically and finds a couple examples that seem to support this. But for every example I can give a counter example where the criteria are not met. Try my unhip, boring, dry, and weird OPC church for a couple Sundays. None of the marketing and persuasion strategies Tarico generalizes about are true of my church. In any event, Tarico claims that her psychologizing of conversion experiences and religious belief in general shows that "cognitive research does offer what is becoming a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon of belief" (62). She says that while this doesn't prove that God doesn't exist, the principle of parsimony leads us to do without that explanation for religious belief. "[S]upernatural explanations for religious experience are becoming unnecessary" (63).

Now, certainly Tarico is right that this explanation does not show that God's existence is *false*, since that would be to commit the genetic fallacy. So, perhaps Tarico thinks she's shown that belief in God is *unwarranted*. But that would be problematic too since presumably her "lens of cognitive science" gives similar stories for any belief whatsoever (indeed, that is what Tarico's argument amounts to; she takes a few cognitive science studies about belief and knowledge *in general* and *applies* those studies to religious belief *in particular*). So if having an explanation for a belief B by means of cognitive science means that B is *unwarranted*, then *all* our beliefs are unwarranted, even the belief that cognitive science can explain religious belief! So, perhaps Tarico thinks she has shown that people would still believe in God even if God did not exist. If so, she needs more than her chapter. I don't think the universe, humans, religions, or beliefs would exist if

God did not exist (for a similar argument, see Michael J. Murray, “Belief in God: A Trick of Our Brain,” in *Contending With Christianity’s Critics*, B&H, 2009 47-57). Moreover, it’s not that cognitive science is insufficient to explain religious belief and conscious experiences; it’s that cognitive science is insufficient to explain *any* belief and conscious experience. Cognitive science cannot give a *sufficient* explanation for belief and consciousness since those phenomena have features recalcitrant to naturalistic or scientific explanation.

A Review of Chapter Three

Steve Hays

III. Self-Defeating Cultural Relativism

1. In chap. 3, Jason Long says, “Muslim parents tend to have Muslim children, Christian parents tend to have Christian children, Hindu parents tend to have Hindu children” (66).

i) And infidel parents tend to have infidel children. So how does that correlation undercut Christian theism without simultaneously undercutting atheism?

ii) I’d add that this is one reason why it was difficult to convert the hostile heathen peoples surrounding ancient Israel. They were implacable enemies of the chosen people.

iii) Social conditioning is not a problem for Calvinism. That’s an aspect of God’s providence. God can providentially employ social conditioning to cultivate Christians and reprobates alike.

2. Long says, “Hardly any conceivable message could be more motivating than the threat of hell...” (67).

The threat of hell can’t explain Christian belief, for unless you believe the threat, it’s not a credible threat. An unbeliever doesn’t feel threatened by hellfire sermons. Therefore, Long’s analysis only pushes the question back a step.

3. Long says, “In addition to childhood indoctrination...” (71).

But childhood indoctrination is a double-edged sword. Depending on their parents and their schooling, children can just as well be (and often are) indoctrinated in atheism.

4. Long bandies fancy terms like “cognitive dissonance theory,” “impression management theory,” “psychological reactance theory,” and “confirmation bias.”

But, once again, that cuts both ways. They can all be applied to atheism as well as theism.

5. Long says, “A majority of experts in the history of the ancient Near East will defend positions beneficial to Christianity” (76).

Really? Are members of the Society of Biblical Literature a bunch of ardent Christian apologists?

6. Long says, “If an intelligent, rational group of people who were never exposed to the idea of religion were asked to become experts in the history of the ancient Near East, the

unanimous consensus of the group would be that the Bible is bunk” (76).

Aside from the circular claim that infidels have a monopoly on rationality and intelligence, this hypothetical is inherently unverifiable. So what does that tell you about the intellectual standards of atheism? Why is it acceptable or respectable to make indemonstrable, self-serving claims?

“They would reach this conclusion for two reasons: there is absolutely nothing in the book that would impress critically thinking dispassionate outsiders...” (76).

But that’s not a reason. That merely restates the same tendentious claim. It says something about Long’s lack of intellectual aptitude that he can’t distinguish an assertion from an argument, much less a question-begging assertion. In giving his “reason,” all he’s done is to repeat himself. Paraphrase the same tendentious claim.

“...and they would not have been exposed to the centuries of aura and mystique that society has placed on the Bible” (76).

Is that the experience that students have in public grade school, middle school and/or junior high and high school? Is that the experience they have at community colleges, state universities, and the Ivy Leagues? Is that the experience they have watching TV? Going to movies? Listening to rock music?

7. Long says, “It does not take a willfully open mind to accept the existence of God because it is essentially the default position of our culture” (77).

It is? Is Hollywood the Bible belt? Is Manhattan the Bible belt? Is Massachusetts the Bible belt?

8. Long says, “Skeptics have their positions but are willing to consider other viewpoints” (77).

Given the number of self-refuting arguments and blatant falsehoods in Long’s essay, that self-deceptive claim is a lovely illustration of the insular, hidebound mentality he attributes to Christians.

Jason Engwer

As Steve Hays has noted in his review of *The Christian Delusion*, much of what the authors argue in the first few chapters of the book could be applied to atheists and other non-Christians as well. Jason Long's chapter on the malleability of the human mind raises questions about the human mind in general, not just Christian minds.

Long wants us to ask whether the behavior of a supposed god seems "sensible" to us (66). In the previous chapter, however, Valerie Tarico suggested that we should be suspicious of a god who's like us (56-59).

By the time you get through Long's chapter, a pattern in the book becomes evident. Much of what's being criticized is the lowest variety of Christianity. It's true that most people, including most atheists and other critics of religion, don't have many reasons for believing what they believe and often arrive at false beliefs or arrive at true beliefs for reasons that aren't objectively justifiable. But how much does criticism of such people undermine the belief system they're associated with? Professing Christians who are the least capable of objectively defending their beliefs may hold those beliefs for no good reason. Or they may have been brought to faith by a supernatural means that's reliable, but which they can't objectively demonstrate. Whatever the case, the authors of *The Christian Delusion* should have spent less time discussing the least intellectual elements of Christianity and more time addressing the religion's best representatives.

Long criticizes the Bible for its reference to a "talking donkey" three times that I noticed (69-70, 76), and Paul Tobin considers it worth mentioning as well (157). Steve Hays has already addressed this subject in his review of the book¹⁸, but I want to expand upon and reemphasize the point. Why do skeptics so often mention the Bible's references to a snake and a donkey that speak? If the skeptic is assuming that miracles are impossible, then he should make the case for his naturalism, something neither Long nor Tobin does in his chapter in the book. Or if they think that the Bible is suggesting that all snakes and all donkeys can speak by natural means, then how are they arriving at that conclusion? The passage about Balaam and the donkey portrays the event as supernatural and unexpected. Not only is there no suggestion that such an event is natural, but there's even a suggestion to the contrary. Why, then, do skeptics like Long and Tobin think that the presence of a speaking animal is so objectionable that mentioning it in the brief and dismissive way they do is sufficient? They probably haven't given the issue much thought.

Long refers to the suffering of Hell as involving "absolute" and "complete" agony, and he distinguishes those terms from the eternity of Hell, so he doesn't seem to have its eternity in mind (67). What is he referring to, then? The Bible teaches degrees of suffering in Hell and even uses the term "few lashes" to describe what it will be like for some people (Luke 12:45-48).

¹⁸ See page 74—ed.

Long's claim that "there is no pressure from society to understand or defend itself against the true position of skeptics" (69) is ridiculous. I can turn on the television during the Easter season, the Christmas season, or on other occasions and see John Dominic Crossan or Bart Ehrman explaining why the gospels are unreliable. Most biology teachers in American high schools probably aren't teaching a Christian view of origins. College professors often encourage a negative view of religion in general or Christianity in particular. So does Hollywood. It's not difficult for people to come across material by the likes of John Loftus and Richard Carrier when they go on the web.

We're told that the importance of God to Christians distorts their judgment about religious matters (71). But it's not as though God's existence isn't important to an atheist or agnostic. When he refers to those with "no emotional investment" in Christianity (73), who is he referring to?

It's worth noting that while the contributors to the book often lump all professing Christians together, sometimes suggesting that we can't reach a reliable conclusion about whose interpretation of Christianity is right and whose isn't, the authors do sometimes make such distinctions themselves. Jason Long and John Loftus speak of Mormonism as if it's distinct from Christianity (73, 87).

Long claims that no informed outsider to the Biblical faith would be persuaded that the Bible is true (76). Are all of the people who claim to have been persuaded by something like the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, at a time when they weren't yet Christian, lying or honestly mistaken? If somebody like the non-Christian scholar Pinchas Lapide is persuaded that a Christian Biblical miracle account is true, are we supposed to think that he was ignorant or improperly biased in some relevant way? If so, why?

Paul Manata

Jason Long's chapter is more of the same self-refuting nonsense. Hays is right about the blade Long & co. use cutting both ways. Engwer is right that Long & co. are directing their critiques to the lowest variety of Christianity, the type of people Bill Maher interviewed and scoffed at in his mockumentary, *Religulous*.

Long tries to make use of the criticism that religious adherents are driven by factors that make religious beliefs "typically devoid of rational thought" (66). Long doesn't bother to define what he means by rationality, even though the term is very important to interpreting his claims. And Long doesn't try to explain how, on materialism, a person can think at all, let alone be devoid of rational thought.

The first point Long makes to show this lack of rational thought is to make the uninteresting observation that people often take the religion of their parents. Apparently if this happens, then the *de jure* question is in play. Now putting aside my covenantal view of how God brings his elect into the kingdom (normally through families), let's apply Long's complaint to an atheist who endorsed the book, Michael Martin. Says Martin,

This book is dedicated to the person who had the greatest influence on my disbelief in God, my step-grandfather, Louis Young. Lou—I always called him that—was a self-educated man.... Even as a young child I had many talks with Lou about God. He was an atheist with a definite metaphysical turn of mind, and I recall vividly his saying, "It is difficult to understand how something could be uncaused; but it is also difficult to understand how a chain of causes could go on forever." ... Lou's influence was particularly strong since my parents had only the vaguest religious convictions, were never members of a church, and gave me no religious instruction. His influence remained with me all throughout my childhood in Cincinnati..." (Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, xi).

Uh-oh. Besides his step-grandfather admitting atheism is hard to understand (since Christian theism says the universe was caused and that the causes do not go back infinitely), yet ever the faithful he remained, Martin is subject to the Long arm of the flaw. Long says that those who were raised Christian never "go on to question" (66) their beliefs. But if you continue to read Martin, you'll see that questioning atheism was never open to Martin. He never went to church and was unaware of how to refute religion until he left the military and went to college.

Long says that a "child's environment must affect his religious affiliation to an extensive degree" (66), and this somehow implies that they lack a rational foundation for their belief. Martin has a similar story. Martin's story could be multiplied the world over. Indeed, if the New Atheists get their way and get rid of religion (except for the Baptists they stick in the zoo), then all children will be raised atheists. This will be okay with Long, for you're only irrational if you're born with a belief *he* does not hold.

Long goes on to claim that emotional factors weigh heavily in motivating and distorting what religious people believe, so they fudge data and arguments to get their beliefs to come out unscathed. He mentions that religious adherents are “motivated” to continue in their beliefs because of the negative consequences associated with rejecting the faith (67), and that religious beliefs are “synonymous with identity” for some people (69). Sure, some believers can be so characterized, but then, so can some scientists. Out of fear of not obtaining funding, or to advance their career, scientists might “fudge” numbers. Emotional considerations like pride might cause some scientists to ignore or distort evidence provided by dissenting colleagues. The *Oxford Handbook of Rationality* details some of this:

Like all people, scientists are emotional beings, and their emotions may lead to distortions in their scientific works if they are attached to values that are inimical to the aims of science. Here are some cases where emotions have distorted scientific practice:

1. Scientists sometimes advance their own careers by fabricating or distorting data in order to support their own hypotheses. In such cases, they have greater motivation to enhance their own careers than to pursue truth, explanation, or welfare.
2. Scientists sometimes block the publication of theories that challenge their own by fabricating problems with submitted articles or grant proposals that they have been asked to review.
3. Without being fraudulent or intentionally evil, scientists sometimes unintentionally deceive themselves into thinking that their hypothesis and data are better than their rivals.
4. Scientists sometimes further their careers by going along with politically mandated views—for example, the Nazi rejection of Einsteinian physics and the Soviet advocacy of Lysenko’s genetic theories. (Paul Thagard, “Rationality and Science,” *The Oxford Handbook to Rationality*, 2004, 378).

Atheist Michael Philips cites other cases. He reports that, “over the last thirty years the image of science has been tarnished by a number of high profile cases of fraud” (*The Undercover Philosopher*, Oneworld, 145). He points out that the high cost of experiments and trials serve as a prophylactic to dissuade repeated testing. If a “single trial costs \$150 million, how is anyone ever going to replicate it?” (Philips 146). Philips reports that according to Jules Hallum, a director of a national institute for scientific integrity, “Nobody gets funding to do replications, so science is not the self-cleaning apparatus it once was” (Philips 146). Given what we read above in Thagard, coupled with the contemporary scientific procedure’s friendly environment for fraud, coupled with the statements Long produces about man *in general*, there’s no doubt that scientists protect pet theories and bad theories just like some religious adherents.

Indeed, Philips goes on to offer case after case of blatant fraud at the hands of scientists (Philips 145-152). There are also countless cases of scientists beholden to confirmation bias holding to pet theories that have been debunked. Scientists find their identity in their pocket protectors and spectacles and like-minded glad-handing. Scientists can act irrationally and hold to their theories for emotional, political, and myriad other irrational or non-scientific reasons. So *NOTHING* Long cites serves to undermine the truth of Christianity or the positive epistemic status it has for countless believers.

Long pretends the “skeptical” position protects him from the kind of besetting cognitive sins that he extrapolates to believers from thirty-year-old books not specifically about religious believers. He claims that skeptics have their positions “but are willing to consider other viewpoints” (77). But then he responds to believers who say that x has a higher degree of warrant than y, so if y conflicts with x, then proper function demands dropping y, with this claim: “What’s the point in listening to people like this” (75)? Long won’t even *consider* their viewpoint. He exposes himself as a credulous faithful adherent of his dogmas, according to his own terms!

As more evidence of his biased and uncritical thought process, Long claims that if “intelligent, rational, and unbiased” people were to study the Bible they would all report that it is unworthy of belief. To these “unbiased” people, the Bible would not be a guidebook to events that happened in the Ancient Near East, but “it would be just another book in the mythology section of the library” (76). For Long, to be unbiased means that you *start with* the idea that the Bible is a book of myths. You begin biased towards its classification; it’s myth, not history, and definitely not God’s word. You cannot “begin” as a “religious believer” and count as an unbiased scholar of the ANE. You have to *begin* as a religious *unbeliever* (76). For Long, to be unbiased means to be biased toward his beliefs. This is what passes as tough-minded, cogent thinking for atheism, I guess.

Long spends some time talking about how the majority of “intelligent” people are “less likely to be religious” (77). In doing so he cites the overused Paul Bell report in *Mensa* magazine. That study has been cited across the internet on atheist blogs and discussion forums. It’s mentioned in popular works of atheology, like *The God Delusion*. Long probably never actually read the report, but is using it as an argument from authority.

One wonders what this claim of Long’s is supposed to prove. At one time, the vast majority of the world’s most intelligent people were religious. Would Long think that meant that atheism was irrational a couple hundred years ago? Is the rationality of a worldview tied to some contingent fact like that? Odd. At any event, Long needs to read scientists like Richard Nisbett’s, *Intelligence and How to Get It* (Norton, 2009). Nisbett points out several reasons why unbelievers might score higher on IQ tests than believers. However, *none* of the reasons are due to *religion*. Many things can explain this data. Long doesn’t bother to look for disconfirming evidence. That’s because he’s stuck in the cycle of confirmation bias, ironically, that he claims is true of religious believers (74). That college professors may be overwhelmingly atheistic proves that religious beliefs are benighted about as easily as it proves that Long’s talk about “identity” considerations and “fear” of

disapproval by the clan is the real cause of the disproportion. Long's attack on religion comes back to bite him.

Similar claims include the claim that rational scientists are overwhelmingly anti- or non-religious. A recent study performed by Elain Howard Ecklund took place between 2005 and 2008 as part of the Religion Among Academic Scientists (RAAS) study. The findings are published in her book, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (Oxford, 2010). The scientists interviewed work for what the University of Florida reported as the "Top American Research Universities" (Ecklund, 157). Here are some quotes from the book:

"Aggressive attacks on religion such as Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* do not accurately represent the complex ways in which scientists--even those who are not religious--actually engage religion and spirituality" (Elain Howard Ecklund, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think*, Oxford, 2010, 4).

"After four years of research, at least one thing became clear: much of what we believe about the faith lives of elite scientists is wrong. The 'insurmountable hostility' between science and religion is a caricature, a thought cliché, perhaps useful as a satire on groupthink, but hardly representative of reality" (ibid 5).

"As we journey from the personal to the public religious lives of scientists, we will meet the nearly 50 percent of elite scientists like Margaret who are religious in a traditional sense and the over 20 percent more like Evelyn who, though eschewing religion, still see themselves as spiritual to some extent..." (ibid 6).

[Embarrassing to Eller, Tarico, and Long] "In fact, for the majority of scientists I interviewed, it is not the engagement with science itself that leads them away from religion. Rather, their reasons for unbelief mirror the circumstances in which other Americans find themselves: they were not raised in a religious home; they had bad experiences with religion; they disapprove of God or see God as too changeable" (ibid 17).

"Scientists who do practice religion can face intense pressure to give it up as they are sometimes harshly judged by their secular peers" (ibid 24).

"Similarly, when social scientists survey the general population, they find that older individuals are much more likely to express higher levels of belief and practice than younger individuals. My survey of scientists, however, turned this relationship on its head. It was the younger scientist who was more likely to believe in God and to attend religious services. And when I compared my survey of scientists to another study conducted over thirty-five years earlier, the likelihood of younger scientists having faith had increased. If this holds throughout the career life-course for this cohort of elite scientists, it could indicate an overall shift in the attitude toward religion among those in the academy" (ibid 32-33).

“The majority of religious scientists are rarely public with their colleagues about their views. As Jack correctly surmised, religious scientists generally tried to keep their faith to themselves because of the perception that other faculty in their department think poorly of religious people and religious ideas” (ibid 43).

“When religion unavoidably comes up, such as in discussing news events, the conversation ends abruptly, or everyone—religious and non-religious alike—tacitly agrees that religion is generally negative and has a negative relationship to science, or at least that the subject is delicate and is best avoided. The hallmark of a strong culture is that there is widespread public agreement about certain issues—in this case, the issue of suppressing religion—even in the context of individual dissent. Most relevant here, strong departmental cultures related to religion made religious scientists feel as if they could not talk openly about being religious because they might face negative sanctions from their colleagues” (ibid 44).

We can stop there. All of these quotes are troublesome for the thesis Long wants to promote; indeed, for the general vibe of *The Christian Delusion*. However, some statements Long makes are highly ironic when placed next to these quotes, especially the last two. Long says, “society has painted a nasty picture of atheism and skepticism. People who do not believe in God are least trusted minority in America” (69). Long tells us that the religious “believe because others around them believe” (65). He talks about how peer pressure and a desire to fit in negatively affect critical and skeptical inquiry. Virtually all of Long’s claims about Christians can be reflected back at atheists and scientists. Yet Long never once indicts these as irrational or somehow in a state of epistemic turmoil. Long’s argument in this chapter seems to be:

1. Studies about humans in general show that they hold and persist in their belief for irrational reasons.
2. Christians are human.
3. Therefore some Christians hold and persist in their belief for irrational reasons.

Unfortunately, scientists, philosophers, and atheists are humans too. Just as the sources I offered do not undermine science or all scientists, Long’s similar studies do not affect Christianity or all Christians. Long’s chapter is pointless for undermining the case for Christianity, or for removing the warrant any Christian whoever might have for his or her beliefs. If taken seriously, Long’s chapter equally damages his book, if it damages Christianity. But Long won’t let it damage *The Christian Delusion*. Therefore, Long shouldn’t let it damage Christianity. To end on a positive note, Long might want to take this into consideration: When spitting at someone, make sure the wind isn’t blowing in your direction.

A Review of Chapter Four

Steve Hays

IV. The Selective Outsider Test

In chap. 4, Loftus plugs the Outsider Test for Faith (OTF).

1. Ironically, he flunks the OTF by his slanted formulation of the OTF. And that's because of his arbitrarily restrictive formulation.

He even admits right up front that the OTF is "primarily a test to examine religious faiths" (82).

Why? The insider viewpoint is hardly limited to one's religious outlook. An atheist will also have his "insider" perspective.

At the very least, then, why not an Outsider Test of Belief in general, rather than an Outsider Test of (religious) Faith in particular?

Ironically, his "Outsider Test" is formulated from the viewpoint of an insider. An atheist. And a militant atheist at that. As such, the Outsider Test is really the Insider Test.

In the interests of truth in advertising, the Outsider Test for Faith should be relabeled the Insider Test by Infidels (ITI).

An individual using the ITI will judge Christianity by the prejudicial standards of an atheist. Testing the Christian faith by administering a test which is frontloaded with atheistic assumptions like methodological naturalism.

2. The OTF accentuates the socially conditioned character of religious belief. But, of course, that cuts both ways. We can also cite statistical correlations to show the socially conditioned character of atheism. Therefore, the OTF is self-defeating as a weapon against Christianity.

3. Loftus says "adopting the OTF is like following the Golden Rule, or so argues Dr. James McGrath" (85).

However, McGrath flunks the Outsider Test. For McGrath imposes methodological naturalism on Biblical historiography. Yet that imposition hardly reflects the viewpoint of the Bible writers. Rather, it reflects the insider perspective of a faithless ax-grinder like McGrath.

4. Loftus says, "I'm asking believers to change their assumptions and/or become agnostics. This is what I call the 'default position'" (88).

But that flunks the Outsider Test. Agnosticism is only the default position if you happen to be an agnostic. So that reflects the insider perspective of an agnostic.

5. Loftus says Christians “use David Hume’s evidentiary standards for examining miraculous claims to the faiths they reject... They adopt a methodological naturalist viewpoint to test these other extraordinary claims and find them wanting” (86).

Loftus doesn’t cite any statistical data to justify his sweeping claim. In principle, Christianity doesn’t rule out the extraordinary claims of rival religions. To the contrary, the Christian faith affirms the existence of an occult reality. Black magic.

6. Loftus says Christians “also deconstruct these other religious texts by assuming human rather than divine authors” (86).

But that’s deceptive. Christians don’t necessarily “assume” that. For instance, a Christian apologist will demonstrate that fact.

7. Moreover, if you have good reason to believe that your own position is correct, then, by definition, a contrary position is wrong. Everybody does that.

8. Loftus says “The Christian theist must now try to make sense of this claim [i.e. two natures of Christ], coming as it does from an ancient superstitious people...” (86).

But that pejorative characterization flunks the Outsider Test. To brand them as “superstitious” doesn’t reflect the viewpoint of an ancient people. Rather, that reflects the insider perspective of an apostate like John Loftus.

9) Loftus says, “Just think how it would sound to evangelical Christians if Mormons claimed their faith was ‘properly basic,’ or that the inner witness of the Spirit self-authenticates their faith” (87).

i) For all I know, Plantinga might concede that Mormon faith is properly basic. Properly basic simply means a belief enjoys prima facie warrant. It doesn’t mean the belief in question is either true or unfalsifiable.

ii) There’s nothing wrong with claiming divine self-authentication if, in fact, a believer does enjoy the witness of the Spirit. That’s a variant on the argument from religious experience, and there’s nothing inherently wrong with that appeal. There’s nothing wrong with making the claim as long as the claim is true.

Jason Engwer

John Loftus claims that Evangelical Christians take two different approaches toward other religions. One approach is to “presume what they believe based on what they were raised to believe”, thereby “begging the question” (86). And they adopt a naturalistic, Humean approach toward other religions (86). They approach miracles in non-Christian belief systems similar to how Loftus approaches Christian miracle claims.

But there’s no reason to think that all Evangelicals take one or both of those approaches. A Christian worldview involves the occurrence of miracles among unbelievers, like the healing of Naaman and the empowering of non-Christians by demons (2 Kings 5, John 11:49-52, 2 Thessalonians 2:9, Revelation 13:13-14). Some Christians believe that Mohammad, the founder of Islam, was demonically influenced. They don’t argue for a naturalistic origin of the religion. Protestants sometimes argue that Marian apparitions are demonic. Christians often acknowledge that non-Christians have had supernatural near-death experiences. Many similar examples could be cited.¹⁹

Loftus generalizes about “any given adopted religious faith” (82). He argues that people adopt faith for insufficient reasons. But that generalization doesn’t tell me what my background was as an individual, nor does it tell me what I’ve done since adopting my faith (thinking about issues, reading books, having conversations with people who hold other views, etc.). It also ignores the possibility that God can lead a person to faith through a reliable means that isn’t verifiable by objective argumentation, such as the witness of the Holy Spirit. Something like the witness of the Spirit wouldn’t be an objective argument for Christianity. Thus, a dispute that’s being judged by such argumentation can’t be won by an appeal to something like the witness of the Spirit. But the idea that God, if He exists, can only persuade people by means of objective argumentation is absurd.

There’s some truth to what Loftus is saying. But many of the people he interacts with in apologetic contexts *have* tested their faith to some extent, even if they didn’t do so before adopting their faith. He can criticize those people for not testing their beliefs earlier. And the fact that they were late in doing it does raise the question of whether they tested their faith sufficiently. Maybe their prior involvement in that faith distorted their testing. But maybe it didn’t, or maybe the testing was sufficient to overcome the distorting effects.

Critics of Christianity often frame the issue of how we should approach the religion in misleadingly negative terms. Loftus tells us that “the odds are that we are wrong” (98) for any worldview, since there are so many conflicting worldviews in existence. He tells us that most religions would have to be false even if not all of them are, so we should be skeptical that a given religion is true (99). Etc. But we reach such conclusions after examining some evidence, such as what other people believe and the history of religion. If we’re going to use such negative initial observations to frame our judgment about religion, why not also allow positive initial observations to frame it, such as the apparent reasonableness of a person who commends a religion to us, the general trustworthiness of

¹⁹ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/02/bell-book-candle.html>

eyewitness testimony such as Christianity claims to have for some of its central beliefs, etc.?

There is merit to questioning one's beliefs. As far as Loftus is trying to get people to do that, as a general principle, that's healthy. But when he goes on to make comments about how Christians supposedly just beg the question by presuming their worldview or take a Humean approach toward other religions, or he assumes that people haven't tested their faith enough when he's in no position to know that about them, that's unhealthy. And he's been doing such things for years. He claims that "Believers are simply in denial when they claim their religious faith passes the OTF [Outsider Test for Faith]." (103) His chapter doesn't demonstrate that assertion, nor does the remainder of the book. As I mentioned in the introduction of my review, the book doesn't even address some of the most significant evidence for Christianity.

Paul Manata

There are so many things to critique in John Loftus's chapter that one could write a book correcting all of his errors and fallacious reasoning. Thankfully, to dismiss Loftus's "outsider test for faith (OTF)" all we need to do is undermine his specific argument for it. It is always nice when someone puts forth an argument for their position. An argument is supposed to give you reasons to believe the conclusion. It is to persuade you to accept the conclusion. It should be valid and sound. So if the form is fallacious or the premises false, then you may dismiss the argument immediately. The author cannot complain since he put it out there as "the argument" for his position.

But first, a preliminary observation. Loftus claims to have taken the outsider test for Christianity. He says he judged Christianity by the same standards he judged other religions false. Christianity did not pass the test. However, one problem here is that Loftus' buddy, David Eller, told us back in chapter one that there is "no such thing as Christianity but rather Christianities" (26). Loftus repeats this claim on page 196, in the context of another chapter, and endorses it. When he needs to debunk Christianity, suddenly it becomes a fixed target; yet when Christians appeal to a fixed target to defend Christianity, Loftus claims it is a moving target and that there is no such thing as Christianity. This shell game is rather unfortunate, especially considering the atheists who unthinkingly laud Loftus's OTF. See, Loftus can't say that he gave the test to Christianity (singular). He just gave it to one of the thousand versions he claims exist. He then rejects all the other versions as an outsider. But he cannot claim to have been an insider to any of them except the one he was in. By my count, Loftus needs to do 20,000 more outsider tests for the denominations he and his cohorts claim represent different Christianities. So he can never again claim he's debunked Christianity via the outsider test, because "there is no such thing as Christianity."

Getting on with the argument, Loftus tells us, "My argument is as follows" (81):

1. *Rational people in distinct geographical locations around the globe overwhelmingly adopt and defend a wide diversity of religious faiths due to their upbringing and cultural heritage. This is the religious diversity thesis.*
2. *Consequently, it seems very likely that adopting one's religious faith is not merely a matter of independent rational judgment but is causally dependent on cultural conditions to an overwhelming degree. This is the religious dependency thesis.*
3. *Hence the odds are highly likely that any given adopted religious faith is false.*
4. *So the best way to test one's adopted religious faith is from the perspective of an outsider with the same level of skepticism used to evaluate other religious faiths. This expresses the OTF. (82)*

Validity:

How does Loftus get to (2) from (1)? (2) has a conclusion indicator, but does not seem to follow from (1). (1) is not a logical truth or a theorem.

What justifies the move from (2) to (3), i.e., “it seems very likely” to “the odds are highly likely”?

Why would “the odds” that any particular religion is *false* follow from the claim that “it seems very likely that adopting a religion is not *merely* a matter of independent rational judgment”? Aren’t these three claims consistent: (i) it is not *merely* a matter of independent rational judgment that you believe that p,” and “(ii) believing p is dependent on your culture,” and (iii) “the odds are highly likely that p”? They certainly seem consistent. Indeed, Loftus tacitly admits they are on page 89 by claiming that his belief in science meets the criteria of (i) through (iii)! One can have reasons for faith while not adopting that faith merely for reasons.

Furthermore, as James Anderson points out, even if we assume that all religions, and by implication Christianity, have a low probability of being true, we can still be rational in believing Christianity:

[S]uppose we grant [that the odds are highly probable that any given religion is false] for the sake of argument. Given that the major world religions are logically incompatible with each other (at most one could be true) one might argue that something like [premise 3] is true from the point of view of sheer demographic statistics. The question is whether anything follows that is problematic for Christians. I can’t see that it does. In general, it doesn’t follow from the fact that $P(p)$ is very low that I shouldn’t believe p or that I should subject p to some sort of “outsider test” before I’m permitted to believe p. Plantinga’s writings are full of counterexamples to such misguided inferences, e.g., the probability of being dealt a particular bridge hand (email correspondence, July 18).

So a low probability of a belief’s B having a true truth value doesn’t logically imply that I should test that belief and treat it as probably false. Loftus needs to give us reasons to believe that B *is* false. But if he could do that, there’d be no need to take an outsider test.

Finally, how does (4) follow from the above premises? Where is “testing faith” and “level of skepticism” and “evaluate other faiths” in those premises? The conclusion seems totally unrelated to the premises. Indeed, a better conclusion would be, “Therefore, your faith is probably false.” But if (3) is true, then why take a test? You have a probabilistic defeater for your faith. No need to test it.

We can test this argument for validity by using logical counterexamples. The first counterexample exposes a problem of vagueness that the argument has:

- 1.* Rational people in distinct geographical locations around the globe overwhelmingly adopt a wide variety of taste preferences due to their upbringing and cultural heritage.
- 2.* Consequently, it seems very likely that adopting one’s taste preferences is not merely a matter of independent rational judgment but is causally dependent on cultural conditions to an overwhelming degree.

- 3.* Hence the odds are highly likely that any given adopted taste preference is false.
- 4.* So the best way to test one's adopted taste preference is from the perspective of an outsider with the same level of skepticism used to evaluate other religious faiths.

Loftus's argument is also just as true for taste preferences. But clearly this counterexample is troublesome. First, what would it mean to say that my preference for vanilla is *false*? Second, that people disagree about taste preference gives me no reason to be skeptical of my preference for vanilla. More troubling, many religious beliefs are bound up with values and it is not clear that they can be neatly separated. That people disagree about my values gives me no reason to drop mine and test them with the same level of skepticism I have towards theirs. However, let's grant Loftus can clean up his argument and remove the vagueness and ambiguity. The next test shows a more severe problem.

- 1.** Rational people in distinct geographical locations around the world overwhelmingly adopt and defend a wide diversity of philosophical beliefs due to their upbringing and culture.
- 2.** Consequently, it seems very likely that adopting one's philosophical position is not merely a matter of independent rational judgment but is causally dependent on cultural conditions to an overwhelming degree.
- 3.** Hence the odds are highly likely that any given philosophical position is false.
- 4.** So the best way to test one's adopted philosophy is from the perspective of an outsider, with the same level of skepticism used to evaluate other philosophies.

I think the vast majority of philosophers, even those who endorsed Loftus's book, would reject this argument as absurd. But it has the same form as Loftus's argument, which means Loftus's argument should likewise be rejected. For example, many of the standards of evaluation (those standards by which we judge whether x is more rational than y; standards by which we judge between competing hypotheses which both explain all the empirical data; standards like the reliability of our sense or our cognitive faculties, etc.) are *philosophical* in nature. But if those must be tested and evaluated, by what standard would we do so? Or, more troublesome, the counter example shows that we should have *the same* level of skepticism towards, say, the philosophical belief that the world is maya as we should have towards the philosophical belief that the external world exists and is mind independent. The counter example also shows that we should have *the same* level of skepticism towards the moral command, "one ought to torture babies for fun," as we have toward the moral command, "one ought never torture babies for fun." Indeed, the counter example concludes that we should *test* that moral command! Has Loftus tested that moral command? Do the police know?

But Loftus might bite the bullet here and claim that the conclusion is not false even if the premises are. So we can make the invalidity more explicit by this counter example:

- 1.*** Many farmers grow and harvest a wide variety of foods due to demand.
- 2.*** Consequently, it seems very likely that what is farmed is not merely a matter of tilling the soil but is also causally dependent on demand.
- 3.*** Hence, the odds are highly likely what is farmed is demanded.

4.*** So, the best way to test what one farmer has farmed is from the perspective of a horse racing jockey, with the same level of skepticism you use to evaluate what other farmers have farmed.

Now, this argument seems to have the same *logical form* as does Loftus's argument, but the conclusion is clearly false. (4***) is false and does not follow from the premises, therefore neither does (4) follow from the premises in Loftus' argument. Hence, Loftus's argument is *invalid*.

Soundness

However, Loftus arguments have problems even granting its validity. An unfortunate problem is its lack of soundness.

I will grant (1) *arguendo*, but it should be noted that Loftus's fellow contributors do not! Eller, Tarico, and Long do not seem to grant that most humans, let alone religiously inclined humans, are *rational*. Tarico begins a subheading of her chapter with the title: "So You Think You're Rational" (50). As for being rational, Tarico tells us that "research on human cognition suggests" that "none of us are" (50). So a problem with (1) is that Loftus's cohorts think it is *false*. Loftus needs to remove "rational" from the premise.

Apropos (2), what does it mean to say that religious beliefs are causally dependent on culture to an overwhelming degree and so it seems likely that they are not rational? Surely a large majority of our beliefs have correlations to our cultural conditions, and surely a great many of them are rational. Furthermore, what does "to an overwhelming degree" mean? How are religious beliefs not only causally dependent on cultural conditions, but causally dependent to "an overwhelming degree"? Would we say, "The ball caused the breaking of the window to an overwhelming degree"? What does that mean? What are the other factors? And isn't "overwhelming" a bit strong? That would seem to get rid of original thinkers.

(3) has many problems. Loftus fails to offer any probability calculus to show how he determines the claims about probability in (3). One problem (3) has is that Loftus is assuming that the probability of any given religion being true is equipossible with all religions. But it seems obvious to me that some religions are more probable than others. Loftus's argument depends upon the idea that the religious faith one adheres to is a matter of luck, like choosing a lottery ball out of a giant urn. If there are 500 Ping-Pong balls inside the urn, the probability that I pick any one of them is 1/500. Each ball has the same odds. But what argument can Loftus offer to the effect that religious faiths are equipossible like this? He doesn't offer a single one in the entire chapter.

The problem is compounded. Loftus admits that the belief that the external world exists and is mind independent is highly probable. Indeed, the view that the external world is an illusion is "probably false." That assumption "cannot be taken seriously" and is "extremely implausible" (95-96). Thus it seems like Loftus's own position is that religions that posit that the external world is an illusion are less probable than ones that do not. So

Loftus's own stated views seem to indicate that not all religious faiths are equipossible, but that is the assumption in (3), hence (3) is false.

There are more problems with (3), however. In response to the claim that Loftus needs to take the outsider test for his belief that the external world is an illusion, Loftus says that before he takes that test the challenger must show him that his belief in a mind-independent external world is "probably false" (95-96). Loftus holds the position that the response to the person who claims that your belief *could* be false is, "So what? Give me *good reason* to believe that it is *false*" (96). Okay, "So what?" to Loftus's claim that Christianity could be false. If Loftus responds that he has "good reasons" to believe that Christianity is false, then let's hear them. Now, no doubt he will say that he has given them. I obviously don't think he has any good reasons for believing that Christianity is false. Be that as it may, the point is that his response here shows that the outsider test is *superfluous*! If Loftus does not have good reasons that are persuasive to me for thinking that Christianity is probably false, then I don't need to take the OTF. If he has good reasons that are persuasive to me, such that I conclude that Christianity is probably false, then I don't need to take the OTF! Loftus's OTF is a waste of time, a needless obstacle to getting on with the business of giving someone good reasons for thinking their belief is false.

The last problem with (3) is that it commits the genetic fallacy. Loftus tries to bypass the criticism by claiming the objection is (a) irrelevant and (b) false (98-99). He claims that the charge is irrelevant because "the origination of certain kinds of belief is indeed a relevant factor when assessing if those beliefs are probable" (99). He gives an example of a paranoid belief brought on by use of psychedelic drugs. But *this* is irrelevant! First, if the drug user was caused to believe that $2+2=4$ by taking the drug, the origination would do nothing to show that the belief is probably false. There are arguments Christians give for thinking God is a necessary being, or that he is transcendently required for necessary features of human thought or intelligible experience. Moreover, Christians present *reasons* for thinking their belief is true, or for thinking it has not been defeated and so they are within their epistemic rights to hold that belief. Loftus's claim is that belief in God originates from an unreliable source (putting aside that this simply assumes the falsity of the biblical explanation for the cause of a person's belief in God and trust in Jesus Christ, which means Loftus is attacking Christianity as an outsider). But the genetic fallacy occurs when you disregard the reasons one has for thinking their belief is true. The unreliable cause might be irrelevant to the belief's truth value, but the reasons given may very well be relevant. So, suppose Loftus's drug user supplies evidence and reasons for thinking the CIA is after him. At that point the reasons must be dealt with. Loftus ignores that little problem, thus making his charge of irrelevancy itself irrelevant.

The second out for Loftus is that the charge is false. He says that he allows that a religious adherent could pass the test. Well, this is false and duplicitous: Loftus says he allows that someone could pass it yet likewise says that "believers are just in denial when they claim their religious faith passes the OTF" (103)! Secondly, Loftus's (3) is the claim that a religious belief is "highly probably false" due to its origination, which is to commit the genetic fallacy (putting aside its question begging assumption of the ultimate source

of faith in Christ). So it is not a false charge and the claim that Loftus might allow, in theory, a faith to pass the test does not mean he has not committed the genetic fallacy.

Lastly, here is the big problem with (4). If I give up Christianity in order to test it, and every other worldview, then I would find myself in a state of cognitive paralysis. For example, I would have no idea about the origination and purpose of my cognitive faculties. I would not be able to believe that their purpose was to deliver true beliefs. Since no one can adopt a “perspectiveless” stance, then what stance should I adopt? What view of mind would I have? What moral stance would I take in order to judge a worldview’s moral consequences and consistency? What would I believe about man, his problem, and the solution? Would I be a realist or an anti-realist? What would I think about meaning? How would I even think *about* other religions and my religion? Would I deny naturalism and hold that there is intrinsic *purpose* in the world? What would my views on logic be? Would *reasons* and *intentions* be an irreducible explanation for why certain things take place? Would I hold that the universe is causally closed? Would I think that *normativity* is an *irreducible* feature of the world?

I thus find that I cannot take Loftus’s test because it has too many built in undercutting defeaters to my cognitive and moral proper functioning. The results would be disastrous, thus proper function does not allow me to take Loftus’s test. Would Loftus take a test to see if his cognitive faculties are reliable? Giving up the reliability of his cognitive faculties and placing them on the table for testing would give him a reason not to take the test since the minute he gives up the reliability of his faculties he loses the motivation to test them, or anything else. Loftus pretends that this is to be biased toward your worldview. Yes, it is. And I’ve just given good reasons for the bias. Loftus thinks that I cannot test any other worldview objectively while being biased toward mine. But this is to confuse psychological bias with rational bias. I can still apply local rules of rationality to my belief and other beliefs, even if I am psychologically biased and committed to my belief. Moreover, I have positive, rational reasons for believing my religion is true and that others are false. Loftus merely *suggests* that I apply double standards to other religions, he doesn’t *show* this. As C.S. Lewis said, “I believe in Christianity like I believe in the sun. Not only because I see it, but because of it I see everything else.”

A problem that besets all forms of cultural relativism

Loftus’s argument focuses on disagreement. But what about agreement? The vast majority of humans throughout history have believed in something “other,” something “supernatural.” Furthermore, it is sometimes hard to note whether we have a real disagreement, and if so, where it lies. For example, there is agreement *mixed in* with disagreement between various cultures. Most agree that there is something supernatural, that man has a problem and is in need of a solution, man is not ultimate, meaning and purpose is an irreducible feature of the world, miracles have happened, etc. Loftus’s argument seems to rest on the notion that disagreement leads to his test, which should lead to atheism. But of course many of the meta-level concerns are agreed upon. The level of agreement leads to atheism being off the table, if we’re to take Loftus’s test seriously. That is, if disagreement is supposed to entail cognitive confusion, then why doesn’t agreement entail cogni-

tive rest? A similar problem haunts cultural relativism in its moral dimension. There's just more agreement than the cultural relativist would like. Imagine a fish bowl with a fish in it. Now, a great and overwhelming majority of the world's population, yesterday and today, would agree that something is in the fish tank. Atheists are the ones saying that nothing is in there. If disagreement shows relativism then agreement should show objectivism or realism. So the atheist that raises the problem from disagreement needs to stick to his guns. If not, then all this hubbub about "disagreement" leading to cognitive despair is simply hand waving. They think agreement counts for nothing. They aren't bothered by it, at all. So why should the theist be bothered by disagreement?

Loftus's argument for his outsider test is vague, ambiguous, invalid, unsound, superfluous, informally fallacious, and subject to a defeater-deflector. It fails on just about every level.

Part 2: Why the Bible is the Word of God

A Review of Chapter Five

Steve Hays

V. Babinski's Flat-Headed Cosmography

Chap 5 is an effort to show that Bible writers taught a flat-earth cosmography. In fact, this chapter is a showcase of Babinski's hermeneutical naïveté.

1. Babinski says, "...It's clear that the Bible is a product of the prescientific period in which it originated" (132).

It's important to keep this statement in mind as we evaluate Babinski's "evidence." For the principle he is enunciating is that Bible writers wrote what they did about the configuration of the world because ancient Jews were in no position to know any better. They didn't have the tools of modern science. So that's why they taught a flat-earth cosmography.

2. Apropos (1), Babinski says [quoting Horowitz], "the earth's surface ends at the horizon, the place where heaven and earth meet...Some texts suggest that the ends of the earth's surface are marked by cosmic mountains, while others suggest that the cosmic ocean extends to the ends of the earth" (115).

i) Stop and think about this for a moment. Imagine that you're an ancient Jew or ancient Near Easterner.

The "horizon" is relative to the indexical viewpoint of the observer. It represents the limits of what the observer can see from his position. He is to the center as the horizon is to the circumference.

But it also follows from this that the "horizon" is a shifting boundary. For the observer is a moving reference point.

You'd only have to walk to the "horizon" to discover that the horizon didn't end. As you move, the "horizon" moves away from you. As you move forward, the "horizon" recedes.

i) Let's also keep in mind that many ancient near Easterners were travelers. For example, some were sailors. As such, ancient sailors knew that the dry land didn't consist of one central landmass or supercontinent surrounded by the cosmic sea.

They also traveled along far-flung trade routes. Over mountain passes. They knew from experience that the hills and mountains on the horizon of their hometown didn't represent the outer limits of the world. They knew from climbing the local hills and mountains that the sky wasn't a solid dome, resting on the summit.

3. Babinski says [quoting Denis Lamoureux], “The sun, moon, and stars are placed in (Hebrew b) the firmament on the fourth day of creation, above which lay ‘the waters’” (123).

i) But if the firmament was a solid dome, with sun, moon, and stars embedded in the firmament, then they’d be frozen in place. If the firmament was secured by pillars, and luminaries were embedded in the firmament, then there would be no apparent motion from east to west. Likewise, embedding stars in a solid firmament could never account for retrograde motion, or the different rates at which the luminaries seem to move across the sky.

ii) On that model, moreover, you couldn’t account for the seasonable variations in sunrise and sunset. Not just shorter or longer days, but the apparent displacement along the horizon over the course of a year.

iii) On a related note, if the moon was a disk, and the earth was flat, the apparent shape of the moon would vary depending on which part of the flat earth the observer occupied. But ancient peoples traveled. Yet the moon was the same shape wherever they went. At a minimum, that would imply the sphericity of the moon. And if the moon, why not the earth?

Yet this information was easily available to ancient stargazers. Naked-eye astronomy would suffice.

4. Babinski says, “The Flood ended only after God ‘closed’ the floodgates of the sky...” (123).

But if we take this literally, what does it imply? A closed system—like an aquarium or snow crystal paperweight.

The firmament is like a dam that keeps the upper waters from inundating the earth. It rains or snows when God opens a “floodgate.”

But an obvious problem with that depiction is that rainwater would have nowhere to go. There is no drain. So every time it rained, the sea level would rise a bit more.

Surely there were smart, observant people in the ANE who could figure that out. It wasn’t easy to survive in the ANE. It took a lot of practical intelligence to make it from one day to the next in those harsh, inhospitable conditions.

5. Babinski quotes some Bible verses to try and prove Biblical geocentrism (e.g. Josh 10:12; Eccl 1:5; Ps 19:4-6). But how does geocentrism mesh with a flat earth?

i) Ancient observers saw the sun (and moon and stars) go “around” the sky, from east to west. Then what happens? If the earth is flat, you’d expect the sun to stop at that point

because it simply can't go further. The sun literally "lands" or touches down at one end of the earth. It can't pass through the solid surface of the earth. At that point, the logical way for the sun to get back to the east is to reverse course. So, if the earth is flat, we'd expect the sun to alternate between clockwise and counterclockwise motion.

Instead, it reappears every morning in the east, right where it started! Wouldn't this suggest that it went "around" the earth, in empty space—just as it went around the sky?

And if it moves in a semicircle during the day, wouldn't that suggest it also moves in a semicircle at night? The sun went full circle because the earth is round.

ii) Moreover, wouldn't that be reinforced by the fact that day and night are roughly the same length? (And even if we make allowance for seasonal variations, that evens out over the course of a year.)

iii) Likewise, didn't ancient sailors, who sailed by the stars, ever notice that the position of the constellations varied depending on where you were? Is that what we'd expect from a flat earth—or a spherical earth?

iv) Needless to say, sailors were also acquainted with the phenomenon of relative motion, viz. passing ships. So appearances could be consistent with more than frame of reference.

v) And sailors also saw ships "sinking" below the horizon (or "rising" above the horizon). Yet they knew from their own experience that those ships hadn't gone over the edge of the earth—like a cosmic waterfall.

6. Babinski says, "...verses throughout the Bible agree that the earth is immovable, moving only in the case of earthquakes..." (128).

But, of course, that has nothing to do with relative motion or locomotion. It's not talking about the earth in relation to other celestial bodies. Rather, that's a reference to seismic activity.

7. Babinski cites Josh 10:12 to prove Biblical geocentrism. But the description is explicitly from the local viewpoint of an earthbound observer. To blow this up into a global description is anachronistic.

8. Babinski cites Mt 4:8 to prove a flat earth. But aside from the fact that this is probably a vision, didn't ancient travelers ever notice that the world extends beyond what you can see from any particular hilltop or mountaintop?

9. Babinski mentions "flat-earth themes" like the Ascension (132).

i) However, Jesus doesn't fly up to heaven. Rather, he briefly levitates, at which point he is then enveloped by the Shekinah.²⁰

²⁰ Cf. D. Bock, *Acts* (Baker 2007), 67; D. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans 2009), 115.

ii) If the firmament were truly a dome, then heaven would surround all sides of the hemispheric firmament, from the zenith to the horizon. In that case, heaven wouldn't just be up. Heaven would be all around us. Sideways. Ahead and behind.

10. Babinski mentions the netherworld (132). But biblical depictions of the netherworld are simply modeled on ANE mortuary customs.²¹

11. Babinski cites Dan 4:10-11 as a prooftext for a flat earth. But this description is quite compatible with a spherical earth. Let's take a comparison:

Both the size of Olympus Mons (roughly the size of the American state of Arizona) and its shallow slope (2.5 degrees central dome surrounded by 5 degree outer region) mean that a person standing on the surface of Mars would be unable to view the upper profile of the volcano even from a distance as the curvature of the planet and the volcano itself would obscure it. The only way to view the mountain properly is from orbit. However, one could view parts of Mons: standing on the highest point of its summit, the slope of the volcano would extend beyond the horizon, a mere 3 kilometres away; from the three kilometre elevated caldera rim one could see 80 kilometres to the caldera's other side; from the southeast scarp highpoint (about 5 km elevation) one could look about 180 km southeast; from the northwest scarp highpoint (about 8 km elevation) one could look upslope possibly 240 km and look northeast possibly 230 km.²²

Just as Olympus Mons can seem to fill the horizon, to a ground-based observer, so can Daniel's world-tree. Unless Babinski happens to think that Mars is flat rather than spherical.

12. Babinski compares Gen 1 to the Enuma Elish, where the "sea-goddess" Tiamat is the sky. But aside from the fact that Babinski disregards scholarly arguments against the literary dependence of Gen 1 on the Enuma Elish,²³ he also ignores the practical question. If Tiamat is the firmament, or if she supplies the raw materials for the firmament, then of what is a sea-goddess made up? Is a sea-goddess solid, like a bronze statue? Is she composed of stuff that can dam the upper waters?

13. Babinski cites Rev 1:7 as a prooftext for Biblical geocentrism. However:

i) Suppose the verse does, indeed, conjure up the image of a flat earth? So what? Language is full of dead metaphors. We ourselves use flat-earth metaphors whenever we speak of sunrise/sunup or sunset/sundown.

ii) For that matter, the imagery could just as well be hyperbolic. To suggest this isn't spe-

²¹ Cf. C. Morgan & R. Peterson, eds. *Hell Under Fire* (Zondervan 2004), 53-54.

²² <http://www.lonympics.co.uk/Olympus%20Mons.htm>

²³ E.g. K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans 2003), 424-25; J. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths* (Zondervan 2009), 100-102.

cial pleading. It's easy to document hyperbole in Scripture. What is more, hyperbolic depictions are characteristic of eschatological imagery.

iii) Moreover, "sight" is frequently an abstract metaphor for knowledge. And it's just as easy to document that fact from Scriptural usage.

On that construal, the verse is simply saying, in a vivid way, that when Christ comes back, everybody will both know and acknowledge, willingly or unwillingly, who Jesus really is.

iv) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we take this literally. How would that depiction presume a flat earth?

For instance, suppose we said, "Every eye shall see the moon."

Would such a phenomenon only be possible on a flat earth? Hardly!

You see, Babinski has smuggled a suppressed premise into his conclusion. He tacitly rephrases the verse to say, "Every eye shall see him all at once."

So he's assuming the event must be instantaneous. Of course, the verse doesn't say that. For that matter, the verse doesn't even say anything about Jesus "descending." You might be able to get that from other passages, but not from Rev 1:7.

If the "atmospheric effects" of the Parousia were sufficiently large and distant, and if they hovered in one place for 24 hours, then, of course, everyone around the world would be able to see it.

So even if you construe the verse with crass literality, it's quite possible for earthlings on a rotating planet to see the same atmospheric phenomenon. It would be a worldwide spectacle.

14. Babinski takes the cubical shape of the New Jerusalem literally (142-43).

i) But the shape of the New Jerusalem is numerological, not literal. It is dictated by John's duodenary numerology, which spatializes the 12 tribes of Israel (Rev 21:12). A concrete emblem of the 12 tribes. And the cubical shape is just a geometrical extension of the duodenary motif. Multiples of 12.

ii) In addition, the cubical shape may well be intended to trigger yet another numerological association, where the configuration of the New Jerusalem presents a counterpoint to the mark of the Beast: 666 versus 12x12x12.

iii) There may also be literary allusion to the inner sanctum (in Solomon's temple).

This is all patently symbolic.

15. He brings up the lifecycle of stars, as if that runs counter to the creation account. Yet what the creation account describes is not simply the creation of natural kinds, but the inauguration of a self-perpetuating cycle. It's not static by any means. Once God creates a natural kind, it can (and does) reproduce itself.

16. Babinski also devotes some time to the meaning of *raqia*. However, his analysis is defective in two important respects:

i) Whether or not *raqia* denotes a solid vault is disputed in the scholarly literature. For a number of standard commentaries and monographs define the term more broadly, classify this as a poetic figure of speech, or consider it a phenomenal description.²⁴

ii) More to the point, even if the term did, in fact, denote a solid vault, this doesn't mean that Gen 1 intended to teach its audience that the sky was a solid vault. It doesn't even mean that Gen 1 took that for granted, as an unquestioned cultural assumption.

For there is still the question of whether that imagery is literal or figurative. For if Gen 1 is depicting the world as a cosmic temple, then we'd expect the presence of architectural metaphors to cue the reader.

17. Babinski says [after quoting Josh 10:12], "That God would direct his command at the sun rather than the earth implies a belief in a stationary earth (129).

One of the ironies of this claim is that it runs counter to the interpretation of Joshua's Long Day offered by two scholars (i.e. Stephen Meyers; John Walton) whom Babinski plugs in his essay (133,35).²⁵

18. Babinski also mishandles the mythopoetic passages in Scripture. But aside from his search-and-destroy mission, this mistake is also due to his failure to make allowance for different literary genres. Yet the Biblical use of mythopoetic language in poetic and polemical settings is nothing new or damaging to the inerrancy of Scripture.²⁶

19. Babinski leans heavily on the claims of Paul Seely. However, Babinski ignores the counterevidence. See Appendix III in this review.

20. Babinsky says, "Two Evangelicals [Peter Enns & Denis Lamoureux] have reviewed Beale's book and explained why Genesis 1 and other parts of the Bible present falsifiable statements regarding cosmology that cannot be explained away solely as 'temple im-

²⁴ Cf. C. J. Collins, *Genesis 1-4* (P&R 2006), 45-46, 264; V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1-17* (Eerdmans 1990), 122; B. Waltke, *Genesis* (Zondervan 2001 62; G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word 1987), 19-20.

²⁵ J. Walton, "Joshua 10:12-15 and Mesopotamian Celestial Omen Texts," A. Millard, et al. eds. *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, (Eisenbrauns 1994), 181-90; 72 http://www.bibleandscience.com/bible/books/genesis/genesis1_sunstoodstill.htm

²⁶ Cf. J. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and Old Testament* (Baker 1997); E. Smick, "Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms," *WTJ* 44 (1982), 88-98, http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/19-Psalms/Text/Articles/Smick-MythopoeticPs-WTJ.htm

agery' (as Beale had hoped)" (134).

Why does Babinski classify Enns and Lamoureux as "Evangelicals" rather than liberals? Both men clearly deny the inerrancy of Scripture. If Babinski is defining "Evangelical" so broadly that it's consistent with a repudiation of inerrancy, then what's the difference between evangelical and liberal?

As for their reviews, see Appendix IV.

21. Finally, let's take a classic example "triple-decker" cosmography in Scripture: "The likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth" (Deut 4:17b-18).

It's easy to see the basis for this depiction, and there's nothing mythical about it. The sky is higher than dry land, while dry land is higher than sea-level. The three "tiers" represent the relative position of the three primary ecological zones. And that depiction is literally true.²⁷

²⁷ Cf. C. J. Collins, *Science & Faith* (Crossway 2003), 100-101.

Jason Engwer

There are several points about Biblical cosmology and ancient cosmology in general that Edward Babinski either ignores or doesn't say enough about:

- He acknowledges that there's some ambiguity in ancient views of cosmology (115), and we know that ancient sources held a variety of perspectives.

- Agnosticism was always an option. Just as we today aren't obligated to take a position on issues we're ignorant about, the same was true of people who lived in ancient times. We shouldn't assume that every Biblical author had to have taken a position on every cosmological issue, so that he must have held a false view if he didn't understand the correct cosmology.

- Just as we today use poetic language or the language of appearances, for example, such as when referring to a sunrise or sunset, so could ancient people. Babinski acknowledges, for instance, that "the Lord's defeat of cosmic foes was sometimes applied metaphorically" (119).

- One of the indications that a Biblical author didn't intend his cosmological comments to be taken as an equivalent of a modern scientific description is that the author uses multiple images to describe the same phenomenon. Babinski cites references to pillars of the earth in Job (128), yet elsewhere he discusses Job 26:7 (n. 52 on 142), which refers to the hanging of the earth without reference to pillars. If pillars are referred to in some places, but aren't part of the imagery used elsewhere in the same book, a book that frequently uses poetic language, why should we think that the passages about pillars were meant to express belief in actual pillars and, thus, a false cosmology? In the same note that discusses Job 26:7, Babinski cites another passage in Job (38:8-11) that refers to doors at the boundaries of the sea. Are we to believe that the author of Job thought there were actual doors there? Is Job 38:8 referring to an actual womb? John Loftus is correct when he refers to "the poetical book of Job" in a later chapter (246).

- If we're going to take references to something like pillars of the earth or corners of the earth as literal cosmology, then why not take the same approach toward passages that most naturally suggest a round earth, for example? Should we assume that passages about the circular nature of the earth's atmosphere (Job 22:14, 26:10, Proverbs 8:27) are meant to imply a spherical earth? A circular atmosphere could accompany an earth that isn't round, but a round earth would be a more natural fit.

- As Steve Hays has noted in his review of Babinski's chapter, there would be a lot of inconsistencies if we tried to combine all of the images the Bible uses when discussing these issues. The alleged Biblical cosmology that Babinski constructs doesn't even make sense. He refers to beings ascending and descending from Heaven, manna falling, smoke from burnt offerings rising up to God, etc. (130-131). But if there's a solid dome and water over the earth (122-125), how are such objects getting through?

- Some people believed in the spherical shape of the earth in ancient times, even during the Old Testament era. Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century A.D., comments that belief in a spherical earth was the common view of his day (The Natural History, 2:2).
- There were many means by which ancient people could have arrived at correct cosmological conclusions, such as the shadow of the earth during a lunar eclipse. Steve Hays has discussed some other examples in his reply to Babinski.
- The later critics date Biblical books like Genesis, the more they have to take into account advances in knowledge over time and the existence of belief in a spherical earth among later sources.
- The early Christians held a variety of views of the shape of the earth. Theophilus of Antioch suggests agnosticism on the subject, at least apart from a Divine revelation (To Autolycus, 2:32). Athenagoras refers to the earth as spherical (A Plea For The Christians, 8, 16). While Babinski cites Revelation 7:1 as a reference to a flat earth (n. 57 on 144), the earliest commentary on Revelation sees the four corners as referencing “four nations” (Victorinus, Commentary On The Apocalypse Of The Blessed John, 9). Basil of Caesarea refers to a large number of cosmological views that had been held by people over the centuries and mentions doubts that were continuing to be raised against common opinions on the subject (The Hexameron, 3:4, 9:1). Babinski suggests that the New Testament repeatedly advocates a flat earth (127, n. 57 on 143-144). The diverse views of the early post-apostolic Christians, including some who believed in a spherical earth, give us reason to be cautious about Babinski’s conclusion. While he cites post-apostolic sources who held something like the cosmology he assigns to the Bible (n. 59 on 144-147), we should keep in mind that many ancient sources, both Christian and non-Christian, contradicted that cosmology.
- Steve Hays has already discussed some of the problems with Babinski’s interpretation of the Bible. I want to expand upon one of those passages, Matthew 4:8. Matthew could easily have known that there was no mountain from which a person could physically see every kingdom of the earth, including whatever details of those kingdoms would be involved in showing their “glory”. The parallel passage in Luke 4:5 refers to how Satan showed Jesus the kingdoms “in a moment of time”. Jesus is *shown* the kingdoms. He doesn’t move around to look at them. And it happens in an instant. Apparently, Satan is supernaturally bringing images before Jesus. The mountain backdrop isn’t meant to convey the concept that there was some mountain high enough to allow people to see everything on a flat earth. Rather, the mountain backdrop is being used to convey the concept of elevation, without regard to whether that elevation allows a person to physically see the entire earth. This incident has nothing to do with normal eyesight or a flat earth. Babinski repeatedly overlooks such details in his attempt to put together a Biblical cosmology that’s inconsistent and nonsensical.
- We should keep in mind that the issue here isn’t just whether the Biblical authors, considered as normal individuals, are likely to have held correct cosmological views or to have been agnostic on cosmological matters rather than having held erroneous views. Ra-

ther, we also have to take evidence for the Divine inspiration of scripture into account. If a scientist and a five-year-old both refer to a sunrise, we give the scientist a benefit of the doubt that we don't extend to the child. The child may think that the sun actually rises. Any Christian who thinks a Biblical author is like the scientist rather than the child would have to argue for the Divine inspiration of the Bible. He couldn't merely assert it. But if there is good reason to believe in the Bible's inspiration, then that factor has to be taken into account.

Paul Manata

There's really not much to add to what Steve Hays and Jason Engwer had to say about Ed Babinski's chapter "The Cosmology of the Bible." I'll make two small points:

1. Babinski mocks the biblical writers for using terms like "stretching out the heavens," the "courses" of the stars, and "the sun rises and sets." For Babinski, this language is evidence that the biblical authors are unscientific boobs. Yet when it comes time for Babinski to explain our universe in modern, scientific, sophisticated terms, he writes: "our planet is a tiny life raft bobbing in space with far less fortunate life rafts bobbing over to our left and right" (132). The editor of *The Christian Delusion* ought to find all copies of this book and burn them before the scientifically enlightened people of the next century get to it. I can imagine a book in the future with this chapter: "The Cosmology of Edward Babinski." See, apparently, for Babinski, you can write like that if you live in the scientific age and so we know you don't mean it. If you don't live in the scientific age, then you can't be figurative like Babinski. You must mean it all literally. After all, we're starting with the assumption that these people were dumb and so that's why they said what they did.
2. Babinski likes to point out that ancient, pre-scientific people wrote the Bible (hardly an interesting observation) and so this accounts for why they made so many stupid, ignorant, and unscientific statements about the origin and nature of the cosmos. He looks at some ANE statements on the creation of the world and finds some similarities between them and concludes that this shows that the biblical writers just borrowed the unscientific understanding of the creation of the cosmos prevalent at that time. Some of his comments have to do with the notion of "words" that speak the cosmos into existence (113) as well as "commands" for the sun to remain where it is and for other "law-like" regularities to operate as they do (128 - 130). Babinski mocks this as obviously unscientific and improper as an explanation for the existence of the world. However, I don't think so. In fact, I think the biblical authors as well as other ancient peoples hit upon an important truth when explaining the cosmos: the invoking of personal intentions as a full or complete explanation of the origin of the cosmos and the existence of "natural laws." If there are natural signs of intelligence, order, and purpose in the cosmos, especially irreducibly so, then the intentions, powers, and beliefs of a person seems to me to be just what the doctor ordered in terms of a full or complete explanation, rather than a partial one. This isn't the place to argue for design, irreducible purpose, natural signs, etc. (for those arguments see: Robin Collins, "The Teleological Argument: an exploration of the fine-tuning of the universe," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); John Foster, *The Divine Law-maker* (Oxford, 2004); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 2004)). Rather, this is to point out that reference to the intentions and beliefs and powers of a personal agent is to offer a massive missing piece to the job of explaining the existence of the universe we encounter. It would appear that these stupid, ancient, dumb, and unscientific people hit on a rather huge explanatory resource. Babinski's explanation is only a partial explanation, and it is less fundamental than the explanation given by ancient stupid people.

A Review of Chapter Six

Steve Hays

VI. The Bible and Modern Slipshoddiness

1. In chap. 6, Tobin begins by drawing attention to alleged discrepancies between Gen 1 and Gen 2 (149). It doesn't even occur to him that Gen 1 is a global creation account whereas Gen 2 is a local creation account, centered on the Garden of Eden—even though numerous scholars draw that distinction.

2. Tobin trots out an old objection to the alleged numerical discrepancy between the number of animals in Gen 6:19-20 and their number in Gen 7:2-3. However, that objection fails to consider the Hebraic literary technique of synoptic/resumption-expansion.²⁸

3. Tobin alleges racism in the OT discrimination against Ammonites and Moabites (Deut 23:3), as well as the ban on mixed marriages in Ezra and Nehemiah.

i) However, the distinction is religious rather than racial. A distinction between pagans, on the one hand, and members of the covenant community, on the other.

ii) Even if, for the sake of argument, the OT was racially discriminatory, that wouldn't disprove the OT unless Tobin can show, on secular grounds, that racial discrimination is wrong.

iii) In fact, many unbelievers subscribe to racial discrimination. They favor racial preferences for certain minority groups, to the detriment of other racial and ethnic groups.

4. Tobin alleges some discrepancies between Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. However, this fails to take into account the genre of each. Both books speak in generalities. These are not unconditional or unqualified statements one way or the other.

5. Tobin alleges a discrepancy between James and Paul on the value of the law. This, however, involves a superficial reading of each.²⁹

6. Tobin says, "It has long been known that the story of the great Flood told in Genesis chapters 6-9 is a scientific impossibility" (151).

i) Of course, young-earth creationists are quite familiar with that objection, and they have

²⁸ "In typical Semitic style, the summary injunction to take pairs of animals into the ark is now developed by the more specific injunction to take seven pairs of clean animals," B. Waltke, *Genesis* (Zondervan 2001), 137-38.

²⁹ To take just one counterexample, cf. "Excursus 2: Faith, Works, and Justification in James and Paul" in Dan McCartney's recent commentary on James: http://www.wtsbooks.com/pdf_files/9780801026768.pdf

marshaled many arguments to the contrary.³⁰ Tobin needs to refute their arguments.

ii) Tobin is also assuming the global interpretation of the flood. But he needs to refute scholars who argue for the local interpretation of the flood.³¹

iii) In addition, it's not as if young-earth creationism and old-earth creationism are tight, mutually exclusive packages. It's logically and exegetically possible to combine elements from one with elements from the other.

iv) In fact, Tobin's objection contradicts Babinski's chapter (5), where Babinski assures us that the narrator of Genesis was indebted to a primitive triple-decker cosmography. But if, for the sake of argument, we accept his interpretation, then the flood wasn't "global" in the modern sense of the term.

7. Tobin says [citing Cyrus Gordon], "the scholarly consensus holds that the Genesis story is dependent on the Gilgamesh epic" (152).

i) To the contrary, even a liberal like Peter Enns doesn't take that position:

It is not necessary to ponder whether Genesis is dependent on these ancient Mesopotamian stories. The various flood stories simply share common ways of speaking about a horrible flood of some sort. It is a common scholarly view that either a severe local flood (around 2900 B.C.) or numerous local floods triggered these flood stories.³²

Likewise, as another scholar says:

Given the fact that there were several different flood traditions from Mesopotamia, and that they have so many points in common with the biblical story, it might be logical to conclude that all the stories recall a common event that was re-told to reflect different social, cultural and theological contexts.³³

ii) Even if we stick with Cyrus Gordon, that's not all he has to say on the subject:

The use of birds which could be released for determining the presence and direction of land (Genesis 8:6-12) is not a folkloristic invention, but reflects actual navigational practice...A cage full of homing pigeons is not a bad method of direction finding.³⁴

³⁰ E.g., J. Sarfati, *The Greatest Hoax on Earth* (Creation Book Publishers 2010), chap. Chap. 10; Andrew Snelling, *Earth's Catastrophic Past* (ICR 2009); K. Wise, *Faith, Form, and Time* (Broadman 2002).

³¹ E.g., T. D. Alexander, "Genesis," *ESV Study Bible*, J. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Zondervan 2001); R. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Baker, 2nd ed., 1991).

³² <http://biologos.org/blog/gilgamesh-atrahasis-and-the-flood/>

³³ J. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Lion Hudson 2008), 38; "These cuneiform accounts show similarities with Gen 6-9, a fact which is possibly to be explained by common reference to an actual historical event," T. Mitchell, "Flood," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1:512.

³⁴ C. Gordon, *Before Columbus* (Crown 1971), 77.

8. Tobin says, “Genesis 11:26-28 says that Abraham came from ‘Ur of the Chaldees.’ Estimates of Abraham’s lifetime fall anywhere between the 23C BCE and the 16C BCE, yet the Chaldeans as a people only came into existence around the 8-7C BCE - long after the time of Abraham” (ibid. 153).”

However, this objection is bound up with the identification of Ur, which is quite controversial.³⁵ As Duane Garrett explains:

It is true that the Chaldeans do not appear in the historical record until the 9th cent., when they show up in southern Babylonia. If Ur of the Chaldeans is the Ur of lower Mesopotamia (the Ur of Sumer), then it looks like Genesis is connecting Abraham to these people. This is obviously a problem. In my view, Abraham’s Ur is far to the north, near Haran. Genesis never connects him to lower Mesopotamia (his family ties are all near Haran). The designation “of the Chaldeans” is still a bit of an enigma, but there is no reason to think that Genesis wrongly asserts that the Chaldeans of Neo-Babylonian fame were already in Babylonia during the time of Abraham.³⁶

9. Tobin says, “Genesis 26:1 relates a story about Isaac going to Gerar to meet with ‘Abimelech, king of the Philistines.’ Archaeological finds tells us that there was no city of Gerar and no king of the Philistines to meet with Isaac during the historical period in which he would have lived” (153).

i) It doesn’t occur to Tobin that scribes sometimes updated archaic terms in the text. As one scholar notes:

Here we see a usage from the twelfth to tenth centuries (1180 and following) that replaced an earlier, obsolete terms—just as we would say “the Dutch founded New York” although they did so as New Amsterdam, the present name replacing the former under their British successors.³⁷

ii) As another scholar notes:

Two other possibilities exist for the use of the term “Philistines.” One is that Moses is writing for the people of his day, a time when the Philistines are firmly entrenched in Canaan (see Exod 13:17); or, secondly, perhaps there was an early wave of Aegean invaders who settled in the land of Gerar, and Moses applies the generic name ‘Philistines’ to them.³⁸

iii) As yet another scholar explains:

³⁵ Cf. V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1-17* (Eerdmans 1991), 363-65; J. Walton, ibid. 390-91.

³⁶ Private email (6/16/10).

³⁷ K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans 2003), 340.

³⁸ J. Currid, *Genesis 1:1-25:18* (Evangelical Press 2003), 385.

I suggest that the Philistines of Genesis represent the first wave of Sea Peoples from the Aegean, and that the later Philistines represent the last wave (ca 1200 BC). These early Philistines would then represent some earlier Aegean group, such as the Caphtorim from Crete (Deut 2:23).³⁹

10. Tobin says, “Genesis 12:14-16...include[s] the use of domesticated camels...The archaeological evidence shows us that camels did not become domesticated until the 11C BCE, well after the time of Abraham and Joseph. Camels could not have been used during the time of the patriarchs” (153).

i) That’s an argument from silence. It’s quite unrealistic to expect that we’d have adequate information about the domestication of camels, given how little evidence has survived, and how little of the surviving evidence has been excavated.

ii) If camels were useful a few centuries later, they’d be equally useful a few centuries earlier.

iii) As a matter of fact, there is evidence for domesticated camels within this timeframe.⁴⁰

11. Tobin says, “Genesis 17:9-11 tells of a covenant between God and Abraham, which was sealed by the act of circumcision...How could the act of circumcision be a ‘sign of the covenant’ between God and Abraham when everyone else was doing it” (153).

That’s rather silly. The same symbol can have a polysemous import depending on the cultural connotations which any given society or subculture assigns to it. Take the swastika.

12. Tobin says the story of Moses closely parallels the legend of Sargon (154). However:

i) You can only say the two are closely parallel if you conveniently disregard the major differences.

ii) Some scholars think it parallels the legend of Horus rather than Sargon.

iii) Even if it was allusive of some legendary figure, the Bible often polemicizes against pagan myths and legends, so this would be par for the course, and fully consistent with the historicity of the event.

iv) If the account of Moses contains any literary parallels, they are probably intertextual parallels—looking forward and backward. As one scholar points out, in Exod 2:3, the word “basket” is

The same word used of the boat that Noah built to save his family and the world’s animals from the Flood (Gen 6:14). The fact that the Bible only uses the word

³⁹ V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Eerdmans 1995), 94.

⁴⁰ Cf. K. Kitchen, *ibid.*, 338-39; <http://www.bga.nl/en/articles/camel.html>

here and in the flood narrative ('the ark of the covenant' uses a different Hebrew word) strongly suggests that there is an intentional connection being made between two accounts.⁴¹

Oswalt also points out another parallel in the same verse:

The Hebrew word used for 'reeds' here is the Egyptian loan word *sup*, which is the same word used in 13:18 and elsewhere to identify the sea that God led his people across (28 occurrences; see also Jonah 2:5). This creates a strong impression that the narrator wanted the reader to make a connection between the two events.⁴²

v) Unfortunately, there's nothing out of the ordinary about mothers of unwanted babies exposing their newborns by tossing them in the river if they happen to live near a river. For instance:

Medieval foundling wheels were wooden cylinders set in the wall of a convent or church. The baby was placed in the cylinder from the outside and the cylinder was turned towards the inside, where nuns would care for the baby and seek new parents. The first foundling wheel was believed to have been installed in Rome in 1198 at the orders of Pope Innocent III who was alarmed at the number of newborns, usually illegitimate, found caught in the nets of fishermen on the River Tiber.⁴³

And even that's not fully parallel, for Jochebed didn't abandon him. To the contrary, she took elaborate precautions to save his life.

vi) Jochebed probably put him in a basket by the river because she knew that Pharaoh's daughter used to go bathing at that spot, and if her baby came under the protection of the princess, he'd be safe. These are realistic details.⁴⁴

13. Tobin says, "We have at least three names for Moses' father-in-law..." (154).

This oversimplifies the issue:

i) As one scholar notes, the Hebrew term (*chatan*) has a wider semantic range than simply "father-in-law":

It appears to be a more general term describing a male coming into a relationship

⁴¹ J. Oswalt, *Exodus* (Tyndale House 2008), 292.

⁴² Ibid. 292-93; cf. J. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Baker 2001), 114.

⁴³ "Italy revives 'foundling wheel'" <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/world/italy-revives-foundling-wheel/story-e6frf7lf-1111113068777>

⁴⁴ For more on this, cf. J. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford 1999), 136-40; A. Millard, "How Reliable Is Exodus?" http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/how_reliable_is_exodus.htm; A. Ross, "The Birth of the Deliverer," <http://www.christianleadershipcenter.org/exod.2.pdf>

to a family thorough marriage—namely, a bridegroom, a son-in-law, or a father-in-law.⁴⁵

ii) We should also make allowance for the difference between a personal name and a tribal name.⁴⁶

14. Tobin says, “Even the name ‘Moses’ itself was originally Egyptian, not Hebrew” (154).

And how does that cast doubt on the historicity of the account, exactly? Since Moses was adopted by the Egyptian princess, why wouldn’t his adoptive name be Egyptian rather than Hebrew?

15. Tobin says, “The date of the Exodus is also plagued with uncertainty” (154).

And how does that refute the historicity of the Exodus, exactly? After all, the Bible never dates the Exodus. At best, it provides some roughly datable details and intervals. But any attempt to date the Exodus will have to combine biblical data with extrabiblical data. Therefore, it’s not as if the biblical timing of the Exodus contradicts extrabiblical dates—for Scripture gives no date for the Exodus. Like many ancient events, any attempt to correlate literary notices with relative chronology is an educated guess.

16. Tobin also raises other stock objections to the historicity of the Exodus. However, he doesn’t interact with standard scholarship to the contrary.⁴⁷

17. Predictably enough, he also denies the historicity of the Conquest. And, once again, he fails to interact with the opposing scholarship.⁴⁸

18. Likewise, he denies the historicity of the Hebrew monarchy. And, once more, he fails to engage the opposing scholarship on this issue—as well as OT history in general.⁴⁹

19. He also makes deceptive comments like: “Surely such a vast empire [i.e. David’s] would have left immense archaeological evidence of its existence...as in the case with his

⁴⁵ J. Currid, *Numbers* (Evangelical Press 2009), 151-52.

⁴⁶ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Baker 1992), 177.

⁴⁷ E.g. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt; Ancient Israel in Sinai* (Oxford 2005); Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, chap. 6.

⁴⁸ E.g. R. Hess, *Joshua* (IVP 1996); R. Hubbard, *The NIV Application Commentary: Joshua* (Zondervan 2009); Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, chap. 5; K. L. Younger, *The NIV Application Commentary: Judges, Ruth* (Zondervan 2002).

⁴⁹ D. Block, ed. *Israel Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?* (Broadman 2008); R. Hess et al. eds., *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History* (Eisenbrauns, 2008); R. Hess & D. Tsumura eds., *I Studied Inscriptions Before the Flood* (Eisenbrauns 1994); D. Howard & M. Grisani, eds. *Giving the Sense* (Kregel 2003); J. Hoffmeier & A. Millard, eds. *The Future of Biblical Archaeology* (Eerdmans 2004); V. P. Long et al. eds., *Windows into Old Testament History* (Eerdmans 2002); V. P. Long, ed. *Israel’s Past in Present Research* (Eisenbrauns 1999); A. Millard et al. eds., *Faith, Tradition, and History* (Eisenbrauns 1994); A. Millard & D. Wiseman, eds., *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (IVP 1980); I. Provan et al. *A Biblical History of Israel* (WJK 2003); Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, chaps. 2-4.

[Solomon's] father David, modern archaeology simply finds no evidence for this empire or for any of his supposed architectural undertakings" (156).

Of course, David and Solomon never had an "empire" in the sense of Rome, with far-flung colonies and miles of monumental architecture, or *viae publicae*. Rather, we're mainly talking about political borders and international trade relations. The only major structures were the temple and the palace, centered in Jerusalem, and the scholars I cite dispose of that issue. For instance:

Given (1) the thorough destruction of Jerusalem's official buildings by the Babylonians in 586, (2) the reuse of the site in the Persian period, and then (3) the massive redevelopment of the site and total rebuilding of both the temple and the surrounding precincts in Herod's time. Plus (4) Roman destruction and Byzantine and Muslim buildings since then, and (5) the practical impossibility of digging archaeologically in the present precinct.⁵⁰

20. Tobin says, "Genesis 2 introduces us to a talking snake who urged Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit. In Numbers 22 we find the story of Balaam and his talking donkey" (157).

i) Gen 2 doesn't use our (English) word "snake." Rather, it uses a Hebrew word with occult connotations.⁵¹

ii) For reasons I've given elsewhere, I think it's more likely that Gen 3 describes an angelophany, involving a fallen angel.

iii) Num 22 attributes the creature's speech to a divine miracle.

iv) Moreover, the episode in Num 22 is intentionally satirical. It was meant to be incongruous. Theater of the absurd.

v) Tobin's objection boils down to his dogmatic rejection of the supernatural.

21. Tobin then compares the virgin birth to pagan "parallels" (157-58).

i) Upon closer examination, these don't involve a virginal conception. Rather, they involve a god who impregnates a woman by sexual intercourse.

ii) Matthew and Luke are written from a Jewish perspective, not a pagan perspective.

iii) If there are any literary parallels to the virgin birth, those would be to other miraculous birth narratives in Scripture.

⁵⁰ Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 122.

⁵¹ V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1-17* (Eerdmans 1991), 187.

iv) Tobin simply ignores the opposing literature on this subject.⁵²

22. Tobin says the massacre of the innocents is fictitious, given the lack of corroborative evidence (158f). Of course, that's an argument from silence. There's no reason period historians would bother to record a minor atrocity in a backwater like Bethlehem. Why assume it would even be a well-known incident in an era studded with so many large-scale atrocities?

23. Tobin says "If God wanted to avoid the massacre of the innocents, he could easily have intervened supernaturally at the beginning by making the wise men avoid Jerusalem altogether and head on to Bethlehem directly" (160).

But it wasn't God's intention to avoid the massacre in general. It was only his intention to avoid the premature death of Jesus. The public witness of the Magi to the political and religious establishment in Jerusalem is part of the prophetic testimony to the Messiahship of Jesus, which is, in turn, a part of God's providential plan.

24. Tobin says the nativity account is an example of aggadic Midrash, based on Exod 1-2 (160). However,

i) The nature and relevance of "Midrash" is widely disputed.⁵³

ii) What we have in Mt 2 is a case of typology, where an earlier event prefigures a later event. Tobin doesn't believe that's possible since he's an atheist. But from a Christian standpoint, God can arrange earlier events to foreshadow later events.

iii) Indeed, one popular objection to Matthew is that he allegedly indulges in fanciful proof texting. But if Matthew felt at liberty to fabricate the details of his stories, then stories could be tailor-made to precisely parallel OT events and prophecies.

25. Tobin raises stock objections to the census of Quirinius (160-63). However:

i) Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Luke's statement is imprecise. Does that mean Luke is mistaken? Not at all.

Rather, it would be a typical case of Lukan hyperbole. Hyperbole is a deliberate overstatement for rhetorical effect. The Bible often resorts to hyperbole. For example, "Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry" (Ps 18:7).

Luke is fond of hyperbole.⁵⁴ If Lk 2:1-2 is hyperbolic, then all this means is that Luke is

⁵² E.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, "Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth," *On Romans* (T&T Clark 1998), 151-65; J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (James Clark & Co., 3rd ed., 1987).

⁵³ E.g. R. T. France & D. Wenham, eds. *Gospel Perspectives 3: Studies in Midrash and Historiography* (JSOT 1983).

telescoping several events in time and place as if they all took place at one time.

Hyperbole is not an error. It would only be erroneous if the author intended to be strictly accurate. Hyperbole is a standard rhetorical device. Luke's original audience would appreciate that fact.

ii) In addition, as one scholar points out:

The growing amount of evidence indicates that there were many common features between censuses and property returns throughout the Roman empire, including Egypt and Arabia, both close by Palestine. The Egyptian census documents, because of their relative plenty, have been determinative in most discussions. However, there is small but significant evidence concerning how censuses and property returns were conducted outside of Egypt as well, besides the fact that they did not follow the same time-frame. The result is that the account in Luke seems to have many, if not most, of the features one would expect in a census return, as Palme and even Rosen have shown. However, as Rosen has also shown, there may be some other features of the Lukan account, such as the trip to Bethlehem, that are better explained in terms of some of the peculiarities of the property returns... Both Palme and Rosen have shown that the parallels between the Lukan account and the censuses of Egypt and the property returns of Arabia are too many to ignore, and indicate that a plausible historical account is being given by Luke... The grammatical arguments are likewise not decisive, but there is still plausibility for Lk 2:2 referring to the census being before Quirinius became governor.⁵⁵

26. Tobin alleges "failed/faked" prophecies in Scripture, such as Matthew's use of Hos 11:1-2 in Mt 2:14-15: "But that passage was actually about the return of the Israelites during the Exodus" (164).

i) Needless to say, both Matthew and his audience would be quite familiar with the original context.

ii) This is a case of typology.⁵⁶ A new Exodus. Indeed, we already have the new Exodus motif in later OT writers and writings.

iii) If, as liberals would have it, gospel writers like Matthew felt free to invent stories from scratch, or manipulate preexisting traditions at will, then they could make their stories dovetail with the precise terms of the prophetic fulfillment. So this generates a dilemma for the critic: either the events were fictitious, in which case the gospel writers could cut-and-tail the stories to perfectly fit OT prophecies—or else they resorted to fanci-

⁵⁴ "Oikoumenen, as in Acts 11:28, is hyperbolic. 'Entire' or 'all' is used twenty-three times in chaps 1-2," R. Stein, *Luke* (Broadman 1992), 105.

⁵⁵ S. Porter, "The Reasons for the Lukan Census," A. Christophersen et al. eds. *Paul, Luke and the Graeco-Roman World* (Sheffield 2002), 187-88.

⁵⁶ Cf. J. Sailhamer, "Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15," *WTJ* 63/1 (Spring 2001), 87-96.

ful prooftexting because the events really transpired, and they felt duty-bound to stay close to the facts on the ground.

27. Tobin raises stock objections to Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14. However:

- i) Tobin fails to distinguish between sense and reference. Even if the Hebrew term didn't mean "virgin," it could still be referring to a virgin.
- ii) Tobin disregards the nature of a "sign," which is something extraordinary in Isaian usage.
- iii) As Alec Motyer demonstrates, this oracle is part of a larger, unfolding motif (Isa 6-12) which extends well beyond Isaiah's lifetime:

One fact is immediately clear: it is impossible to confine the Immanuel prophecy to any long-forgotten 'fulfillment' in the time of Ahaz. The content of Isaiah 7:14 does not dwell in isolation. It belongs to a connected and indeed interwoven series. Immanuel is the possessor of Judah (8:8); he is the ultimate safeguard against the machinations of the nations (8:10)—Isaiah could not have used the reassuring words 'God is with us' unless with a direct reference to the child whose name this was; Immanuel, consequently, is the great 'prince of the four names', the heir and successor of David (9:6, 7), and in the light of 10:21 the interpretation is irresistible that the one born in David's line is also unequivocally divine, 'the mighty God'; he is additionally the Prince of righteousness and peace, sovereign over a reconciled world (11:1ff). Seen in this light, not only does the name Immanuel receive its full meaning, but one of the tensions within chapter 7 is resolved. The paradox of chapter 7 is that Ahaz is called to rest himself confidently upon the promises of the Lord as being absolutely reliable and irrevocable, and yet, consequent upon his unbelief, the promises are apparently abrogated. Immanuel both confirms that the devastation was the punitive act of God—this, by being born to inherit the disestablished dynasty—and also by his name and deeds he proclaims that the promises were indeed kept, and wonderfully so.

Secondly, seen in the light of its total context, the Immanuel prophecy is found to be interlaced with tensions on the topic of the time of its fulfillment. On the one hand, it has as its context the times of the Assyrian (see 7:17ff.; 8:8; 9:1ff.; 10:34-11:1). But equally it seems to belong to the undated future. Thus 9:1 looks back to the darkness of the Assyrian times and forward to the 'latter time' in which the birth will take place. Again, 11:1 belongs to a time when Judah as well as Israel will have been regathered from worldwide dispersal (verses 11, 12), yet according to 8:8 and 10:33 the Assyrian overran but did not destroy Judah. What a genuine tension this is may be seen by the fact that the two elements in it are found straining away at each other in the same verses and subsections.

We will try to put ourselves into the situation in which Isaiah was placed. At least three important factors were involved. Firstly, Isaiah proceeded, from the start,

from the knowledge of the ultimate fall of Judah and Jerusalem and the captivity of the people (see 6:9ff.). This, coupled with his awareness that the Assyrian was not to be the instrument of this destruction, would necessarily involve the projecting of the ultimate hope into the undated future.⁵⁷

28. Tobin says, “Isaiah 19:5-7 claims the river Nile will dry up. The passage was written almost three thousand years ago and was clearly meant for his time. Yet to this date, the Nile has yet to dry up” (164).

i) Tobin overlooks the obvious fact that Isaiah is studded with poetic imagery, of which this is just another case in point:

The drying up of the Nile (5) is a figurative description of the coming economic decay—such a decay as would make one wonder if the Nile had gone!⁵⁸

The poem may be based on actual events, but it as likely offers an imaginative picture like the Moab poem rather than one whose detail relates to a specific context.⁵⁹

ii) Even if, for the sake of argument, we took it literally, this could easily refer to a temporary natural disaster rather than a permanent national drought.

iii) For that matter, the wording of the text probably refers to irrigation canals and distributaries in the delta, rather than the Nile proper or the Nile in toto.⁶⁰

29. Tobin says, “Isaiah 17:1-2 asserts Damascus will cease to be a city forever. I think most people living today in Damascus, the capital city of Syria, would find such a prophecy rather funny” (164).

What’s rather funny is Tobin’s tin-ear for Isaiah’s homonymic trope, or the political situation which he envisions. As one scholar explains:

The city was captured by Assyria in 732 BC, but was not reduced to ruins. It was, however, left without power or influence, and that is the message that Isaiah memorably presents by employing a word-play between “from [being] a city” (moir) and “a heap” (moi).⁶¹

⁵⁷ J. A. Motyer, “Context and content in the Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14,” *TynB* 21 (1970): 118-125; http://98.131.162.170/tynbul/library/TynBull_1970_21_05_Motyer_Isaiah7_14.pdf; cf. J. Hamilton, “The Virgin Will Conceive: Typological Fulfillment in Matthew 1:18–23,” J. Nolland & D. Gurtner, eds. *Built upon the Rock* (Eerdmans 2008), 228-47; http://www.swbts.edu/resources/SWBTS/Resources/FacultyDocuments/Hamilton/TheVirginWillConceive_7_19_05.pdf; J. Oswalt, “The Significance of the Almah Prophecy in the Context of Isaiah 7-12,” *Criswell Theological Review* 6 (1993), 223-55.

⁵⁸ J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP 1993), 165.

⁵⁹ J. Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Hendrickson 2001), 118.

⁶⁰ Cf. J. Mackay, *Isaiah 1-39* (Evangelical Press 2008), 419.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 394.

30. Tobin says, “Ezekiel predicted (26:7-14) that Nebuchadnezzar will destroy the city of Tyre. Yet even by the prophet’s own later admission, the prophecy failed (Ezekiel 29:17-20)” (164).

i) To begin with, this fails to grasp the nature of oracles of judgment. Except for truly eschatological oracles of judgment (i.e. the final day of judgment), oracles of judgment are implicitly and typically conditional. By giving advance notice, they provide an opportunity to avert the threatened consequence.⁶² If, in this situation, Baal II blinked first in the face of imminent destruction at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar’s army, then that could well avert disaster.

If an oracle of judgment is conditional, and the threatened party repented or relented under pressure, thereby avoiding the consequence, then the prophecy was a success rather than a failure.

ii) Moreover, Tobin’s objection is simply an argument from silence. Even if we had no corroborative evidence, that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Why is Tobin so credulous about ancient history in general, but so incredulous about Biblical history in particular?

iii) Furthermore:

According to Josephus, Nebuchadnezzar did indeed besiege Tyre for some thirteen years (586-573 BC) [Contra Apionem, 1.156; Antiquities 10:228]. By the end of that time, Tyre’s economic and political importance was destroyed, and the king of Tyre became a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar. The siege appears to have been a success, as Ezekiel had prophesied.⁶³

The siege was successful and Tyre did pass into Babylonian control. In a list of royal hostages at Nebuchadnezzar’s court, to be dated about 570 BC, the king of Tyre has the initial place...About 564 BC, Baal, Ethbaal’s successor as king of Tyre, was replaced by a Babylonian High Commissioner.⁶⁴

31. Tobin says, “Ezekiel tried his hand again at prophecy when he predicted Egypt will become desolate, completely uninhabited, and that Egyptians will be scattered to other countries (Ezekiel 29:8-12). Yet Egypt has never been desolate, or completely uninhabited, and there never was an Egyptian diaspora” (164-65).

This fails to take poetic license into account:

An element of rhetorical exuberance was naturally involved in prophesying, the role of which was to persuade the audience of a basic theme, using both conven-

⁶² Cf. R. Pratt, “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/TH.Pratt.Historical_Contingencies.pdf

⁶³ I. Duguid, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ezekiel* (Zondervan 1999), 358.

⁶⁴ L. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* (Word 1990), 109.

tional and emotional language as supportive aids. Physical images may be used to convey emotional reality...Language contains a legitimate element of hyperbole, and prophetic language is entitled to this feature.⁶⁵

32. Tobin says, “Hoping for a third time, Ezekiel tried again. He predicted that Nebuchadnezzar will conquer Egypt (29:19-20). Nebuchadnezzar never did this” (165).

i) Once again, that’s an argument from silence, and yet another instance of Tobin’s selective scepticism.

ii) Moreover,

A cuneiform text refers to Nebuchadnezzar’s thirty-seventh year (568 BC) when the king of Babylon marched against Egypt, that is, within three years of this prophecy.⁶⁶

Josephus provides some evidence that he [Nebuchadnezzar] invaded in 582 BC, and Babylonian sources suggest that he attacked the Egypt of Pharaoh Amasis in 568 BC.⁶⁷

33. Tobin says, “Jeremiah 36:30 prophesied that Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, shall have no successor. Yet 2 Kings 24:6 says he was succeeded by his son, Jehoiachin” (165).

That’s a highly deceptive statement of the available evidence. As one scholar explains:

The three-month reign of Jehoiachin (cf. 2 Kings 24:6,8 does not contradict the prediction of v30. Jehoiachin’s succession was not a valid one but only a token one because he was immediately besieged by Nebuchadnezzar, surrendered in three months, and then went into exile, where he died after many years. No other descendant of Jehoiakim ever ascended the throne.⁶⁸

The historical books report that when Jehoiakim revolted against the Babylonians in 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar mobilized his army against him. However, by the time the Babylonians actually reach Jerusalem, it is Jehoiachin not Jehoiakim who is on the throne...His son Jehoiachin was deported to Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar put his uncle Zedekiah (who was also Jehoiakim’s brother) on the throne.⁶⁹

34. Tobin says, “In the authentic Epistles of Paul, he expected the apocalyptic end of the world within his own lifetime, or at least the lifetime of most of his flock (1 Corinthians 7:29-21 [sic]; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17)” (167).

⁶⁵ Ibid. 111.

⁶⁶ D. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel 25-48* (Eerdmans 1998), 151.

⁶⁷ T. Longman, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Hendrickson 2008), 268.

⁶⁸ C. Feinberg, *Jeremiah* (Zondervan 1982), 253.

⁶⁹ Longman, *ibid*, 240.

i) Regarding 1 Cor 7:

a) Tobin is evidently ignorant of what Paul was setting his own position in opposition to. He was opposing the view of popular Greek philosophy. On the one hand, this stressed the continuity of the world, given the eternity of the world. On the other hand, it also stressed a degree of personal discontinuity, given the immortality of the soul—rather than the resurrection of the body.

Hence the temptation to squeeze everything into this life on the assumption that because the afterlife is incorporeal, there are things you can do here-below which will be denied you in the hereafter.

By contrast, Christian eschatology reversed the equation. On the one hand, this stressed the discontinuity of the world, given the day of judgment, and the palingenesis. On the other hand, this also stressed a degree of personal continuity, not only given the intermediate state, but the final state (i.e. resurrection of the body).⁷⁰

Time was “shortened” (not “short”) compared to the “long” view of the Greeks, viz. the eternity of the world.

b) In addition, the immediate crisis has reference, not to the imminent return of Christ, but famine.⁷¹

ii) Regarding 1 Thes 4:14-17:

Two further matters need discussion, since a good deal of misunderstanding has had its day here. First, Paul is not stating that he expects to be alive at the Parousia. Rather, he was simply currently among ‘the living’ who are set out in contrast to ‘the sleeping.’ His concerning fact has nothing to do with who will be living, but with the simple fact that they have no advantage over the dead regarding the Parousia. Or to put it another way: to be alive or dead is of no consequence at all regarding the coming of Christ. In other places, including later in this letter (5:10), Paul reckons with either possibility. Similarly, a few years later he can reflect on ‘whether we are “at home” [in the body] or “away from home”’ (2 Cor 5:6-9) with regard to being alive or dead at the coming of Christ. In any case, Paul’s (and ‘their’ or ‘our’) being among the living or the dead at the coming of Christ is ultimately an irrelevancy; that, after all, is quite the point made in the passage as a whole.⁷²

It should be noted that what Paul is primarily emphasizing in 1 Thes 4:13-18 is not that he and the recipients of this letter will be alive when Jesus returns. Rather, he is affirming that the dead in Christ will not miss out on the parousia. Accordingly, Paul does not bother to clarify who among those presently living will

⁷⁰ Cf. B. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Eerdmans 2001), chap. 11.

⁷¹ Winter, *ibid.*, chap. 10.

⁷² G. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 2009), 175.

be alive at the parousia and who will not. Since the contrast lies between those Thessalonians who are dead in Christ and those who are alive, where else can Paul include himself and the recipients of this letter except with those who are alive?⁷³

35. Tobin tries to drive a wedge between the “chaotic” ecclesiology of 1 Cor, and the “hierarchical” ecclesiology of 1 Tim and Titus.

i) On the face of it, the polity in 1 Cor 12 seems to have a more developed “hierarchy” than the simpler polity in the Pastorals. Don’t bureaucracies tend to develop more layers over time, not fewer?

ii) It wouldn’t be surprising if, at the end of his life, Paul put more emphasis on church office, to take over as the apostles died off.

36. Tobin says, “In the OT, the book of Daniel, some portions of Psalms, and the later part of Isaiah are all known to be pseudonymous. In the NT, the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) are considered by a vast majority of critical scholars not to have been written by Paul... Three other Pauline Epistles (Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians) are also considered by a majority of scholars to be pseudonymous. 2 Peter is unanimously considered to be pseudonymous, with most scholars also lumping 1 Peter into the same category. James and Jude are also generally considered to be pseudepigraphical works” (166-67).

This doesn’t begin to engage the opposing literature. Let’s take a sampling of the standard conservative literature:

Bible Introductions:

Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Moody 1994).

Andrew Hill & John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Zondervan 2009)

Craig Blomberg, *From Pentecost To Patmos* (B&H 2006).

D. A. Carson & Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan 2005).

Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (IVP 1990).

Andreas Köstenberger, L. S. Kellum, & Charles Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown* (B&H 2009).

Terry Wilder, J. Daryl Charles, and Kendell Easley, *Faithful to the End* (Broadman 2007)

⁷³ R. Stein, *Interpreting Puzzling Texts in the New Testament* (Baker 1996), 297.

Monographs

E. E. Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Brill 2002).

Psalms

Roger Beckwith, "The Early History of the Psalms," *TynB* 46/1 (May 1995), 1-27.

Isaiah

John MacKay, *Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Evangelical Press 2009).

John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Eerdmans 1998).

Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40-66* (B&H 2009).

John Walton, "New Observations on the Date of Isaiah," *JETS* 28 (1983), 129-32.

Daniel

Gleason Archer, "The Aramaic of the Genesis Apocryphon Compared with the Aramaic of Daniel," J. Payne, ed. *New Perspectives on the Old Testament* (Word 1970), 160-69.

_____, "The Hebrew of Daniel Compared with the Qumran Sectarian Documents" J. Skilton, ed. *The Law and the Prophets* (P&R 1974), 470-81.

Roger Beckwith, "Early Traces of the Book of Daniel," *TynB* 53/1 (2002), 75-82.

David W. Gooding, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel," *TynB* 32 (1981), 43-80.

Gerhard Hasel, "The Book of Daniel: Evidences Relating to Persons and Chronology," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981), 211-225.

Alan Millard, "Daniel and Belshazzar in History," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11 (1985), 72-78.

_____. "Daniel 1-6 and History" *EQ* 49 (1977), 67-73.

Donald Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon* (Oxford 1985).

Donald Wiseman, et al. *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (Tyndale Press 1965).

Edwin Yamauchi, "Hermeneutical Issues in the Book of Daniel," *JETS* 23/1 (March 1980), 13-21.

_____, "The Archaeological Background of Daniel." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980), 3–16.

Stephen Miller, *Daniel* (B&H 1994).

John Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch* (IVP 2009), chap. 4.

2 Thessalonians

Gregory Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (IVP 2003).

Gordon Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 2009).

G. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 2002).

Bo Reicke, *Re-examining Paul's Letters* (Continuum 2001).

Pastoral Epistles

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Yale 2001).

William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (2000).

Bo Reicke, *Re-examining Paul's Letters* (Continuum 2001).

Prison Epistles

Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Baker 2003).

Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Eerdmans 2008).

P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon* (Word 1982).

_____, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Eerdmans 1999).

Bo Reicke, *Re-examining Paul's Letters* (Continuum 2001).

1-2 Peter

Gene Green, *Jude & 2 Peter* (Baker 2008)

Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (Baker 2005).

Michael Kruger, “The Authenticity of 2 Peter,” *JETS* 42/4 (December 1999), 645-71.

James

Craig Blomberg, *James* (Zondervan 2008).

Dan McCartney, *James* (Baker 2009).

Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Eerdmans 2000).

Jude

Gene Green, *Jude & 2 Peter* (Baker 2008)

Jason Engwer

Paul Tobin repeats a lot of common objections to the Bible, but he doesn't interact much with conservative scholarship. He also ignores a lot of liberal and moderate scholarship that's more favorable to the Bible than he is. Steve Hays has already addressed a lot of Tobin's claims. I'm going to discuss several problems with Tobin's chapter that are representative of some other portions of the book as well and representative of what many critics of Christianity argue.

Tobin writes:

“Evangelicals have expended countless hours and published entire encyclopedias trying to reconcile these ‘difficulties’ in the Bible, which only ends up proving how many difficulties there are, and how elaborately one must labor to explain them away.” (151)

Atheism has had a large number of objections raised against it. Atheists have written many articles and books addressing those difficulties. The Christian Delusion is partially a response to criticisms of atheism, and it attempts to dismiss the evidence cited in support of Christianity, such as fulfilled prophecy and Jesus' resurrection. Since those of us who are reviewing The Christian Delusion have been raising so many objections to the book, should we conclude that there must be something wrong with it? As more Christians respond to the book, should we conclude that there are even more errors in it than we first thought, simply because more and more is being said against the book and its authors have to become increasingly defensive? When skeptics claim that the resurrection witnesses were hallucinating, that the gospels are wrong about the large majority of what they report concerning Jesus, that the large majority of New Testament authorship attributions are wrong, etc., that's quite elaborate.

Tobin spends several pages on the infancy narratives (157-163, 177-178), and that's a subject I have a lot of interest in. I'll address that material as a representative example of some of the problems with Tobin's approach.

He doesn't make much of an effort to interact with conservative scholarship, and even much of what moderates and liberals have argued is ignored. Despite frequent citations of Raymond Brown's work (see the notes on 177-178), Tobin reaches a radically liberal conclusion about the infancy narratives that Brown rejected. According to Tobin:

“With the links now completely severed between the nativity and world history, we can now see the rest of the nativity accounts for what they really are...a fairy tale. Removed from the anchors of history provided by Herod and Quirinius, the nativity accounts drift into the realm of myths and legends.” (163)

I agree with Tobin that modern Roman Catholic scholarship is “quite ‘liberal’” (179-180), and Raymond Brown was one of the foremost Catholic scholars of our day. I would

classify him as a liberal. He surely wasn't a conservative. But contrast Tobin's highly negative assessment of the infancy narratives to Brown's more nuanced view.⁷⁴

Later in his chapter, Tobin briefly discusses Biblical prophecy (164-165, 178), and he ignores the best arguments for the traditional Christian position. Though he often cites Brown's more negative conclusions about the infancy narratives, he says nothing about Brown's comments concerning Jesus' fulfillment of two common Messianic expectations in ancient Israel: the Messiah's Davidic ancestry⁷⁵ and His coming from Bethlehem⁷⁶. Brown concludes that Jesus' Davidic ancestry is probable.⁷⁷ Though he's more critical of Jesus' Bethlehem birthplace, he thinks there's some significant evidence for it.⁷⁸ If Tobin wants to criticize Christianity on issues like the historicity of the infancy narratives and Biblical prophecy, he ought to interact with the sort of argumentation scholars like Brown have produced, as well as the additional and better arguments of more conservative scholarship.

Think about the absurdity of Tobin's suggestion that Herod's slaughter of the Bethlehem children and Quirinius' census are "the anchors of history" in the infancy narratives (163). Without those anchors, the narratives allegedly "drift into the realm of myths and legends" (163). Matthew and Luke make many historical claims that don't depend on the slaughter or the census. That's why a scholar like Brown can reach a negative conclusion about the historicity of those two portions of the infancy narratives, but come to more positive conclusions about other aspects. Were Jesus' parents named Joseph and Mary? Was Mary pregnant outside of marriage? Was Jesus born in Bethlehem? When was He born? Was He later taken to Nazareth? Etc. And even if we were to assign Tobin's "anchors" as much significance as he does, he makes little effort to interact with the counterarguments regarding the slaughter⁷⁹ and the census⁸⁰.

Part of the problem is that he sets up false expectations. He seems to think that even vague similarities with pagan mythology are problematic.

He doesn't address the anti-pagan nature of early Christianity, and he doesn't demonstrate any literary dependence on pagan sources in Matthew or Luke. But he draws a vague parallel to "virgin births" in pagan accounts, defining "virgin births" so broadly as to include incidents of a god having sex with a woman who was a virgin prior to the sex or expanding the category to "some form of unusual intercourse" (157-158). But if we want parallels to "unusual" conceptions or births, regardless of whether virginity was involved, the Old Testament supplies us with examples without resorting to paganism.

⁷⁴ http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/11/raymond-browns-assessment-of-infancy_07.html;
http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/11/raymond-browns-assessment-of-infancy_08.html

⁷⁵ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/12/son-of-david.html>

⁷⁶ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/12/was-jesus-born-in-bethlehem.html>

⁷⁷ The Birth Of The Messiah (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1999), 511

⁷⁸ Ibid., 513-516

⁷⁹ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/12/historicity-of-slaughter-of-innocents.html>

⁸⁰ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/12/luke-census.html>

Given the high significance of conception and birth in human life, it would make sense for God, if He exists, to provide signs and set individuals apart at that stage of life. The reason why that sort of theme is so common in both ancient Jewish and ancient pagan cultures is because there's a common human recognition of the importance of that early phase of a person's life. Similarly, one can find references to eating, sleeping, friendship, marriage, dying, and other aspects of human life in both Jewish and Gentile literature. Given how vague the category of "unusual" births is, and given how many thousands of pages of literature we have from the ancient world, finding vague similarities to the virgin birth of Jesus in other sources tells us little about the historicity of the account.

Tobin tells us "it should not come as a surprise that the early Christians came up with similar stories about Jesus" (158). He goes on, in the same paragraph, to say that Evangelicals appeal to the historical nature of the infancy narratives to distinguish the Christian account from similar accounts in paganism. It's at that point that Tobin brings in Herod's slaughter and the census of Quirinius as the alleged anchors of history that can be used to test the Evangelical argument.

But before we go down that false trail, let's reconsider Tobin's reasoning. If he's read one of his own most commonly cited sources, Raymond Brown, he ought to know that an argument can be made for the historical credibility of the virgin birth account apart from acceptance of Herod's slaughter and Quirinius' census. The evidence suggests that the virgin birth account predates the gospels in which it appears, as Brown explains. It seems that at least some of Christianity's early opponents attributed the virgin birth claim to Jesus Himself (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1:28), so that it wasn't a matter of "the early Christians coming up with" it.

Tobin doesn't interact with arguments for the traditional authorship attributions of Matthew and Luke or the arguments for their general credibility as historical sources. He doesn't say much about the specific circumstances in which they wrote and what sort of sources they would have had access to relevant to the virgin birth and other elements of the infancy narratives. He doesn't address the early patristic sources or early reactions to the infancy narratives among non-Christian sources. Instead, we get an irrational focus on Herod's slaughter and Quirinius' census, and on those two points we get a highly selective repetition of common arguments that have been addressed by Christians many times and for many years.

Tobin gives us the usual appeal to Josephus, assuming that he's reliable not only in general, but in many details as well. I don't object to assigning a lot of significance to Josephus' testimony, but it should be noted that Tobin's trust in Josephus seems inconsistent with his radical skepticism toward Matthew and Luke. Remember, Tobin used the alleged non-historicity of the slaughter and the census to argue that the infancy narratives are "completely severed" from history and are in "the realm of myths and legends." (163) Yet, scholars regularly reject the testimony of Josephus on some matters, even when he makes autobiographical comments, while accepting his testimony elsewhere. They don't use Josephus' inaccuracy on some points to reason their way to the sort of radically negative conclusion that Tobin applies to Matthew and Luke. The Josephan scholar Steve Ma-

son refers to “countless changes and contradictions” in Josephus.⁸¹ The historian Paul Maier writes:

“Josephus’s accuracy and reliability as a historian have been challenged repeatedly. His free interpretation of his sources and his embellishments of the biblical record have already been cited. That he had a habit of overstating for dramatic purposes is also clear. The reader must discount such hyperboles as his claim, for example, that so much blood was shed in Jerusalem during its conquest that streams of gore extinguished the fires burning there. Like most ancient historians, Josephus also had trouble with numbers...That Josephus also had a lofty opinion of himself has already been noted, and his various heroic exploits were doubtless embroidered to enhance his image. At times he is inconsistent in statements made in *The Jewish War* when compared with those in *Antiquities*, even if many of these may be understood as corrections in the latter writing on the basis of better knowledge. The discrepancies between *The Jewish War* and his *Vita*, however, are more serious. They include irreconcilable versions of a brutal incident involving Josephus’s activities at Taricheae (Magdala) in Galilee, when enemies tried to attack him in his lodging. The accounts of his escape not only strain credibility but show a streak in his character that is more cruel than crafty. Josephus also shows a credulity in reporting that a ball fired from a Roman ballista hit a pregnant woman in Jerusalem, tearing a fetus out of her womb and projecting it a hundred yards. Besides such horrors were the presumed portents he reported during Jerusalem’s last days: a cow supposedly gave birth to a lamb in the Jerusalem temple, visions of horses and chariots gave battle in the heavens, and the like.”⁸²

Why doesn’t Tobin give Josephus the same treatment he gives Matthew and Luke? Even if he considers Josephus more reliable, shouldn’t he allow the same sort of combination of historical and unhistorical information in Matthew and Luke rather than dismissing them as “completely severed” from history (163)?

Tobin goes on to repeat common objections to the slaughter and the census without making much of an effort to interact with responses to those objections. He neglects the post-Biblical sources who directly discuss the slaughter and the census while focusing on alleged *indirect* implications against the historicity of those accounts in sources like Josephus and Tacitus. And even his treatment of those sources ignores a lot of what’s been argued by critics of his position. All of the internal and external evidence has to be taken into account, but Tobin’s selectivity is typical of his chapter and much of the remainder of the book.

⁸¹ Josephus, *Judea, And Christian Origins* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 42

⁸² *The New Complete Works Of Josephus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999), 14

Paul Manata

There's really nothing but scraps left of Tobin's chapter after the drubbing Hays and Engwer gave it. I'll just mention something briefly. Steve Hays already commented on Tobin's appeal to the legend of Sargon as the inspiration for the Moses story, but it was interesting to see that Tobin didn't engage Brian Lewis' monograph on Sargon. Hector Avalos berated us Triabloguers for not referencing Lewis's "authoritative monograph" when we dared open our mouths about Sargon. It appears that you can leave out Lewis so long as you're hostile to the historicity of the Moses account. In any case, for what it's worth I will post a link to my review and interaction of the authoritative monograph, which shows that the Sargon myth has several problems to overcome if it is to be postulated as the inspiration for Moses' infant exposure on the Nile:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/09/avalos-legend-study-of-some-blog-texts.html>

A Review of Chapter Seven

Steve Hays

VII. What We've Got Here is a Failure of Comprehension

In chap. 7, Loftus tries to demonstrate Scripture is uninspired due to its alleged lack of clarity. This chapter suffers from two fundamental flaws:

1. Many of Loftus' illustrations are self-refuting. This chapter is just a pretext for him to bloviate about all the things he finds morally repugnant in Scripture. However, he can only be outraged by the offending passages under the assumption that he knows what they mean.

So Loftus doesn't think these Bible passages are ambiguous. To the contrary, he deems them to be unambiguously wrong. Far from documenting the unclarity of Scripture, his argument requires him to treat his prooftexts as clearly wrong. Therefore, his entire exercise backfires.

2. Loftus also flunks the Outsider Test. For example, he says at the outset that: "one approach to seeing this is to simply look at the many barbarisms in the Bible. There are moral problems to be found in almost every chapter. Some of them do not need comment because they go against every decent moral standard civilized people accept in today's world..." (181).

Needless to say, his tendentious appeal to the "decent moral standards" of "civilized" people in "today's" world explicitly reflects his insider perspective. He makes no attempt to step outside of his secular humanistic belief-system and evaluate these passages on their own terms, from the viewpoint of the Bible writer. So once again his entire exercise backfires.

This is pretty bad. Either (1) or (2) would be sufficient to sink the chapter, much less both of them. And those are not the only problems.

3. For all his moralistic posturing, Loftus never attempts to justify his value judgments from a secular standpoint.

i) He doesn't explain how or even whether atheism can underwrite moral absolutes.

He might be excused from this particular task if, given the division of labor in this collaborative work, he could delegate that task to another contributor. And, indeed, a whole chapter (13) is devoted to that enterprise by David Eller. But unfortunately for Loftus, Eller rejects "natural/real/objective" moral norms (358). And other contributors also espouse moral relativism.

Therefore, Loftus' outrage is devoid of rational force unless he can mount an independent argument to justify his outrage.

ii) Moreover, even if he could establish right and wrong, this doesn't mean that human beings have human rights. For he would also have to show that organisms like human beings are entitled to certain rights. But given the reductive view of human nature in physicalism, that is far from obvious.

4. Loftus has a footnote on Calvinism in which he says, "It means God decrees every evil deed that we do. It also means that God decrees every evil desire that we have to do every evil deed that we do. We cannot do otherwise. We cannot even desire to do otherwise. It also means God decrees everything that we believe. None of us can believe other than that which God decrees. Therefore, God decrees people to hell, since those who end up there could not have believed differently. I only have the harshest kinds of comments for such a theology. That God is an evil monster requiring nothing but disgust and loathing. Such a theology creates atheists and motivates me like no other theology to attempt to demolish the Christian faith" (205n33).

Several problems:

i) To say that Calvinism creates atheists is no counter to Calvinism, for Calvinism would say that God decreed that very outcome.

ii) If, according to the OTF, beliefs are socially-conditioned, then Loftus can't demolish the Christian faith by writing a book attacking the Christian faith. For, by his own admission, believers have control-beliefs which generally render them impervious to disconfirmation. So his agenda flunks the OTF.

iii) Loftus leaves the impression that he repudiates Calvinism because Calvinism is deterministic. Yet in an editorial note (366-67n21) to Eller's essay, Loftus recommends a book (Good and Real) by Gary Drescher which gives a defense of "secular moral realism."

But according to one review, Drescher is a secular determinist! Quoting Drescher, the reviewer says:

Thus choice...is a mechanical process compatible with determinism: choice is a process of examining assertions about what would be the case if this or that action were taken, and then selecting an action according to a preference about what would be the case. The objection The agent didn't really make a choice, because the outcome was already predetermined is as much a non sequitur as the objection The motor didn't really exert force, because the outcome was already predetermined...Both choice making and motor spinning are particular kinds of mechanical processes. In neither case does the predetermination of the outcome imply that the process didn't really take place.⁸³

⁸³ <http://www.naturalism.org/reviews.htm#Drescher>

Therefore, we'd expect Loftus to tell us that "I only have the harshest kinds of comments for such an atheology. Secular moral realism is an evil monster requiring nothing but disgust and loathing. Such an atheology creates atheists and motivates me like no other atheology to attempt to demolish atheism!"

5. Loftus disregards the fact that some of God's communications are misunderstood by divine design. For example, that's why Jesus speaks in parables. The parables are comprehensible to insiders, but incomprehensible to outsiders. We have an analogous phenomenon in the case of Johannine misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel.

Audiencial incomprehension is the intended effect of these divine communications. Far from reflecting a breakdown in communication, they succeed in achieving God's ulterior purpose.

6. Loftus fails to draw an elementary distinction between a narrative description and a moral prescription. A narrator doesn't endorse whatever he records. Indeed, Scripture frequently narrates an event to expose the iniquity of the human participants.

7. Likewise, a law doesn't automatically endorse the behavior in question. As one scholar notes:

The law sets a minimum standard of behaviour, which if transgressed attracts sanction. It regulates institutions like marriage or slavery, but it does not prescribe ideals of behaviour within marriage. Does the regulation of slavery or bigamy mean that the Old Testament endorses these institutions and regards them as ethically desirable?...In most societies what the law enforces is not the same as what upright members of that society feel is socially desirable let alone ideal...What legislators and judges tolerate may not be what they approve. Laws generally set a floor for behaviour within society, they do not prescribe an ethical ceiling. Thus a study of the legal codes within the Bible is unlikely to disclose the ideals of the law-givers, but only the limits of their tolerance: if you do such and such, you will be punished. The laws thus tend to express the limits of socially acceptable behaviour: they do not describe ideal behaviour.⁸⁴

8. Loftus says "the failure of the Holy Spirit to 'illuminate' believers to know the will of God...is a very serious problem here" (182).

But that's only a very serious problem if the Holy Spirit intends to give every believer the correct interpretation of Scripture. Loftus needs to show that Scripture assigns that goal to the Holy Spirit.

9. Loftus says, "God is understood to authorize the meat-eating industry" (185) in Gen 6-9.

⁸⁴ G. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Baker 2004), 80.

- i) And how does that represent a failure of communication, exactly? Does Loftus regard that as a fallacious inference? If so, where's the argument?
- ii) Or does he disapprove of that inference? But his disapproval is irrelevant to whether or not the text miscommunicates.
- iii) Likewise, if he opposes the passage because he disapproves of meat-eating, then he flunks the Outsider Test. It's not as if the narrator disapproves of meat-eating.

9. Loftus says "this practice [capital punishment] is being rejected by more and more civilized people... There are many barbaric capital punishment laws found in the Old Testament (OT), including having extramarital sex (Deuteronomy 22:13-30), homosexuality (Leviticus 20:13) and engaging in other deeds that democratic, free-loving people would not think deserve such punishment, to say the very least..." (185).

- i) By appealing to "civilized, democratic, free-loving" people, Loftus once again flunks the Outsider Test. He measures the text by his insider yardstick.
- ii) He also makes no effort to defend his insider standards. He merely asserts them.

10. He complains that Gen 16:1-3 has been used to justify polygamy and concubinage (186).

That's a rather odd charge coming from an atheist. Is secular ethics opposed to having more than one wife, or having a mistress?

Indeed, why wouldn't a "freedom-loving" atheist support various forms of sexual expression—including polygamy and concubinage?

Loftus sounds like an uptight fundy. He needs to loosen up. Where's the fun in being a godless atheist if he suffers from these monogamous hang-ups. Let's hear it for free love, baby!

10. Loftus says, "Notice also how cavalierly Lot is willing to hand his daughters over to be raped by the men of Sodom..." (186).

Yes, you'd almost think the Bible was describing a fallen world.

11. Loftus says, "For no reason at all God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son. The silence of God about child sacrifice here is appalling" (186).

- i) To say there is "no reason at all" for God's command betrays a profound ignorance of narrative theology:
 - a) Let's remember the target audience for Genesis: the Exodus-generation is the audience for Genesis. Both Abraham and the Exodus-generation were forced to lead a nomadic

existence. Both Abraham and the Exodus generation were living in the promised hope of a better future.

The faith of Abraham, and God's reward, serves as an encouragement to the Israelites in the wilderness. Since God is faithful to his promises, they should be faithful to God.

b) The hypothetical sacrifice of Isaac foreshadows the hypothetical sacrifice of the firstborn under the Mosaic covenant. By the same token, it also foreshadows the principle of vicarious atonement, where a sacrificial animal takes the place of the firstborn (Exod 13:12-13).

c) The three-day journey to Mt. Moriah prefigures the three-day journey to Mt. Sinai. That underscores the providence of God. Just as he was providentially present in the life of Abraham, that, in turn, supplies a precedent for his trustworthy guidance of Israel.

ii) Likewise, God prevented the sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac was not a sacrificial victim. That was never in the cards. But God knew something Abraham didn't.

iii) Isaac was not a "child." By this time Isaac was a teenager.

12. Loftus says, "Anyone who accepts a different religion and/or seeks to convert others is to be put to death (Deuteronomy 12:1-13:16). Anyone who curses God is to be put to death (Leviticus 24:11-16). Witches are also condemned to death (Exodus 22:18; Deuteronomy 18:10). This is very significant when it comes to democratic, free-loving people..." (187).

i) Liberals don't believe in freedom. Liberals are social engineers. They impose their values on everyone else.

ii) Once again, Loftus flunks the Outsider Test.

iii) These laws underscore our intrinsic duties to God.

13. Loftus says, "Surely no civilized person should accept indentured service or slavery of any kind..."

Notice his dictatorial method. Loftus doesn't argue for his position. He merely stipulates that his position is true.

How does that demonstrate the rational superiority of atheism?

Why is indentured service intrinsically evil? Where's the argument?

Loftus says, "Leviticus 25:44-46 tells us that slaves could be bought from foreign nations...On this rock the Christian faith dies" (187).

i) Once more, Loftus doesn't even attempt to make a rational case for his position. He simply asserts his position.

ii) But as one scholar explains,

A theological reason underlies this discrimination: God redeemed his people from Egyptian slavery, to become his slaves (vv42,55). It is unfitting, therefore, that an Israelite should be resold into slavery, especially to a foreigner.⁸⁵

iii) There's nothing inherently wrong with in-group privileges which are unavailable to the out-group. There are corresponding rights and responsibilities which come with in-group membership. That's a commonplace of social existence the world over.

14. Loftus says, "this [eye for an eye] is barbaric justice, period" (188).

i) Once more, no reason is given. The reader is expected to instantly acquiesce to Loftus' moralistic opinions. Loftus must be remarkably egotistical to think that his personal opinions should command our unquestioning assent. What a head-trip!

ii) Actually, the lex talionis is a principle of strict equity in the administration of justice. The punishment fits the crime. Far from being "barbaric justice," it's strict justice.

15. Loftus says, "This Exodus passage is also used by antiabortionists to deny women the right to choose. This in turn has caused many women to die from 'back alley' abortions and has been used to justify the actions of terrorist abortion clinic bombers" (188).

i) If vigilantism is wrong, so is murdering babies.

ii) The question is whether parents have a right to kill their own children. Loftus beclouds the issue with antiseptic euphemisms.

iii) Since abortion is an elective procedure, no one is forcing a mother to abort her own baby, whether in a "back alley" or an abortion clinic.

iv) Murder shouldn't be a risk-free endeavor.

16. Loftus says, "This verse [Lev 17:10] was (and is being) used to deny blood transfusions, which are now necessary for performing some surgeries and to sustain injured people" (188).

i) The fact that cult members misinterpret Scripture doesn't mean that Scripture is unclear.

ii) If an adult cult member chooses to imperil his life through his blind commitment to cultic interpretations, that is his prerogative. He only has himself to blame.

⁸⁵ G. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Eerdmans 1988), 322.

iii) The law should intervene to prevent cult members from imposing these strictures on underage children.

17. Loftus says, “Divinely sanctioned wars are frequently mentioned...including genocide against the Canaanites...Amalekites...” (188).

Unless Israel committed “genocide” against her mortal enemies, her mortal enemies were going to commit genocide against Israel. It was a war of national survival. Peaceful coexistence with militant pagans was not a live option.

18. Loftus says, “These few chapters [Judges 19-21] describe incredible horrors” (189).

i) This coming from a man who one page before was defending abortion clinics!

ii) Loftus doesn’t make the slightest attempt to properly exegete this passage—or Judges generally.⁸⁶

19. Loftus says, “The use of the word ‘fool’ here [Ps 14:1; 53:1]...has been used to berate and discriminate against nonbelievers, and even persecute them” (189).

And unbelievers persecute Christians. Therefore, Christians have to defend themselves.

20. Loftus goes on a tirade over Jer 19:3-9. However:

i) For a man who supports abortion, his stated concern for children rings hollow.

ii) The passage isn’t just about children being killed one way or another. After all, everyone dies sooner or later. The passage is about the sin of idolatry.

iii) One of the ways in which God punishes the wicked is to put some evildoers at the mercy of other evildoers. That’s poetic justice, retributive justice, and remedial punishment. Sinners have a natural inclination to self-justification. They refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoing unless someone else wrongs them in the same way. When someone does to them what they’ve been doing to others, it suddenly hits home.

21. Loftus says, “Better yet, why not just make one of the Ten Commandments: ‘Thou shalt not sacrifice any man, woman, or child to me or to the many other false gods?’” (190).

Of course, that’s a stupid demand given the fact that Scripture explicitly condemns human sacrifice. Indeed, that’s the very point of Jer 19:3-9, which Loftus rages against.

22. Loftus says, “These verses [Prov 13:24; 22:15] have been used by abusive fathers

⁸⁶ For a corrective, cf. D. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Broadman 1999); G. Wenham, *Story as Torah*, chap. 6; K. Lawson Younger, *Judges/Ruth* (Zondervan 2002).

who were justified in using a ‘rod’ to beat their children because they were ‘loved.’ We now have more enlightened ways of disciplining children” (190).

As usual, Loftus flunks the Outsider Test by imposing his value system on the text, as well as imposing his relativistic values on the reader.

23. Loftus says, “There are harsh demands when it comes to the conditions allowable for divorce, which say nothing about divorcing a spouse for verbal and/or physical abuse” (191).

Of course that’s an argument from silence. The fact that Scripture is silent on other possible grounds for divorce (e.g. physical abuse) doesn’t mean other grounds are thereby excluded. That’s a fallacious inference.

24. Loftus says, “There are harsh sayings about hating one’s parents...” (191).

A Hebraic idiom. Expressing a contrast by using antonyms (“love/hate”).

25. “Expressed in the NT we find racism (Matthew 15:21-28) and even anti-Semitism (Matthew 27:21-36; John 8:44-45; Revelation 2:9-10)...” (191).

i) Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the NT is racist, Loftus needs to show that racism is wrong. What’s the secular argument for that value judgment?

ii) He hasn’t shown that Mt 15:21-28 is racist. The distinction is religious, not racial. The Canaanite was pagan.

Keep in mind, too, that pagans could always convert to the Jewish faith. Race was not a barrier.

iii) Since Matthew, John, and Revelation were written by Jews, it’s ludicrous to claim that these are anti-Semitic. You might as well claim the OT is anti-Semitic when it castigates stiff-necked Israel.

26. Loftus says, “We find the virtues of faith to be more important than reason in the NT too (Mark 9:23; 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16), which has led many believers into some bizarre fatal doomsday cults” (191).

Mark 9:23 and 1 Cor 1:18-2:16 don’t oppose faith and reason. Faith in God (Mk 9:23) is supremely reasonable, for God is wise.

In 1 Cor 1:18-2:16 Paul opposes faith and folly. The reason of the unbeliever is irrational, while the faith of the believer is rational. That’s the antithesis.

27. Loftus says, “We find texts that offer sexually repressing advice (1 Corinthians 7)—including what many Christians see as the denigration of homosexuality (Romans 1:18-

32)” (191).

- i) Since 1 Cor 7 is about the general necessity of marriage, it’s hardly a prooftext for sexual repression.
- ii) Loftus flunks the Outsider Test. He is judging the sexual ethics of Scripture by his insider standards.
- iii) Loftus doesn’t attempt to show that Paul’s view of homosexuality is wrong. Loftus simply assumes what he needs to prove.

For all his intellectual pretensions, Loftus is anti-intellectual. He keeps begging the question.

28. Loftus says, “we find chauvinistic passages that tell us women are to be silent in the churches (1 Corinthians 14, 1 Timothy 2:8-14), and that they should submit to and obey their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24, 1 Peter 3:1-6)” (191).

- i) That’s a one-sided summary of Biblical marriage. Loftus conveniently ignores the marital duties of the husband.
- ii) Submission to human authorities is always conditional.
- iii) Loftus oversimplifies the role of women in the church.⁸⁷
- iv) Loftus flunks the Outsider Test. He’s judging social roles by his own extraneous standards.
- v) Unless Loftus can justify human rights, he can’t very well justify women’s rights. He has failed to justify either the general proposition or the specific proposition on secular grounds.
- vi) Keep in mind that Loftus has a less than stellar track-record in his personal treatment of women.

29. Loftus says, “We find disturbing passages that slaves are supposed to obey their masters...” (191).

- i) Well, what would you expect under the circumstances? Would it be prudent for NT writers to exhort Roman slaves to foment revolution? That would be suicidal.
- ii) However, the NT does condemn the slave trade (cf. Rev 18:13).

30. Loftus also has a section on church history, which is more of the same. One of the striking things about Loftus is how he simply rubberstamps the moral orthodoxies of the

⁸⁷ Cf. https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/50/50-4/JETS_50-4_761-771_Hoehner.pdf

liberal establishment. For a “free-thinker,” he doesn’t bring any independent judgment to bear on the social issues of the day.

31. Loftus says, “Calvinists claim God has at least two wills, one revealed in the Bible and a secret one only he knows. The revealed will is not his true will. But it can be used to get people to do his true secretive will. His secretive will sometimes sovereignly decrees that people will commit horrendous acts against others for higher purposes. In the Calvinist sense then, God didn’t communicate his true will on purpose. But if this is correct, then as I’ve argued elsewhere, Calvinists have no reason whatsoever to trust the Bible about anything. It also means everyone eventually does what God wants them to do, including me. You see, I’m doing God’s secretive will by editing this book, which will lead people astray. Maybe his secretive will is to save all skeptics and damn all Calvinists to hell? On Calvinistic grounds there can be no reasonable objection to this possibility because Calvinism leads to a complete and utter skepticism with regard to what God really wants us to do and to believe” (197).

Several problems:

i) Loftus’ argument is self-contradictory. On the one hand he says God uses his book to lead some people astray. And that’s true. That’s consistent with reprobation and providence.

On the other hand, Loftus says that maybe God’s decretive will is to save all sceptics and damn all Calvinists to hell. But in that case, he wouldn’t be using this book to lead people astray.

ii) Loftus’ argument is circular. He must rely on Scripture to establish the secret/revealed distinction. He cannot then use that distinction to show that Scripture is unreliable. For if Scripture is unreliable (i.e. if God is deceptive), Loftus can’t rely on Scripture to establish the secret/revealed distinction in the first place, then turn around and try to play that distinction against itself.

ii) In Scripture, God doesn’t deceive the elect. Therefore, Loftus can’t cite the Biblical distinction between the secret/revealed will of God to establish the possibility that God deceives the elect.

iii) In Calvinism, the “secret” will of God is not God’s “real” will. Part of the confusion is the linguistic convention of using the same noun (“will”) with different adjectives (“secret, revealed”) to distinguish two different things. The “secret” will of God (i.e. decretive will) is God’s plan for the world. The “revealed” will (i.e. preceptive will) of God is God’s law for man. Our revealed duties to God.

God’s preceptive will isn’t opposed to his decretive will inasmuch as God’s law is part of God’s plan for the world. God decreed the revelation of his law for man.

iv) Loftus also frames the distinction in conspiratorial terms, as if there’s something sinister-

ter about having a “secret” will. In so doing he fails to distinguish between concealment and deception. There’s nothing intrinsically misleading about keeping your deeper reasons to yourself. That’s not the same thing as lying to someone.

There are situations in which withholding information can be deceptive, but there’s nothing inherently deceptive in saying less than you think. We all do that.

For example, I can tell someone to do something without telling him why I want him to do it. Or I could give him a partial reason which is consistent with my true motives. There’s nothing suspicious or improper about that policy.

Indeed, because behavior is goal-oriented, reasons are often teleological. I have a reason for doing one thing because it contributes to another thing which I also have a reason to do or desire. But I don’t have to explain my entire chain of reasoning.

Jason Engwer

Chapter 7 of *The Christian Delusion* focuses on two issues, the clarity and morality of the Bible. As Steve Hays has noted, John Loftus assumes the moral standards of a twenty-first-century American liberal and never produces an objective justification of that system of morality from his atheistic perspective. We get page after page of Loftus' moral pronouncements, but without any supporting argumentation.

In chapter 6, Paul Tobin claims to know what many passages of the Bible say, and he claims to know that those passages are wrong. In chapter 8, Hector Avalos claims to know what many Biblical passages say pertaining to morality and uses that knowledge to judge the God of the Bible a moral monster. Between those two chapters, Loftus tells us that the Bible is unclear.

He cites disagreements among professing Christians about a wide variety of issues and argues that the Bible isn't clear enough. He tells us that it's a "huge presumption" (196) to think that one belief among professing Christians represents true Christianity, while the beliefs that are contrary to that one don't. He suggests that we would need "consensus" (196) on what's true Christianity. But there isn't a consensus among professing Christians, so the Bible must not be clear enough. In the introduction of the book, Loftus had cited everything from belief in a non-physical resurrection to pro-homosexual readings of the Bible to justify his asking, "how can exegetes really think they have the correct interpretation of it at all?" (19)

Is there consensus concerning Loftus' interpretations of scripture? Or those of Tobin, Avalos, and other contributors to the book? No, there isn't. As I documented in the introduction of my review, the authors sometimes claim that scripture and other sources are clear on matters that are disputed. Why can't Christians do the same?

Loftus writes that "The overwhelming numbers of Christian believers are sincere people who want to please God and understand his will." (198) How does he know that? The Bible addresses thousands of issues. Not only would it be erroneous to conclude that all professing Christians are "believers", but it also would be wrong to conclude that a believer's interest in and sincerity about Trinitarianism, the afterlife, abortion, or some other issue proves his interest in and sincerity about every other subject the Bible touches on. Even where there's generally interest and sincerity, there can be some inconsistency. If Loftus generally has a sincere interest in his wife, does it follow that he never sins against her?

It's facile to assume that God should want every answer to be easy or would never use struggles and errors as means to a good end. Human teachers don't hand their students every answer on a platter, and parents often let their children mature by sorting through issues themselves, without the parent's constant guidance and intervention. God has rights, knowledge, responsibilities, and objectives that teachers and parents don't have, so there isn't a complete overlap. But even human teachers and parents don't seek the highest level of clarity in every context.

God could give us simple answers for our simple lives in a simple universe. But there are advantages to complexity. There are disadvantages as well, but we're not in much of a position to judge the overall balance.

Ronald Mellor notes that the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus have been used to support "every imaginable position".⁸⁸ The Nazis used Tacitus for their own purposes, some scholars have seen evidence in his writings that he was homosexual or insane (among other things), and Mellor documents the use of his writings to support a broad range of philosophical and political systems.⁸⁹ The Bible is much more widely read than Tacitus and addresses more subjects, and more is at stake in its interpretation, so it's not surprising that the Bible has been interpreted even more diversely.

If God was behind the Bible, however, He had far more complicated and extensive objectives than Tacitus ever set out to accomplish. As a Divine book, the Bible would be meant to bring out the virtues of one person and the vices of another, close one person's eyes while opening another's, and alter the course of history in one way at one time and in another way at another time. To criticize the Bible for not meeting the right objectives, you have to know what those objectives are. We would expect God to have knowledge that a human lawmaker doesn't have, and we would expect Him to make judgments that couldn't be made by a human judge. If God commands Abraham to offer up Isaac or judges that certain individuals should live under slavery during a certain period of time, or He decides to end one person's life at age twenty while allowing another to live until age ninety, He's in a position to make such judgments. We're not. God knows what sins are in the heart, and He knows what lessons are learned within the heart under particular circumstances. We don't have that information. When John Loftus compares God to a CEO (183) or asks whether Biblical passages about slavery "express God's complete and utter love toward you as an individual" (187), we ought to ask whether it's likely that God is doing more in the universe than Loftus has imagined.

He raises far too many issues in his chapter for me to address all of them in depth. He makes little effort to interact with arguments for the position he's criticizing. I'll mention several examples.

He objects that the Bible has been used for "condemning loving homosexual relationships" (184). Where's his argument that homosexual relationships shouldn't be condemned?

He associates Biblical slavery with the slavery in American history and concludes, with little supporting argumentation, "On this rock the Christian faith dies." (187)

The Bible's alleged lack of clarity is held responsible for opposition to blood transfusions (188), "the health and wealth gospel" (190), and other positions that are of recent origin

⁸⁸ Tacitus (New York, New York: Routledge, 2009), 162

⁸⁹ Ibid., 16, 85, 137-162

and/or held by only a small minority of professing Christians. Nothing is said of the reasons why the large majority of professing Christians reject such views.

Matthew 5:29-30 and 18:8-9 are condemned because they support “cutting off body parts if they cause someone to sin” (191), and Origen is cited as an illustration of somebody who castrated himself in obedience to those commands. Actually, the fact that Jesus’ disciples go on in Matthew’s gospel to repeatedly sin, such as with their tongues, without any cutting off of body parts, ought to suggest to a reasonable interpreter that something else was in mind. Knowledge of the gospel’s Jewish context and the common practice of speaking in such terms without intending the interpretation Loftus suggests would also help a reasonable interpreter in reaching the right conclusion. So would the absence of cutting off body parts in the remainder of the New Testament and so much of later church history. And Origen’s alleged castration “has become increasingly suspect in modern historiography”, for reasons John McGuckin explains⁹⁰, including the fact that Origen condemned the practice in his writings. Even if he did castrate himself, he would represent only a fraction of one percent of the professing Christian population in doing so.

Without any supporting argument, Loftus cites Matthew 15:21-28 as Biblical “racism” (191).

A passage written by a Jew, in which another Jew refers to *some* other Jews of first-century Israel as children of Satan (John 8:44-45), is described by Loftus as supporting “anti-Semitism” (191). Using Loftus’ reasoning, passages like Ephesians 2:3 and Colossians 1:13 must be expressing hatred of every race, since they refer to all humans as condemned and coming from Satan’s kingdom. By accusing the Bible of anti-Semitism, Loftus isn’t proving that the Bible is immoral or unclear. He’s proving his own incompetence, his own malice, or both. It’s an example of how people can distort the Bible even where it’s clear. If you can read a book written almost entirely by Jews, concerning a Jewish man who is God incarnate, and conclude that the book is anti-Semitic, the problem probably isn’t that the book is unclear. Most likely, the problem is with you.

Then we have Loftus’ claim that John 6:53-56 occurred “At the last supper” (195). He claims that Jesus isn’t clear in that passage, and that lack of clarity led to disagreements over eucharistic doctrine. He asks why Jesus didn’t say “I’m speaking metaphorically.” (195) Maybe if Loftus knew that John 6 occurred prior to the Last Supper, he’d realize that Jesus probably wasn’t referring to the eucharist when He held people accountable for eating His flesh and drinking His blood at that point in time. And since Jesus had explained that people eat and drink by coming to Him and believing in Him (John 6:35), why would He need to go on to also say “I’m speaking metaphorically”? Like Loftus’ anti-Semitism example, his appeal to John 6 backfires. If you have to overlook the timing of Jesus’ comments and the explanation He offers in verse 35, then dismiss the fact that Jesus’ alleged physical presence in the eucharist isn’t physically discernable, how responsible is Jesus, John, or the Holy Spirit for that series of errors? What if God is giving us responsibility to mature and learn from our errors without constantly guiding us and constantly correcting us after we’ve resisted previous guidance and correction?

⁹⁰ The Westminster Handbook To Origen (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 6-7

If you trim away all of the unhealthy fat from Loftus' argument (and there's a lot of it), there is significant merit to what's left. The Bible is sometimes unclear. And there would be many benefits to a higher level of clarity in some contexts. Loftus' objection is worth considering, and it does carry some weight. But he hasn't demonstrated that God didn't have weightier reasons for speaking less clearly.

Paul Manata

John Loftus has a silly little chapter here. This chapter is an exercise in self-debunking. Loftus begins by saying, “It’s been said that the Bible debunks itself” (181). How so? Well, Loftus shows us by “tak[ing] readers on a brief romp through the Bible with an eye on the failure of a perfectly good omniscient God to communicate (or reveal) his perfect will to believers” (181). The conclusion of this “romp” is that if we suppose that God is omniscient and perfect then he did a “woefully inadequate” job at revealing his will. Read that again. That’s right, *given the supposition* that God is omniscient and perfect, Loftus says the Bible shows that God acted ignorantly and imperfectly. If God is omniscient and perfect then you can’t claim he did something ignorantly or imperfectly, especially if *you* are ignorant and imperfect. How is Loftus possibly in the epistemic condition to judge these matters? For Loftus to endorse this conditional: “If God were omniscient and perfect, then we would expect to see a different kind of revelation than the one purported to be from God” is simply to engage in what Paul Moser has labeled “cognitive idolatry.” The problem is that Loftus is in no position to judge the plans, motives, and intentions of an infinitely wise, omniscient being. For Loftus has no reason to think that *what Loftus thinks is adequate* is even remotely representative of what is in fact adequate judged by an infinitely wise mind. He is furthermore disqualified from making *normative* judgments about what is “woefully inadequate.” Norms simply don’t fit into Loftus’s worldview. They are one of those unfortunate recalcitrant facts that need to be placed on his naturalistic procrustean bed. In any case, let’s take a “brief romp” through Loftus’s chapter and see how he debunks himself.

Loftus’s chapter attempts to take claims or reports from the Bible and complain about how they are not clear and, because of this, all manner of problems that could have been avoided were not avoided.

1. On p. 182-83 Loftus talks about good communicators and communicating in general. However, what *is* “communication” on Loftus’s worldview? It is not at all clear that materialism has the ontological funds to bankroll what is going on when agents communicate to each other.
2. On p. 183 Loftus gives us an example of what would count as a “clear” and unambiguous instance of superb communication that would not have resulted in any “misunderstandings.” He says this paradigmatic case of what God should have said to get himself off the hook for causing problems was “easy” to come up with. So, let’s be very clear, Loftus puts this passage I will soon quote up as an example of how God should have revealed himself so that no confusion would have arisen. Since this passage represents what an omniscient God should have said, if it fails then Loftus’s entire argument fails. Because if this passage fails, and Loftus has said this passage makes the cut as an example of omniscience and perfect revealing, then Loftus can’t complain about what is actually in the Bible:

“Genesis 1: In the beginning God created an immeasurable universe of billions of stars, some of which are billions and billions of miles away, through a process

- that took billions of years out of which he finally created the sun, moon, and a spherical earth which revolves around the sun. On it he created water, land, the beasts of the sea, and eventually every living thing on it through stages as one species evolved into the next one. Finally he created human beings to rule over everything he created” (183).
- a. Notice that what Loftus complains about is relative to current consensus. If Loftus’s argument works, then the same type of argument could have been given by the greatest minds of the ancient world. People just a few hundred years ago could have made *the same* argument as Loftus, but Loftus would have had to say that *their* argument was bad. Similarly, scientific consensus may change and Loftus’s proposed way of revealing would have brought up problems *for them*.
 - b. Many scientists think the universe is measurable, so Loftus’s proposed revelation would be the cause for debates and, for Loftus, if a text sparks debates then it is not a communication worthy of an omniscient God.
 - c. Apropos (b), many scientists do not think the universe had a “beginning.” So Loftus’s communication would have caused debates.
 - d. Almost all scientists do not think stars were in the universe “in the beginning.” Loftus’s communication could easily be taken as affirming that. It looks scientifically naive, and so is evidence that an omniscient God did not reveal it. But, Loftus said that this example was an example of how an omniscient God would/should have done it; ergo, Loftus debunks himself.
 - e. Notice Loftus’s “perfect” communication claims that humans were created to “rule” over everything in God’s creation. However, Loftus *himself* uses the *exact same claim* found in the Bible as an example of miscommunication that, “has been used in opposition to the care of our planet and of the animals on it” (184)! Remember that Loftus put forth his alternate rendition of Genesis 1 as a paradigmatic case of how a perfect God should and could have revealed himself to avoid miscommunication that results in violating leftist visions. Loftus said it “was easy” to produce a rendition of the text that would not result in any miscommunication and that would be worthy of an omniscient and perfect God. Loftus has debunked his entire argument.
 - f. Notice that if Loftus had been God, the “Bible” would need to be equivalent to something like the Encyclopedia Britannica for it to be worthy of an “omniscient God.” the Bible would be an answer book. “Why do fireflies glow, mommy?” “Oh Johnny, go get the ‘F’ part of God’s word and look it up.” In actuality, Loftus would have written another book about God giving his people a revelation that they would never read; which, no doubt, is something an “omnisciently perfect God” would not have done. At any event, Loftus thinks he could write a better Bible. Here’s the challenge then: do it.
3. On page 184 Loftus says that God’s revealing that he created man and woman has been used to condemn homosexuality. Would Loftus have wanted God to create Adam

and Steve? But then who would have been around to read any Bible? Then Loftus would complain about “non-communication” instead of “miscommunication.” Oh, that’s right—there would have been no Loftus. So maybe what John has in mind that God should have created a threesome, all of them frolicking in the leaves together. But wouldn’t that give rise to condemning foursomes? So God should have made a four-some. But what about...*n*-somes? And, I haven’t even begun to talk about the problem God would have with the drag queen and transgender population. So, God should have made them too. Or, better, maybe God should have made us asexual. Such is the absurdity of Loftus’s silly little chapter.

4. Two pages later, after John just got done complaining about miscommunication that results in condemnation of homosexuals, John complains that the Bible has had the nasty and unfortunate consequence of “justifying polygamy” (186). In John’s perfect Bible, it would have been clear that all polygamists ought to die (no matter of that contradicts his preferred threesome rendition of Genesis 2)!
5. John says that we shouldn’t “trust people” who “saw nothing wrong” with rape and murder (189). But John Loftus sees nothing wrong with murdering babies, so why should we trust him? Oh, sure, he’ll give us “gerrymandering” and “post hoc” rationalizations to defend his approval of baby murder, just like all those untrustworthy theologians try to rationalize a barbaric God.
6. On page 190 Loftus complains about spanking children, saying the Bible should have been more clear: do not spare the child from the suction cups and burning saline solution.
7. On page 196-201 Loftus tries to cover some objections to his bad argument. He maintains that God could have just put things into the Ten Commandments so that miscommunication would not result. God could have said certain things so that Christians wouldn’t have thought the Bible allowed modern slavery. He says if his will “had clearly been revealed” then many unfortunate things “would not have taken place” (201). Here’s an unfortunate little fact Loftus forgets to mention: John Loftus committed adultery on his wife. There should be no debate that the Bible is very, very clear that adultery is not allowed. However, that didn’t stop John Loftus from violating his marriage vows and disobeying a clear command in Scripture. So, John Loftus is living proof that God could have been as clear as Loftus would have wanted him to be, and that this would not have the result Loftus claims.

Part 3: Why the Christian God is Perfectly Good

A Review of Chapter Eight

Steve Hays

VIII. Hector is a Moral Midget

I had such high hopes for the essay by Hector Avalos. The ambitious title promised the reader that he'd demonstrate that Yahweh is a moral monster. Unfortunately, the essay is a major letdown. In addition to many specific problems, which I'll come to shortly, it suffers from three major problems:

1. For the most part, his essay is a study in comparative cultural anthropology. He compares OT ethics with Hammurabic ethics. However, this doesn't show that Hammurabic ethics is morally superior to OT ethics, much less that Yahweh is morally monstrous. Rather, it merely documents some differences between Hammurabic ethics and OT ethics.

But unless one has some absolute moral norm by which to judge both ethical systems, merely contrasting one law code with another law code fails to show that one is morally superior to another. The exercise never moves beyond the level of a sociological description.

2. In addition, Hector's essay is simply a critique of another essay by Paul Copan. But even if his essay successfully refuted Copan, that wouldn't show that Yahweh is morally monstrous. At best it would only show that Paul Copan failed to make his case. But Copan's case is hardly the only case to be made for the superiority of Christian ethics over secular ethics, or pagan ethics. It simply represents one man's viewpoint.

3. Finally, as a necessary precondition to demonstrate that Yahweh is morally monstrous, Avalos must be able to evaluate OT ethics (or NT ethics, for that matter) by reference to some objective moral standard. But by his own admission, Avalos has no normative standard of comparison.

i) Under the optimistically entitled heading of "Atheism's Morality," Avalos says, "As an atheist, I don't deny that I am a moral relativist. Rather, my aim is to expose the fact that Christians are also moral relativists" (232).

But even if he succeeded in achieving that particular aim, he'd fail to achieve the stated aim for the chapter. Having admitted that he's a moral relativist, he instantly disqualifies himself from alleging that Yahweh is morally monstrous. For a deity who is morally monstrous according to moral relativism isn't objectively immoral.

ii) Moreover, what would he accomplish by showing that his Christian opponents are no less relativistic than he? He's like a gunslinger who's mortally wounded in the process of mortally wounding his rival. So they both bleed to death from gunshot wounds. But even

if the Christian lies in one pool of blood, while Avalos lies in another pool of blood, who won that shootout? Didn't both gunmen lose?

In fact, this exposes the spitefulness of atheism. Make everyone and everything equally worthless in the great scheme of things.

iii) Furthermore, he's equally unsuccessful in showing that Christians are also moral relativists. This, apparently, is his only argument to that effect: "As Kai Nielsen deftly argues, human beings are always the ultimate judges of morality even if we believe in God. After all, the very judgment that God is good is a human judgment. The judgment that what God commands is good is also a human judgment" (233).

Needless to say, that's a terribly shortsighted argument. For it fails to consider the fact that what ultimately lies behind a human judgment is the agency of God. Yes, we make value judgments. But what (or who) makes us make value judgments? All Nielsen and Avalos have done is to kick the can down the street. But from a Biblical standpoint, the God of Christianity is ultimately responsible for Christian judgments about himself.

(Indeed, he's also responsible for the value judgment of unbelievers, to their deserved detriment.)

Therefore, that argument fails to present a genuine alternative to the ultimacy of God in the process of moral valuation.

iv) It's hard to be a consistent relativist. Sooner or later the relativist usually succumbs to the temptation to moralize. And Avalos is no exception. In this very same section, where he admitted to being a moral relativist, he then admonishes the reader that "basing a moral system on unverifiable supernatural beings only creates more violence and endangers our species" (233).

But aside from the tendentious claim that supernatural beings are unverifiable, as well as the equally tendentious claim that this is dangerous, why should a relativist care whether or not Christian ethics creates more violence and endangers our species?

a) That alleged consequence would only be objectionable in case it was evil. But Avalos has morally neutered himself from venturing morally normative value judgments. Whether or not the human race survives is morally weightless. The outcome isn't good or bad one way or the other.

b) Avalos tries to salvage his position by stating that "Speaking only for myself here, I can say that atheism offers a much better way to construct moral rules. We can construct them on the basis of verifiable common interests, known causes, and known consequences" (233).

But the question at issue is not whether we construct moral rules, but whether the moral rules we construct are moral. Are these moral moral rules, immoral moral rules, or amor-

al moral rules?

To say they are “better” begs the question, since that in itself is a morally valiative term. Likewise, to say we construct them on the basis of common interests begs the question as well, for making the common good one’s criterion is itself a moral valuation.

Why, as an atheist, should I value the common good over what’s good for me, as an individual? Surely I have a greater vested interest in my personal welfare.

c) Finally, Avalos says “if the word ‘moral’ describes the set of practices that accord with our values, and if our highest value is life, then it is always immoral to trade real human lives for something that does not exist or cannot be verified to exist” (233).

But even if we bracket the tendentious claim that God doesn’t exist or can’t be verified to exist, his appeal is viciously circular. The question at issue is not whether the word “moral” describes a “set of practices” that accord with our “values,” but whether our values are moral. Likewise, to say that life is our highest value is a stipulation in lieu of a reason. Where’s the supporting argument? What is there to ground this priority?

d) And as an aside, if life is our highest value, then does this mean that Avalos favors the criminalization of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia?

4. Avalos says, “Yet, is saying ‘I am Yahweh’ really a better ethical motive than saying ‘I am Allah’ or ‘I am Shamash’” (214)?

It’s better if one exists and the other does not. It’s better if one God is better than another.

5. Avalos says, “Copan admits that: ‘Pentateuch’s legal code in places does differentiate between Israelite and non-Israelite slaves...grants remitting loans to Israelites but not to foreigners...it allows for exacting interest from a foreigner but not from a fellow Israelite...Moabites and Ammonites are excluded from the sanctuary’ (214).

i) Avalos acts as though discrimination is ipso facto wrong. But he doesn’t really believe that. For instance, back when he was a student at Harvard, he enjoyed certain student privileges denied to non-students.

Moreover, given his work as a Latino activist—given his deep, personal, and partisan investment in identity politics and affirmative action—it’s ironic to see him insinuate that Scripture is guilty of racism. To my knowledge, he also supports racial preferences (in what is euphemistically termed “affirmative action”).

ii) Always keep in mind that, as a moral relativist, Avalos is in no position to condemn discrimination of any form.

6. Avalos says, “So the imposition of Lex talionis (eye-for-an-eye principle) in Pentateuchal laws...should be seen as a regression” (215).

As a moral relativist, Avalos forfeits the right to render that value judgment.

7. Avalos also says Jesus took the eye-for-an-eye principle “very literally” (215). However, he gives the reader no reason to think that Jesus was actually prescribing mutilation in Mt 5:38-39. Where’s the argument?

8. Avalos says, “The idea that a master has absolute control over his ‘money,’ regardless of any injustice to workers, is endorsed by Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers in Mt 20:1-16...Treating workers like the master did is an injustice” (217).

i) But that’s an assertion in search of an argument. There is not even a *prima facie* case of injustice in this parable. It would only be unjust if unequal pay were equivalent to underpayment. But how does that follow? If, for instance, you were to overpay two different workers, but overpay one more than another for the same job, how would that be unjust? After all, you were already paying both of them more than they were entitled to.

Or what about a family business in which I pay my son more than I pay the hired help (for the same job). How is that unjust? After all, isn’t my son entitled to more consideration from his own father and mother?

ii) Since Avalos is a moral relativist, he abdicates the right to moralize about Jesus’ parable.

9. Avalos says, “this contrasts to the cruel attitude expressed by Sarah concerning Ishmael...So where Abraham might represent a humanizing tendency, God actually demands the more inhumane option” (217-18).

This overlooks the fact that God made separate arrangements for the care of Hagar and Ishmael.

10. Avalos says, “one could still capture slaves in war (Num 31:25-47; Deut 21:10, and Kgs 9:21)” (218).

And what’s wrong with that, exactly? Consider the situation on the ground. If you release the pagan POWS, they will live to fight you another day. If you kill all of the able-bodied men, that leaves the women and children defenseless. What’s a better, real-world alternative, given the stark options in the ANE?

11. Avalos says, “If harboring slaves was supposed to be an advance, in the NT we see Paul returning the slave named Onesimus, who has run away from Philemon, his master” (219).

Paul didn’t create the status quo. And Paul was in no position to abolish the status quo. He wasn’t Caesar.

As long as Onesimus was on the lam, he was in danger. Avalos also overlooks the fact that Paul advised Philemon to treat Onesimus as a Christian brother rather than a slave.

12. Avalos says, “Because it is hard to erase all of the injustices found in biblical law, another favorite technique is the ‘trajectory’ argument” (220).

Since I don’t view the Mosaic laws as either unjust or indefensible on their own terms, I don’t resort to the “trajectory” argument myself.

13. Avalos says, “The intolerance of other religions is found in every single biblical book. This includes: 1. commands to destroy the temples and property of other religions...” (221).

Does this mean Hector Avalos opposes efforts by the ACLU et al. to remove any and all Christian symbols on public property?

“...destruction of the ‘clergy’ of other religions (e.g. 1 Kgs 18:40)” (221).

Of course, that conveniently disregards the concrete setting. The Baal-worshippers were persecuting the Israelites. Drove them underground. Did their best to extirpate the Jewish faith. What Elijah did was a counterattack. Self-defense.

“...consistent commands not to worship other gods” (221).

Since Avalos is a militant atheist, why does he find that objectionable? Wouldn’t he simply add Yahweh to the list of banned deities?

“...laws requiring the outright murder of any Hebrew exercising religious freedom” (221).

i) To call it “murder” begs the question.

ii) Israelites were not required to believe in God. They were only required to keep the terms of the covenant.

“In contrast, most Near Eastern religions valued religious diversity and allowed the worship of almost any god people chose” (211).

i) I guess Jezebel, Athaliah, Haman, and Nebuchadnezzar didn’t get the memo.

ii) Avalos also fails to distinguish between the freedom to practice your own faith, and freedom to refuse to practice the state religion. Even if pagan regimes tolerated religious diversity, this doesn’t necessarily mean they allowed religious minorities to opt out of the state religion.

14. Avalos says, “But why couldn’t we say that Shamash is the true god, and then judge

biblical law with how it accords with Shamash's law?" (222).

Why does Avalos think this is such a great comeback?

We could say Shamash is the true god if it's true to say that Shamash is the true God. But unless Shamash is truly the true God, so what?

15. Avalos says, "Of course, this assumes that Yahweh exists and has the authority to kill women and children. Copan is accepting the faith claim of the biblical author. By this logic, if Allah exists, does he have any prerogatives over human life? Indeed, a Jihadist Muslim could say that Allah has the authority to wipe out all Americans because they are incorrigible and wicked" (223).

Avalos must think this is a pretty brilliant objection, because he keeps using it. That doesn't speak well of his own analytical skills.

i) He tacitly assumes that a "faith claim" has no rational basis.

ii) There is also a distinction between might and right. If Allah exists, then it may be necessary, as a pragmatic expedient, for humans beings to submit to his will. Since resistance would be futile and suicidal, we may go through the motions for the sake of our own survival.

That doesn't mean Allah has the prerogative to issue these directives. Whether a deity has the right to tell us what to do depends on the nature of the deity, and our obligations, if any, to the deity.

iii) Apropos (ii), Allah doesn't have the same attributes as Yahweh. And Allah doesn't have the same relationship to man as Yahweh does. So Hector's hypothetical is equivocal.

iv) Avalos also speaks as if "genocide" is ipso facto immoral. Yet there's a version of genocide which is gaining popularity in secular ethics. And that's antinatalism. This is championed by bioethicists like Peter Singer and David Benatar.⁹¹ Indeed, this brand of genocide dwarfs anything you can find in the OT.

16. Avalos says, "We must also recall that all the supposed crimes and wickedness of the Canaanite are narrated by their enemies, the biblical authors" (224).

There are archeologists like John Currid who've corroborated these accounts (e.g. child sacrifice).

17. Avalos says, "It really amounts to this: 'Genocide is okay when my religion does it, but genocide is not okay if your religion does it'" (224).

⁹¹ E.g. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/should-this-be-the-last-generation/>

i) Since Avalos is a moral relativist, his alternative really amounts to this: “Whoever does it, genocide is okay.”

ii) Avalos keeps using the loaded word “genocide.” And he keeps assuming moral equivalence. But Israel was in a war for national survival. It’s not as if her pagan neighbors were ever prepared to make peace. These were warrior cultures.

If your enemy is determined to destroy you, then he forces you to take drastic counter-measures. Your enemy ultimately sets the terms of engagement. His methods dictate your options. If he tries to destroy you by any means necessary, then he doesn’t leave you with a nice little set of humane options.

“But we could easily reverse this” (224).

It is only reversible if one simple-mindedly disregards the factual and ethical differences. Avalos acts as though, if a woman carries a handgun to defend herself against a stalker, then a stalker has the right to use a handgun against the woman.

But, of course, we wouldn’t expect moral discrimination from a moral relativist.

18. Avalos says, “To excuse the plain horror of infanticide...” (224)

i) Is Avalos opposed to infanticide? Why? Does this represent a conflict between biblical ethics and secular ethics?

What about Peter Singer? Singer is a notorious advocate of infanticide. (Of course, his reasons and stipulations are very different from the reasons and stipulations in Scripture.)

What is more, Singer is favorably cited by two contributors to *The Christian Delusion*. So while Avalos tries to foster a sense of odium for biblical ethics, he passes over parallels in secular ethics.

ii) OT “infanticide” is a tragedy. But a fallen world is a tragic world.

For instance, we’ve all heard news reports about a child who survives a disaster (e.g. tornado, plane crash, sinking ship) while his parents and other siblings are killed. Haven’t we said to ourselves, “I wonder if he’d be better off dying with his parents and siblings?”

Is it a mercy to be the lone survivor when all of your loved ones are suddenly taken from you? What kind of life can the lone survivor expect to have at that point?

And, honestly, what are the chances for an orphan in the ANE? Does Avalos think a young boy or girl could survive on its own?

iii) Although a fallen world is a tragic world, it also contains certain incommensurable goods or second-order goods (and benefits) unattainable in a sinless world. So there are

tradeoffs.⁹² Even unbelievers are beginning to appreciate the instrumental value of evil.⁹³

iv. Keep in mind, too, that we have contributors to The Christian Delusion who advocate cultural relativism. But in that event, who are they to judge the social mores of ancient Israel?

19. Avalos says, “First, if it is true that killing infants ushers them immediately into the presence of God, and spares them corrupting influences, then this is a fantastic argument for abortion...If soul saving is the goal, then abortion provides a 100% salvation rate” (225).

i) Since I don’t presume the universal salvation of dying infants, that’s not an argument I’d use. At the same time, I also believe that God is often merciful, and never less than just.

ii) But even on its own terms, that would be a very shortsighted argument for abortion. Far fewer humans would be saved over the long haul. For a 100% abortion rate would quickly result in the extinction of the human race. If there’s no replacement rate, there’s no salvation for future generations. Only the aborted generation would be heavenbound.

20. Avalos says, “Yet Yahweh was believed to cause sterility in women (see Gen 20:17-18). So Yahweh could have sterilized Canaanite women supernaturally, and the problem would be solved in a generation or two. No need to kill children with this procedure” (225).

Of course, that would deny any Canaanite child the opportunity to be saved.

21. Avalos says, “And, of course, Copan forgets that sacrifice of a son is the foundation of Christianity” (227).

Cute, but fatally equivocal. God Incarnate is hardly interchangeable with a mere human baby.

⁹² R. Adams, “Must God Create the Best?” *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford 1987), 51-64; “Existence, Self-interest, and the Problem of Evil,” *ibid.* 77-93; J. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Crossway 2010); “The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment,” *TynB* 57/1 (2006), 57-84, http://www.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull_2006_57_1_04_Hamilton_GloryofGodCentre.pdf;

A. Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O Felix Culpa,’” <http://philosophy.nd.edu/people/all/profiles/plantinga-alvin/documents/Supralapsarianism.pdf>

⁹³ P. Tabensky, ed., *The Positive Function of Evil* (Macmillan, 2009).

Jason Engwer

In chapter 8 and some later chapters in the book, we get lengthy interactions with recent Christian authors, like Paul Copan and Rodney Stark. It's understandable that the authors of *The Christian Delusion* would want to reply to the recent argumentation of prominent representatives of Christianity. But there are some disadvantages to devoting as much space to it as *The Christian Delusion* does. What about readers who don't have much familiarity with the authors being criticized? And just how representative of Christianity, or even Christian apologetics in particular, is somebody like Dinesh D'Souza or Rodney Stark? A Christian reader could grant a lot of what's argued by the authors of *The Christian Delusion* in these chapters without giving up much ground as a Christian. I think the authors miscalculated in their decision to give so much attention to critiques of these particular Christian individuals.

In the chapter currently under consideration, Hector Avalos interacts with an article by Paul Copan related to Old Testament morality. I don't have much familiarity with Copan's work, but I had read an article by him on Old Testament ethical issues shortly before I read *The Christian Delusion*. I disagreed with Copan on some points in that article, and I apparently would disagree with some of his arguments in the article Avalos is replying to as well, judging from what Avalos reports. I'm not going to be defending Copan's article.

And much of what I said about moral issues in my response to John Loftus in chapter 7 is applicable to Avalos' moral assertions. As Steve Hays has noted, Avalos is a moral relativist (232). Like Loftus, Avalos gives us page after page of moral pronouncements without giving us sufficient reason to agree with those pronouncements.

I'll only add a little here to what I've said in response to previous chapters and what Steve Hays has said in his reply to Avalos.

According to Avalos, "if we proceed to the New Testament (NT), slavery may have gotten even worse" (218). He cites 1 Peter 2:18-20, especially the part about submitting to abusive masters. He then comments, "It is deemed good to suffer pain and injustice." (218)

No, what passages like 1 Peter 2 tell us is that it's good to endure pain and injustice righteously *if* a master inflicts pain and injustice. But the fact that the behavior of the master is considered unjust tells us that the experience wouldn't be good without something else added to it. What makes the outcome good? Is it the fact that suffering occurs on the part of the slave? That's a ridiculous way to read Peter. It's the sort of interpretation one might come up with if he's looking for something to criticize. What Peter commends is, to use the wording of Avalos' translation, being "mindful of God" in suffering and "taking it patiently". The acknowledgement of God and patience are good. The pain and injustice aren't good by themselves. Avalos misleadingly uses the ambiguous phrase "suffering pain and injustice", even though Peter is addressing a positive reaction to pain and injustice rather than just experiencing it. Peter isn't calling for more experiencing of pain

and injustice. He's calling for a God-honoring and patient response to pain and injustice when they do occur. And what's Avalos' objection to that? He, as an atheist, would object to honoring God, but that isn't what he's getting at by using a phrase like "suffer pain and injustice". He's using an ambiguous phrase that can be taken in a manner different than what Peter seems to have intended. If you take Peter's comments in context, it's not evident what Avalos finds objectionable.

Avalos comments:

"It was only after the secularization of the West, and after the erosion of biblical authority, that we moved away from slavery and toward greater civil rights for women." (219)

Avalos is correct in noting that there's been some secularization, but that's like noting that a refrigerator isn't as cold as a freezer. Neither is an oven. It's not as though atheism or agnosticism has brought about the modern advances Avalos refers to. In the opening chapter of *The Christian Delusion*, David Eller notes:

"As I have tried to warn readers in my previous work, the United States and the wider Western world are heavily saturated with Christianity throughout their many large and small cultural arrangements. Whether or not they know it – and it is more insidious if they do not know it – non-Christians living in Christian-dominated societies live a life permeated with Christian assumptions and premises. Christians and non-Christians alike are literally immersed in Christian cultural waters, and like fish they usually take for granted the water they swim in." (33)

An atheistic or agnostic worldview doesn't give us much of a basis for concepts like being endowed by a Creator with unalienable rights.

Commenting on Hebrews 9:22, Avalos writes:

"Christian apologists might claim that their god has the authority to order sacrifice, but this claim is no more verifiable than that of any other religion that practices human sacrifice." (227)

I'd suggest that readers consult chapter 11 of *The Christian Delusion* for an illustration of one of the differences between Christianity and the other religions Avalos refers to. Look at what sort of argumentation Richard Carrier resorts to in an attempt to dismiss Jesus' resurrection. Does Avalos think that all of the "other religions that practice human sacrifice" have similar or better evidence to commend them? Antony Flew, though he also was a critic of Christianity, provided a more accurate assessment than Avalos has:

"The evidence for the resurrection [of Jesus] is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It's outstandingly different in quality and quantity, I think, from the evidence offered for the occurrence of most other supposedly miraculous events."⁹⁴

⁹⁴ <http://www.biola.edu/antonyflew/page5.cfm>

After reading chapters 7 and 8 in *The Christian Delusion*, two chapters criticizing the morality of the Christian God, we should notice how unbalanced their critique has been. It's not just that neither Loftus nor Avalos provides an objective basis for their moral assessments. It's not just that they often err in their exegesis and reasoning. They also largely ignore a lot of the relevant evidence. Loftus acknowledges that "there is good in the Bible" (181). But the good is far weightier than either Loftus or Avalos suggests.

In a world with many thousands of Christian hospitals, charities, and universities, within cultures that have been influenced by Christianity in so many other positive ways, doesn't it seem inadequate to reach the conclusion that the Christian God is a moral monster on the basis of Loftus and Avalos' highly selective treatment of the Bible and Jewish and Christian history? When judging whether the Bible has good reasons for supporting something that otherwise seems immoral, don't we take the larger context into account? A Nazi might take John 8 out of context to support anti-Semitism, but that interpretation doesn't hold up well in light of the larger Biblical context I discussed earlier. One of the reasons why a Christian doesn't see the racism that Loftus sees in Matthew 15 is that the incident occurs within a larger worldview involving the common ancestry of every human (Genesis 1-2, Acts 17:26), with the gospel going out to "all the nations" (Matthew 28:19), with people redeemed from "all peoples" (Revelation 7:9), so that "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28). The Jew or Christian who concludes that God had some sufficient reason for commanding the execution of the Amalekite children (1 Samuel 15:3) does so with hundreds of Biblical passages in mind concerning the value of humans as individuals created in the image of God, God's compassion, God's justice, and other principles that would suggest that something other than a low view of human life is involved in 1 Samuel 15. Likewise, the Christian who thinks that some types of slavery can be justified in some contexts, while considering slavery unrequired and unwise in a context like modern America, makes that judgment with the larger Biblical context in mind.

While Avalos cites the modern effects of secularization in advancing moral standards, we should keep in mind that Christians were caring for the poor, establishing charities, opposing abortion and other forms of infanticide, and advancing morality in many other ways long before modern secularization. If you read much of the early patristic literature, representing some of the earliest interpretations of the Biblical documents, you'll see various stages in a developing understanding of morality, and you won't find moral perfection. But you won't find a moral monster either. The same Christians who believed that God has the right to take life and could have just cause for ordering something like the execution of the Amalekite children also never initiated such an execution themselves, but instead cared for abandoned children and opposed abortion. Christians of one race would refer to Christians of another race as their brothers, serving and laying down their lives for one another. So many other examples could be cited. The early Christians weren't morally perfect, and we have the advantage of two thousand years of additional experiences and reflection on moral issues to benefit from. But it didn't take modern secularization for ancient Christians to live by a much higher moral standard than Loftus and Avalos' unbalanced portrayal of Biblical morality would suggest.

Paul Manata

Hector Avalos thinks God is a “moral monster.” But would a “moral monster” offer hundreds of “good moral teachings”? John Loftus told us in the previous chapter that almost all of the 66 books of the Bible have “some good moral teaching” in them (181). At any event, Steve Hays and Jason Engwer commented on much of the details of Avalos’s chapter, I will focus more closely on Avalos’s affirmation of moral relativism.

Avalos says that it is to “miss the point” to claim that an atheist who complains about the morality of the Bible cannot ground moral truths and is simply a moral relativist. No, it’s not to “miss the point.” If the atheist thinks that his argument shows that God is *actually* evil, that is, objectively evil regardless of what human persons or cultures happen to think, and if the atheist is also a moral relativist, then the atheist has contradicted himself. By what arrogance does Avalos purport to do away with the relevance of the law of non-contradiction? If the atheist is holding contradictory premises, then *anything* can be proven from that set. Since anything can be proven, this can be proven: God is *not* a moral monster. That conclusion would follow by strict, deductive logic from contradictory premises. That is, if the premises are true, the conclusion *must* be true. So, the relativist cannot assert that he has shown that God is objectively evil.

Rather, the atheist’s argument would have to be that his *culture* thinks what God did was wrong. God didn’t adhere to the current norms of the atheist’s culture. But if culture determines what is right or wrong, then culture A cannot say that culture B is wrong, for that imposes the norms of culture A onto culture B, which is nonsense according to relativism. Furthermore, the same moral action can be right for A and wrong for B, at the same time. Ultimately, what the cultural relativist can say is only that his culture thinks that some moral action is right or wrong. The moral relativist is opposed to the universality thesis. This thesis says that there are moral norms that do not depend on particular cultures for their right- or wrong-making criteria. Cultures cannot say that their view of morality is “better” than any other culture in any trans-cultural sense. So, what “it is wrong to rape” means is “my culture disapproves of rape.” But if another culture does not disapprove of rape, then “rape is permissible,” is morally right for that culture. The only thing impermissible is that any culture stands in judgment over another.

The problems with cultural relativism are legion. It supposes cultures are morally infallible. It disallows moral reformers who go against their culture (à la Martin Luther King, William Wilberforce, etc). It fails to identify what a culture is and so cannot meet the moral criteria of being a good action-guiding morality. What does someone do when her larger culture conflicts with her sub-culture? And by what standard is the answer to this question given? Evaluating the moral practices of other cultures is unintelligible. So complaining about female circumcision is nonsense. If cultures are meter bars, setting standards of right and wrong, it makes no sense to question them. Moral progress makes no sense. The culture sets the standards, so whatever is right at a time is right. So, there is no moral progress, just moral change; changes in the moral beliefs of the culture.

Of course Avalos might not want to be associated with such a silly notion as culture relativism, perhaps he thinks personal relativism, moral subjectivism, is better. But this is also an absurd position. Subjectivism is not a moral position, it's a psychological one. If what is right or wrong depends on what a human subject believes or approves or, then when Hector Avalos says rape is immoral it means: "Hector Avalos disapproves of rape." The moral content is gone. The problems here are obvious. Moral disagreement is non-sense. If two people disagree, as long as they are truly representing their mental states, then they are *both* right. This means we are all morally infallible. So, if Hector is a subjectivist, his chapter should have been titled: "Hector Avalos disapproves of the Christian God." Or, "Hector Avalos doesn't like the Christian God." Or, "When Hector Avalos thinks of the Christian God, he says, 'Boo, Christian God.' Hector says, 'Boo, rape.' Xerxes says, 'Yeah, rape!' Similarly, Hector says, 'Yeah, vanilla ice cream!' Peter says, 'Boo, vanilla; yeah, chocolate!'"

So, no—pointing out whether someone is a relativist doesn't "miss the entire point."

Now, Hector might say that he is not claiming that God is *really* evil, objectively wrong, trans-culturally and subjectively immoral, etc., rather, he's giving an *internal* critique. But if this is the case, I must point out that he never made an internal critique in his chapter. So I'll just wait for that to come out (does he even know what an internal critique is? Doubtful).

Next, Avalos claims that there are only two types of people in the world.

1. Those who admit they are moral relativists; and
2. Those who do not admit they are moral relativists.

I am in group (2). But so what? No realist or objectivist would "admit they are moral relativists." Avalos probably meant to add "but really are" to the end of (2). But where's Loftus berating Avalos for being a "poor communicator"? Loftus said that God "looks stupid" (202) for his miscommunications, so will he come out and say that Avalos "looks stupid"? Or is Loftus biased?

Moving on, Avalos never once gives an *argument* to the effect that, "all people are moral relativists." His mere say-so doesn't cut it. He isn't God. I am a skeptic. A free thinker. I need more than the mere say-so of an angry ex-Christian who appears to have never studied metaethics to be persuaded of his view.

Avalos tries to show an "ironclad difference between secular and faith-based morality" (233). He gives these examples:

- A. I have to kill person X because Allah said so.
- B. I have to kill person X because he is pointing a gun at me.

This is ridiculous. This says nothing for a *moral* system. Where is the *normative* claim? Besides being ambiguous vague (what if the person pointing the gun at Avalos is a police

officer?), these examples have nothing to do with *morality*. Avalos berated Paul Copan for being out of his league with respect to ANE studies. Well, same for Avalos with ethics. Furthermore, *as an admitted relativist, there is no objective moral difference between A and B*. Both A and B are *equally* moral.

Avalos then becomes an objectivist and an absolutist. He writes, “...it is *always immoral* to trade real human lives for something that does not exist and cannot be verified to exist” (233, emphasis added). Thus Avalos contradicts himself! Now, perhaps he’ll give this a subjectivist spin. Okay, but then it is subject to the problems of subjectivism. We can simply disregard and ignore Avalos, granting that he is merely reporting a psychological state of his. Technically, then, he would be wrong to claim that it is immoral to do what he said. A description of a psychological state is not normative, and morality deals with norms. So, Avalos either contradicts himself within a page, or makes himself irrelevant.

So Avalos is wrong, the Christian apologist *does* triumph when he points out that atheism cannot ground morality and is relativistic. For Avalos must say that all the things he points out in the chapter (e.g., rape, child sacrifice, genocide, slavery, etc.) are not *really* wrong at all. Avalos says that it is “tragic” that in the twenty-first century someone would “defend genocide and infanticide in any form” (234). But as a relativist, Avalos has given up the right to condemn genocide and infanticide. He has given up the right to condemn those who would defend it. Besides that, Avalos’s posturing falls on deaf ears when he defends infanticide in the “form” of abortion.

Lastly, let’s look at the kind of moral hero moral relativism produces. A moral hero practices the morality of her system consistently. A consistent moral relativist does not let other peoples’ or cultures’ ideas of right and wrong affect them. Police call people unmoved by other people’s ideas of morality sociopaths. Ted Bundy brings this out well:

Then I learned that all moral judgments are “value judgments,” that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either “right” or “wrong.” I even read somewhere that the Chief Justice of the United States had written that the American Constitution expressed nothing more than collective value judgments. Believe it or not, I figured out for myself—what apparently the Chief Justice couldn’t figure out for himself—that if the rationality of one value judgment was zero, multiplying it by millions would not make it one whit more rational. Nor is there any “reason” to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring—the strength of character—to throw off its shackles...I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable “value judgment” that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these “others”? Other human beings, with human rights? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more than a hog’s life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as

“moral” or “good” and others as “immoral” or “bad”? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure that I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me—after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and inhibited self (Quoted in Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 5th ed. 30).

A Review of Chapter Nine

Steve Hays

IX. Fruitarian Freethinkers

In chapter 9, Loftus tries to exploit animal pain, as a variant of the argument from evil, to disprove Christian theism. In the course of this he reviews eight different theological responses to animal pain.

I'm not going to systematically comment on his presentation because I only need to defend my own position. His treatment suffers from some fundamental flaws:

1. Loftus never bothers to justify animal rights. He takes that as a given. However, that's hardly a given in atheism.

Before he can argue that animal suffering represents a violation of animal rights, he needs to demonstrate the secular basis for animal rights.

For some reason, Loftus labors under the persistent illusion that he should get a free pass on secular ethics. He doesn't have to make a rigorous case for secular moral realism. We should somehow waive the preliminaries.

2. Loftus fails to draw elementary distinctions between higher and lower animals. But surely a caterpillar lacks the same capacity for pain as a dog.

After all, the average atheist is a physicalist. He regards an animal as a biological organism whose mental states (e.g. pain) are correlated to his degree of neurological development.

3. Loftus fails to draw elementary distinctions regarding the pain threshold and pain tolerance of animals.

4. His treatment of animal pain flunks the Outsider Test. Loftus is projecting his human viewpoint onto the animal kingdom. But he gives us no reason to think that animals share his outlook regarding their quality of life.

5. Loftus fails to show that animal pain is even consistent with physicalism. He conveniently ignores eliminative materialism. Yet, as an atheist, that's hardly a position he is entitled to ignore.

6. Loftus fails to make allowance for the way in which a shock to the system can function as a natural anesthetic.

7. Suppose we consider animal pain from an Epicurean perspective. Suppose an animal experiences excruciating pain right now. However, once the animal is dead, it no longer

remembers how it lived or how it died. In that event, does it even matter how an animal lived or died?

At the time, the animal was in excruciating pain. But every animal dies sooner or later. So, in the long run, how is animal pain a problem?

If death blots out animal consciousness (such as it is), then death blots out whatever unpleasant experiences the animal endured while it was still alive. So even if the animal died in excruciating pain, death blanks out whatever pain it suffered. Whatever harm it had to endure in life is impermanent. That's behind it.

And the Epicurean view of death is a standard move that unbelievers make to offset the lack of an afterlife. Of course, not every atheist shares the Epicurean view, but if he admits that death represents a genuine deprivation, it then that makes atheism less appealing than Christianity.

Let's now transition from general considerations to specific objections:

8. Loftus says, "From Darwin's detailed scientific investigations we learned that humans are directly related to other animals, especially to chimpanzees, who share 98.5 percent of your exact genetic makeup" (237).

Really? We learned from Darwin that we share 98.5% of our genetic makeup with chimpanzees? Did Darwin also discover the Genome?

9. Loftus says, "We are not special to earth's ecosystem either. We depend on each other" (237-38).

Needless to say, the Bible doesn't deny that human beings are dependent on the ecosystem to survive and prosper. Why is Loftus so ignorant of basic Christian theology?

10. Loftus says: "It could no longer be said, except in the ignorant Bible-thumping pulpits of the world, that we were created instantaneously by divine fiat on one day of a divine workweek" (238).

Once again, Loftus flunks the Outsider Test. His pejorative characterization scarcely reflects the viewpoint of the Christians he so disdains.

11. Loftus says, "Based upon the claim that 'at least 98% of all species on this tiny speck of a planet made only a few hesitant steps forward before succumbing to extinction,' Hitches asks: 'What kind of designer or creator is so wasteful and capricious and approximate? What kind of designer or creator is so cruel and indifferent?'" (238).

i) That's a very soft statistic, which also takes for granted the whole evolutionary narrative.

ii) Even if we accept the outlines of that narrative, what is wasteful about a later stage displacing an earlier stage? Why not treat that like chapters of a novel, or scenes in a play? The story has successive episodes or subplots. A later development phases out an earlier development.

12. Loftus says, “We also have the problem of human animal suffering...” (238).

Why does he distinguish natural animal suffering from human animal suffering? Given his Darwinian outlook, aren't humans animals?

13. Loftus says [quoting Dawkins], “It is better for the genes of Darwin's ichneumon wasp that the caterpillar should be alive, and therefore fresh, when it is eaten, no matter what cost in suffering...” (239).

i) Do caterpillars suffer? How do we measure a caterpillar's capacity for suffering, anyway? Is Dawkins in telepathic communication with a caterpillar? Does he know what it's like to be a caterpillar?

ii) Since physicalists correlate consciousness with brain development, in what respect is it even meaningful to speak of pain in reference to a caterpillar?

Doesn't this represent a blatant anthropomorphism?

iii) Why is Loftus so indignant over the pain and suffering of caterpillars when he is so indifferent to the pain and suffering of babies at the hands of the abortionist?

14. Loftus says, “We have killed them just for the sake of hunting for sport” (239).

Without taking a position on the ethics of big-game hunting, I'd just point out to shoot a lion in the prime of life seems more merciful than letting it grow old, to be left at the mercy of the hyenas.

For somebody who bemoans animal pain, wouldn't big-game hunting be a form of mercy-killing? Kill the elk (in one clean shot) before the wolves get to it?

But, of course, Loftus isn't trying to be logically consistent. Rather, he's trying to be consistent with the fashionable causes of the liberal establishment.

15. Loftus says, “we have abused them for our own entertainment through cock fights, bull fights and dog fights” (239).

i) Loftus acts as though human iniquity is somehow at variance with Christian theology. Didn't he ever notice that the Bible has a lot to say about human sinfulness?

ii) Although I think each of these bloodsports is decadent, I'd also point out that there's a moral difference between cockfighting and dogfighting. Dogs and roosters are hardly

equivalent.

This lack of elementary discrimination is one of the things that exposes the frivolity of Loftus' mock indignation.

16. Loftus says, "Some fish we like to eat so fresh that we cook their bodies and eat them while they are still alive and gasping for oxygen" (239).

That's an odd statement on several grounds:

- i) What does the "body" of a fish stand in contrast to? The "soul" of a fish?
- ii) Once again, what is the piscine capacity for pain? Sentience ranges along a continuum. To talk about animal pain without distinguishing degrees of pain, corresponding to degrees of sentience, is sentimental nonsense.

17. Loftus says, "there is a new awareness in the last few decades that we shouldn't unnecessarily harm animals, even to the point where vegetarianism and veganism are becoming alternate lifestyles" (239).

Once again, Loftus flunks the Outsider Test. Fruitarian ethics is hardly a transcultural value.

18. Loftus says, "Animals don't suffer because of their own sinful freewill choices to kill or be killed so the freewill defense cannot be used to justify these sufferings" (242).

- i) Since I'm a Calvinist, that's irrelevant.
- ii) However, this also exposes a tension in his argument. When he wants to play up the injustice of animal suffering, he exaggerates the continuity between man and beast.

But when he wants to stress the innocence of animals, he suddenly draws attention to the discontinuity between man and beast.

But if animals lack the same faculties as man, then why act as if animal rights and human rights are interchangeable? Logically, wouldn't animal rights range along a sliding scale?

19. Loftus says [quoting Robert Wennberg], "Animals suffer, innocent of sin and without guilt, who cannot be morally or spiritually benefited by the ravages of pain, who cannot place any meaningful or elevating interpretation upon their suffering, and who will not (according to most) be compensated for their suffering by another life beyond the grave. It would seem that some animals have been brought into existence only to suffer and die..." (242).

Stop and ask yourself, does this represent the viewpoint of a rabbit? Does a rabbit get up every morning with this overwhelming sense of existential ennui and cosmic injustice?

Or does this reflect the effete hand-wringing of an overbred academic?

20. Loftus says, “What did animals do wrong to deserve this punishment” (244)?

Why think animal pain is punitive rather than functional?

21. Loftus says, “If a theist can sit by and watch as a fawn is slowly burned to death in a forest fire or as a cat kills a mouse or as killer whales drown a humpback whale calf, and not question whether her God is perfectly good and caring to all of his creatures, then I’m baffled” (257).

i) To begin with, that’s bathos in lieu of an argument.

ii) Forest fires serve a natural function in the ecosystem. Predation, parasitism, illness, and mortality all serve a natural function in the ecosystem. Population control. Weeding out the weak and sickly. These are not gratuitous evils.

iii) The Bible itself uses metaphors drawn from the animal kingdom. To that extent the animal kingdom is like a morality play. Although the animal kingdom is amoral, it mimics good and evil. Some animals seem heroic and virtuous while other animals seem vicious and villainous. That’s a way in which God pantomimes morality. An object lesson for humans.

22. Loftus says, “Singer argues that discrimination against animals because they belong to a different species is an injustice, in the same manner that it’s an injustice to discriminate against other people based upon the color of their skin” (257-258).

i) That’s disanalogous at the very point where it needs to be analogous.

ii) Animals discriminate by species. Some animals even discriminate within species. The animal kingdom is far more discriminatory than Jim Crow. A lion doesn’t treat a gazelle the same way it treats a lioness. A lion doesn’t treat its own cubs the same way it treats the cubs of a rival lion.

23. Loftus says, “This Christian option [#6] is that God may resurrect all sentient animals to a new life, either on a new earth, or in heaven itself...Early church fathers Irenaeus, John of the Cross, and Athanasius all believed this...” (258).

John of the Cross was an early church father? That’s news to me. And here I always thought he was a 16C Spanish mystic. If he was also an early church father, then his longevity is quite impressive. What’s his secret?

24. Loftus says, “There are also significant problems with regard to an animal heaven. What kinds of bodies will each creature have in heaven? Will a bear or a shark or an eagle still be carnivorous?...If they lack these bodies will they be the same creatures in heaven? Will they also need to live in the same kind of habitat?” (258).

If they lack physical bodies, then they'd have simulated bodies—like bodies in a dreamscape.

25. Loftus says, “what rational criteria can distinguish between animals that will be in heaven from those that aren't there?” (259).

Of course that's speculative, but it's not hard to come up with rational criteria:

- i) A distinction between lower animals and higher animals.
- ii) A distinction between wild animals and domesticated animals.
- iii) A distinction between social animals and solitary animals
- iv) Pairing off a pet with a pet-owner. If there's an emotional bond between the two, then it would make sense to either resurrect both or resurrect neither.

For example, it seems reasonable for God to resurrect a Christian along with his pets.

v) Apropos (i-ii), death is a misfortune for a pet dog in a way that's not the case for a clam. A pet dog has a higher quality of life. So death is more of a deprivation for some animals than others. An earthworm has less to lose.

26. Loftus says, “As far as I can tell, a heaven with all creatures in it would look like the actual world” (259).

- i) That's only a problem if you assume that animal pain is a problem. If you don't regard animal pain as a natural evil, then there's no reason why the new earth wouldn't resemble the status quo ante in that respect.
- ii) But it's also too much of an all-or-nothing proposition. There is no reason for the new world order to restore every dead animal to life unless you have good reason to think dead animals are entitled to eschatological compensation. And that begs the question.

27. Loftus says [quoting Richard Carrier], “No thanks to God, we got rid of his damned murderous floods, with dams, levies, and channels” (261).

- i) Water is morally neutral. Too much or too little is bad for us.
- ii) We can thank God for giving us the intelligence and raw materials to develop technology.
- iii) God also gave us a roughhewn world which we can cultivate to our liking. An opportunity to exercise our God-given creativity.

28. Loftus says, “God could’ve created us such that the process of photosynthesis would feed us off of the sun itself...” (262).

God could have made us plants. Of course, if he made us plants, then we wouldn’t be human. There are tradeoffs. Would Loftus rather be a daffodil?

29. Loftus says, “God would not even need to create any animals at all” (263).

How is that relevant to Christian theodicy? Christian theodicy was never predicated on the assumption that creatures are necessary beings.

Would a deer rather not exist? Does the average deer rue the day it was born? How many deer has Loftus interviewed?

30. Loftus says, “God could have created wings in addition to our arms that could be used for transportation” (263).

God could have made us birds or bats. Of course, if he made us birds or bats, then we wouldn’t be human. There are tradeoffs. Would Loftus rather be a duck?

31. Loftus says, “God could also control any overpopulation by reducing our mating cycles in the first place” (263).

In my observation, many human beings seem to appreciate our year-round mating cycles. That enhances their quality of life.

Does Loftus have a problem with that? Does he take Depo-Provera to improve his quality of life?

On a final note, Loftus sets this up as contest between Christian views and secular views of animal rights. But that’s a deeply skewed presentation of the logical alternatives. Not all secular thinkers share this radical chic view of animal rights. Consider Richard Posner’s position:

I do not agree that we have a duty to (the other) animals that arises from their being the equal members of a community composed of all those creatures in the universe that can feel pain, and that it is merely “prejudice” in a disreputable sense akin to racial prejudice or sexism that makes us “discriminate” in favor of our own species. You assume the existence of the universe-wide community of pain and demand reasons why the boundary of our concern should be drawn any more narrowly. I start from the bottom up, with the brute fact that we, like other animals, prefer our own—our own family, the “pack” that we happen to run with (being a social animal), and the larger sodalities constructed on the model of the smaller ones, of which the largest for most of us is our nation. Americans have distinctly less feeling for the pains and pleasures of foreigners than of other Americans and even less for most of the nonhuman animals that we share the

world with.

Now you may reply that these are just facts about human nature; that they have no normative significance. But they do. Suppose a dog menaced a human infant and the only way to prevent the dog from biting the infant was to inflict severe pain on the dog—more pain, in fact, than the bite would inflict on the infant. You would have to say, let the dog bite (for “if an animal feels pain, the pain matters as much as it does when a human feels pain,” provided the pain is as great). But any normal person (and not merely the infant’s parents!), including a philosopher when he is not self-consciously engaged in philosophizing, would say that it would be monstrous to spare the dog, even though to do so would minimize the sum of pain in the world.

I do not feel obliged to defend this reaction; it is a moral intuition deeper than any reason that could be given for it and impervious to any reason that you or anyone could give against it. Membership in the human species is not a “morally irrelevant fact,” as the race and sex of human beings has come to seem. If the moral irrelevance of humanity is what philosophy teaches, and so we have to choose between philosophy and the intuition that says that membership in the human species is morally relevant, then it is philosophy that will have to go.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/interviews-debates/200106--.htm>

Jason Engwer

Animal suffering is a significant issue that isn't discussed much. For that reason, John Loftus is at an advantage in bringing it up. Most Christians don't know much about the subject.

The issue of the basis of morality keeps coming up, because the authors of *The Christian Delusion* keep raising moral objections to Christianity. We have to ask again, what's the objective basis for Loftus' moral assessments?

One of the hallmarks of Loftus' argumentation on the problem of evil, something I've seen him do for years now, is that he often claims to not even be aware of a *possible* justification for some form of suffering, even where a possible justification is easy to think of. As we'll see, his chapter on animal suffering offers more of the same.

Though Loftus doesn't have answers for a lot of questions that could be asked of his worldview, he expects Christians to have detailed answers about subjects like what bodies animals would have in the afterlife if they live again and what sort of atmosphere they would live in (258-259). He writes:

"Since their bodies have a direct bearing on who they are, if they lack these bodies will they be the same creatures in heaven?...But we're on this side of heaven, and on this side we want to know how those 'cosmic contradictions' can be reasonably resolved before we can believe that there is a heaven for them (or us) in the first place. Southgate and Haught cannot simply say God can do these things without offering us a reasonable explanation for how this can happen. After all, Haught is the one who called them cosmic contradictions in the first place." (258-259)

There can be a combination of continuity and discontinuity, both on a transformed earth and in the remainder of a transformed universe. (Neither humans nor animals would have to be confined to earth.) Human bodies undergo some change over time, and they're expected to be somewhat different in the afterlife than they are now, yet there's some continuity. The same could be true of animals. I don't see why a contradiction would be involved.

I do think an animal afterlife is a partial solution to the problem of animal suffering. A resurrection of at least some animals seems to make the most sense of Romans 8:19-23. There will be a transformation of nature (verse 21). The non-human creation is associated with humans (verses 19 and 21), both are referred to as longing (verses 19 and 23), and the human longing is associated with resurrection (verse 23).

While Loftus wants detailed answers about animal bodies and the environment in which they would live in an afterlife, does a child who has good reason to trust a parent expect such detailed answers before trusting the parent on other matters? Does Loftus never trust a friend, historian, scientist, or other individual on an issue Loftus doesn't know much about, on the basis of that individual's past trustworthiness?

He compares animal suffering followed by an afterlife for animals to torturing a human, then compensating him (258). If you hear of a tortured person without any further qualifications, you might think of somebody being made to suffer for no good reason, even for bad reasons. And Loftus sometimes tells us that he can't think of even a *possible* good reason for animal suffering in some contexts (248-249, 251), such as prior to human existence under a theistic evolution or old earth creation scenario.

But humans aren't the only observers involved. Angels, both good and evil, are involved as well, and Satan took part in bringing about the fall of mankind. Though humans wouldn't observe events that occurred before their existence, they would be aware of what happened by other means. That's why Loftus is aware of such animal suffering and is writing about it. Loftus didn't observe pre-human animal suffering as it happened, but he can be aware of it anyway. The existence and degree of animal suffering, even suffering that may have occurred prior to human existence, affects humans, such as their sense of responsibility and how significant they consider their sins and the sins of others. That's an advantage. We don't know how weighty the benefits of such advantages would be, but I see no reason to conclude that they wouldn't be significant enough to outweigh the disadvantages of animal suffering.

Loftus proposes an analogy that assumes some of his conclusions without argument. Regarding a father who lets a pack of wolves maul and kill his pets and children, Loftus writes:

“What could possibly justify this inaction when it's considered his parental responsibility to protect his children and pets by stopping the wolves dead in their tracks, immediately?” (251)

He's assuming that God has the responsibility in question. I've already addressed the problematic nature of that sort of assumption in my response to Loftus' comments in chapter 7. God has knowledge that a human father doesn't have, a right to take life that a father doesn't have, etc. Loftus goes on to ask:

“Is there any reason for praising the father for rescuing these two children [while letting four others and some pets die] when he could have stopped the wolves initially?” (252)

Yes, if the father had the same right to take life that God has and knew that the killed children would grow up to cause even worse suffering, for example. If the father had God's knowledge, he would also know how other people looking on would benefit from thinking about what happened, along with other relevant information.

Near the end of the chapter, Loftus asks a question that seems to reflect his priorities:

“What is there that is more valuable to God about this present ecosystem that takes precedence over our sufferings?” (262)

What about the value of letting people suffer the consequences of their sin or the role that suffering has in forming character, for example? Loftus asks his question above in the context of discussing the possibility that God could keep performing miracles to prevent suffering. But He does sometimes perform such miracles, though He doesn't in the large majority of circumstances, and He designed His creation so that some suffering that could otherwise have occurred wouldn't (humans and animals only live so long, we can anticipate some types of suffering and avoid them, natural anesthetics, etc.).

In my responses to Loftus above, I've been assuming that animals experience as much suffering as Loftus suggests or more. But Steve Hays has already mentioned some reasons we have for thinking they may not suffer that much.

Paul Manata

This chapter represents another journey through the fantastic musings of John Loftus. Just like in his chapter on how God should have written the Bible, Loftus tries to play God again and tell us how God should have created. He makes some of his infamous silly comments, like the idea that God should have made us with “wings for transportation” or without “needing to eat.” Loftus also complains about having sex whenever we want to and wishes God “reduced our mating cycles” (do we have “cycles”? How is every day a cycle?) (263). Basically, Loftus wants to fly around with his wings, dive underwater and breathe through his gills, and live in a land of chocolate milk oceans, crushed Oreo cookie soil, pound cake mountains, and marshmallow clouds. In this world that God should have made: “We could pursue our hobbies or engage in sporting activities. And if God had done this we wouldn’t know any differently” (263).

Loftus says that a world that could not be explained by the “natural sciences would help him believe.” Well, we live in that world. The natural sciences cannot explain objective morality, intentional agents acting for purposes, minds, irreducible meaning, intrinsic value, and many other things.

Loftus also says he “sees no reason God would create through evolutionary processes” (263). However, when he said what God should have communicated in order to stave off miscommunication and mockery of the Bible for being “unscientific,” Loftus says that God should have said he created through evolutionary process. Now he admits that the original wording is better!

At any rate, Loftus argues in this chapter that we find things in the world we shouldn’t expect to “on the supposition of Christian theism” (237). However, he never once “supposes Christian theism” in his entire chapter! On “the supposition of Christian theism,” we “suppose the Bible is the word of God, we are not ultimate authorities; we don’t get to tell God how to do things” etc. But Loftus “supposes” that Christian theism is false throughout the entire chapter. If we “suppose Christian theism,” why should we “expect to find” people “without wings”? If we “suppose Christian theism,” why should we expect to find an unfallen world of chocolate milk oceans where we play badminton all day long? Doesn’t “supposing Christian theism” minimally entail “supposing” that this world is *not* how things should be?

Rather, what we do find is that when a Christian theist appeals to his worldview, Loftus says he can’t do this because there are so many undercutting defeaters to this belief that we don’t get to use them to answer his argument (241). But what happened to the whole “I’m going to see what follows from *Christian suppositions*” bit? When Christians give answers Loftus says, “but their answer is wildly implausible to modern scientifically literate people” (244). So, Loftus cheats on the way he set up the context of dialogue. He doesn’t play by his own rules.

Loftus never once justifies his moral indictments, so it’s hard to take him seriously. Loftus says looking around and seeing meat eating shouldn’t follow if we “suppose” Chris-

tian theism. But if we “suppose Christian theism,” then we “suppose the Bible is God’s word,” and we see that “God said to eat meat.” We see many things that are exactly what I would expect to find upon the supposition that Christian theism is true. I would not expect to find, however, wings on my back and gills on my neck and tusks on my face to defend myself with. I would not expect to find chocolate milk oceans. John Loftus is confusing the Christian worldview with Willie Wonka’s Chocolate factory.

In any case, Loftus entire argument rests upon a *noseeum* assumption. Loftus frequently rests on the position that “he knows of no reason” why God would do X (238, 240, 247, 248, 251). Loftus totally disregards skeptical theist responses (and this is apart from the actual responses that were given to his specific claims by Hays and Engwer). Loftus reasons that since “it seems as if there is no reason that could justify God in permitting evil” therefore “there probably is no reason that would justify God in permitting evil.” But why think that inference is good? Loftus sends us to his other book, *Why I Became an Atheist*, for his answer. But that was a bad move.

In that book Loftus admits that the Bible makes the claim that God always does just and is working all things for good (WIBA, 256). But in his chapter in *The Christian Delusion*, Loftus claims that he is looking at the world “from the supposition of Christian theism.” His answer to the skeptical theist response (a response that denies that we are in the epistemic position to claim that the justifying goods we know of are even close to the total amount of God justifying goods that there are) is that it “must be shown that God exists.” Well, not if we’re “supposing it” to begin with! He claims that if the skeptical theist works it only shows that there is “a possible” reason for evil. But this is to miss the point of the skeptical theist response. That there is a possible reason is entailed by skeptical theism, but the more weighty point is that Loftus is in no position to say that if God had a reason Loftus would “probably” see it. As Gregory Ganssle puts it:

The inference from the claim that *it seems as though there is no* sufficient reason to be found to the conclusion that *it is probably the case that there is no* sufficient reason at all is not a strong inference (“God and Evil,” in Paul Copan and Paul Moser, *The Rationality of Theism* (Routledge, 2003), 263, emphasis mine).

Skeptical theism is an *epistemological* claim, not merely or most relevantly a matter of modalities, like possibilities. Loftus is not epistemologically warranted in moving from, “I don’t see it,” to the conclusion “therefore, it probably isn’t there,” when it comes to God’s justifying goods—and Loftus has no reason to believe the majority of them are not outside his ken. If you have access to only 10% of a garden, and you have searched that portion, you cannot conclude: “There probably are no slugs in this garden!”

Loftus commits cognitive idolatry and lays down constraints for God as well as making a claim about his noetic equipment given “the supposition” of Christian theism. On that “supposition,” Loftus should not be as optimistic about his cognitive faculties in this area. Consider that the “supposition” Loftus entertains says that Loftus hates God and seeks to find ways to indict him. Christian theism would claim that Loftus suffers from confirmation bias writ large. Christian theism says that we should expect mysterious and unknown

elements to our world. Loftus has totally failed in his attempted goal he set for himself in this chapter. On the supposition of Christian theism, Loftus is not justified in claiming that if God existed Loftus would have access to all the God-justifying ways there are. Loftus is not justified in claiming that on the supposition of Christian theism the evils make Christianity “less probable.” Not only do Christians have dozens of other arguments for their belief that Loftus does not address (so that even if Loftus was correct, the argument would only reduce the warrant a Christian has for her belief a little bit, but not enough to remove knowledge), and not only can the Christian rest in God’s promise of being a just and good God (which insulates them from epistemic defeat), the Christian theist fully expects the level of animal suffering we see given the fall. The Christian is not persuaded by Loftus telling us that God should have made us plants that get our food from the sun. On the assumption of Darwinism, egregious cases of animal cruelty are not wrong. But it is wrong to, say, torture animals for the fun of it. Therefore, we know of facts we would not expect if Darwinism were true.

Lastly, Loftus claims that he has *deduced* the non-existence of God from animal suffering (264). Well, not only did he not provide the derivation for this deduction, he lets possibility right back in. If it is possibly consistent that God exist and animal suffering exist, then the deductive argument Loftus says he’s made is defeated. Since Loftus does admit in the chapter that there are possible reasons God could have for justifying evil, Loftus has debunked his own claim to having a deductive argument for the non-existence of God from cases of animal suffering.

Part 4: Why Jesus is the Risen Son of God

A Review of Chapter Ten

Steve Hays

X. Trojan Horse Atheism

i) In chap. 11, Price says, “Eddy and Boyd simply cannot bring themselves to grasp the difference between methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism...I regard it as the height of arrogant foolishness for mere mortals to pontificate on the nature and workings of a largely unknown universe...That is why we have to devise methods like this to tell us what most probably happened. All we can do is to assume a cause-and-effect nexus, just like the TV weatherman.” (274-75).

Having accused Eddy and Boyd of failure to grasp the difference between methodological naturalism and metaphysical naturalism, Price, in his subsequent explanation, ironically demonstrates his inability to grasp that very difference.

Probability is a metaphysical concept. If we can’t “pontificate” on the nature and workings of the universe, then we can’t assign probability values to various events. The odds of throwing sixes, the odds of throwing sixes twice in a row, &c., depend on what the world is like. In the world of Alice in Wonderland, all bets are off.

Likewise, causality is a metaphysical category—dependent on what the world is like. Just consider debates over the correct interpretation of quantum mechanics.

ii) Apropos (i), methodological naturalism is a Trojan horse for metaphysical naturalism. In addition, “naturalism” is just a euphemism for atheism.

iii) The specious appeal of methodological naturalism over metaphysical naturalism is that the former seems to enjoy a lower burden of proof than the latter. But as I just pointed out, that’s an illusion.

If Bobby Price insists on a methodologically naturalistic historiography, then he needs to acquit the more ambitious (and honest) position of metaphysical naturalism.

2.Price says, “[Eddy and Boyd] argue that it would be a Eurocentric, ethno-biased slur to ‘people’s religion’ the world over if we didn’t broaden the analogy of present-day experience with which to judge past-event claims) to include that of various Pentecostals, third world shamans, and new Agers...analogy forbids us to deem ‘probable’ any event without reliable corroboration from some analogy with present-day experience” (274-75).

i) On the one hand, Price insists on Troeltsch’s principle of analogy, but on the other hand, when Eddy and Boyd call his bluff and say that any appeal to present-day experience must include the testimony of observers who report modern miracles and other paranormal phenomena, Price backpedals. Yet Eddy and Boyd are simply meeting Troeltsch on his own terms.

ii) However, the principle is also unwarranted. Why assume the present resembles the past? What's the basis for that presumption? It can't be methodological alone, for the axiomatic assumption that the present resembles the past is a metaphysical presumption. Strict uniformity of nature.

3. Price says, "We cannot detect 'probable miracles' even if they happened. Historical inquiry cannot touch them, even if time travel would show them to have been real!" (276).

i) That's an arbitrary assertion rather than a reasoned argument. It's like denying that a casino can detect cheating.

ii) He has defined the historical method such that a historian can't accept a supernatural explanation for a historical event even if that's the correct explanation! Even if a historical event was, indeed, a miracle, the historical method forbids a historian from accepting it as such. Put another way, he has defined the historical method in such a way that his historical methodology would antecedently filter out any and all historical events which don't pass through his secular screening process.

But in that case, the historical method is ahistorical and anti-historical. In his hands, the historical method is intolerant of historical events of the "wrong" kind. The historical method doesn't allow a historian to discover the true explanation in case the true explanation happens to be supernaturalistic rather than naturalistic. But what's the point of a methodology that prohibits you from offering the true interpretation of what really happened?

A methodology that gets ahead of the facts, that is at war with the facts, is worse than useless. Such a methodology is proudly out of touch with reality.

Price and other like-minded infidels have constructed a cage, locked themselves inside, and thrown away the key. Even if a wildfire were approaching, they'd rather stay inside their cage and burn alive than come to terms with an unwelcome reality.

And that's fine for him. Price is more than welcome to make funny faces behind the bars of his self-imposed cage, but Christians are hardly obliged to join him.

iii) It's also disingenuous for him to claim that miracles are undetectable. After all, the basic reason that so many unbelievers reject the Bible is because the Bible contains miracles, and unbelievers don't think things like that either can happen or do happen. But they couldn't reject the Bible on account of miracles unless they had a clear idea, in their own mind, of what constitutes a miracle. If miracles were unrecognizable, it would be nonsensical to reject the Bible because it contains miracles.

4. Price says, "To jump the gun and say 'God did it!' ...is to wave one's theological wand to transform agnosticism into fideism" (277).

To which I might say, to jump the gun and say “God didn’t” is to wave one’s atheological wand and transform agnosticism into atheism.

Methodology can’t tell you that invoking divine agency is jumping the gun. At best, only metaphysics can tell you that. And Price would need to make a rigorous case for the corresponding ontology.

But he doesn’t argue for his position. He falls back on quotable zingers. He tries to shame the reader into submission—like a dog-owner who raises his voice at a misbehaving pet. Are we supposed to cringe at Price’s disapproving tone of voice?

5. Price says, “In appealing to the universal facts of human experience, Hume is being neither deductive nor circular. He is merely appealing to what everyone knows: the frequent reports of the extraordinary we hear from UFO abductees, Loch Ness Monster fans, people who see ghosts or who claim psychic powers, always seem to turn out to be bunk upon examination...Ask James Randi.” (277).

Aside from the fact that Price is deliberately throwing a lot of disparate claims into one pot, what about Randi? Here’s what two distinguished paranormal researchers have to say about Randi’s credibility:

The January 2000 issue of Dog World magazine included an article on a possible sixth sense in dogs, which discussed some of my research. In this article Randi was quoted as saying that in relation to canine ESP, “We at the JREF [James Randi Educational Foundation] have tested these claims. They fail.” No details were given of these tests.

I emailed James Randi to ask for details of this JREF research. He did not reply. He ignored a second request for information too.

I then asked members of the JREF Scientific Advisory Board to help me find out more about this claim. They did indeed help by advising Randi to reply. In an email sent on February 6, 2000 he told me that the tests he referred to were not done at the JREF, but took place “years ago” and were “informal”. They involved two dogs belonging to a friend of his that he observed over a two-week period. All records had been lost. He wrote: “I overstated my case for doubting the reality of dog ESP based on the small amount of data I obtained. It was rash and improper of me to do so.”

Randi also claimed to have debunked one of my experiments with the dog Jaytee, a part of which was shown on television. Jaytee went to the window to wait for his owner when she set off to come home, but did not do so before she set off. In Dog World, Randi stated: “Viewing the entire tape, we see that the dog responded to every car that drove by, and to every person who walked by.” This is simply not true, and Randi now admits that he has never seen the tape.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ <http://www.sheldrake.org/D&C/controversies/randi.html>

That's what magician James Randi did in 1967 on the Today show in connection with the psychic photography of Ted Serios, one of the most significant recent cases in parapsychology. Serios was a Chicago bellhop who could make images appear, at a distance, on carefully controlled Polaroid film. But Randi insisted that the phenomena were fraudulent, and he claimed that he could reproduce them under conditions similar to those in which Serios succeeded. That would have been a neat trick, because those conditions included wearing clothing supplied by the experimenters and being separated from the camera (sometimes in another room, and sometimes in an electrically shielded Faraday cage). Nevertheless, with his usual bluster, Randi accepted a \$10,000 challenge (a considerable sum in those days) to duplicate the Serios phenomena and make good on the claim.

Of course, confidence is easy to feign, and Randi does it routinely in his role as magician... So Randi's dismissal of the Serios case was all it took for those already disposed to believe that Serios was a fake, and it was probably enough even for those sympathetic to parapsychology but unaware of Randi's dishonesty. Many (possibly most) viewers were left believing that the case was without merit.

What the TV audience never learned was that when the show was over and Randi was pressed to make good on his wager, he simply weaseled out of it. To keep that side of the story under wraps, Randi prohibited publication of his correspondence on the matter. That was undoubtedly a shrewd move, because the letters show clearly how Randi backed down from his empty challenge.⁹⁷

6. Price says, "Even if you believe Jesus rose from the dead, I think you will not be quick to conclude that Uncle Mel did, too" (277-78).

Irrelevant. The resurrection of Jesus isn't predicated on the normality of this event. Whether or not Jesus rose from the dead is irrespective of whether or not other people rose from the dead, for the resurrection of Jesus has a specific rationale which is absent in the case of "Uncle Mel."

7. Price says, "What about the worship of Menachem Mendel Schneerson... The Lubavitchers must have borrowed it from Christianity. Yeah, that's really likely. Hasidic Jews borrowed myths from the religion they hated most" (282).

That's an ironic denial coming from a guy who constantly tells us that Christians and Jews borrowed major planks of their theology from their pagan overlords! At one stroke, Price undermines his comparative mythology.

8. Price says, "Likewise, the same thing applies to the Nag Hammadi Gospels! They, too, claim to stem from eyewitnesses" (287).

Is Price trying to be simple-minded, or does that come naturally to him?

⁹⁷ S. Braude, *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations* (Chicago 2007), 22.

An eyewitness claim is a necessary condition, not a sufficient claim. Clearly we need to distinguish between genuine and fraudulent claimants. The Gnostic Gospels were written far too late to be authentic.

9. Price says, “if Paul had our fund of Jesus sayings available in oral tradition why does he not settle issues at once with a dominical saying, for example, on payment of taxes to Caesar, on celibacy, on fasting” (288).

i) There’s no reason to think that Paul had a “fund” of “Jesus sayings” on tap. He picked up some things from his circle of contacts.

ii) Jesus’ audience was generally Jewish, whereas Paul’s audience was generally Gentile. There’s no reason to think the questions that normally came up in a Jewish setting would also crop up in a Gentile setting. So there wouldn’t be a dominical fund of ready-made answers for most questions regarding the Gentile mission.

Jason Engwer

As I noted earlier, the contributors to *The Christian Delusion* often appeal to scholarly majorities to argue against Christianity, such as when discussing Biblical authorship. But they sometimes disagree with scholarly majorities. Robert Price probably provides us with the best illustration. Not only has he argued against Jesus' existence, but he's also argued against the Pauline authorship of documents like Romans and 1 Corinthians. Those positions put him in a tiny minority among modern scholars.

Scholarly majorities do have some significance. But the rejection of majority opinion on some issues by the authors of *The Christian Delusion* should remind us of how limited that significance is even from their perspective.

Steve Hays has mentioned some of the problems with Price's view of miracles. If we need precedent for events that we accept as historical (275), then how do we accept any type of historical event for the first time? If the past must be analogous to the present (275), then where's Price's argument against the best modern miracle claims? As Steve noted, Price doesn't interact with the documentation provided by people like Stephen Braude, and his appeal to alleged debunkers like James Randi (277) is problematic. And why think miracles wouldn't be similar enough to what happens today, even if we didn't have any credible modern miracle accounts? If we know that a human can intervene to interrupt the normal course of nature by reaching out his hand and grabbing an apple that's falling from a tree, thereby preventing gravity from having its usual effect on the apple, why not think God or some other agent could intervene to alter the normal course of nature as well? Even if Price doesn't think there's a God, agnosticism would be sufficient to warrant being open to such a possibility. Price makes no case for the probability of atheism.

He criticizes Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy for arguing that Jesus rose supernaturally rather than as an anomaly (277, 279). Does that mean Price is willing to accept a historical argument for the resurrection, as long as it isn't accompanied by an assertion that the event occurred by supernatural means? If the event isn't inherently supernatural, then why shouldn't we go on to ask about the best explanation of how the event occurred once we accept its historicity? If Price wants to accept the attempt to argue for a historical resurrection, but place the explanation of how that resurrection occurred in a category other than historiography, then he seems to be taking a step away from many of his fellow skeptics and closer to what Christians have been arguing. I suspect that what Price actually wants to do is confine us to an anomaly and a supernatural act as our only options, force everybody to identify which option they're arguing for, then have the antecedent improbability of an anomalous resurrection outweigh any contrary historical evidence that can be brought forward. But why couldn't somebody argue that a resurrection seems to have occurred while not taking a position on how it occurred until after arguing for the likelihood of the event? I doubt that Price wants that option on the table, despite his unconvincing claim that he's open to the miraculous.

Like John Loftus before him, Price criticizes alleged Christian appeals to possibilities, to the neglect of probabilities:

“We are henceforth to baptize the improbable into the probable. But as F.C. Baur said long ago, the true critic admits that anything is possible but asks ‘What is probable?’” (289)

Earlier in the chapter, though, Price appealed to possibilities himself. He criticizes Boyd and Eddy because they “certainly do nothing to make a historical resurrection seem impossible to deny” (279). If probability is all that’s needed, then why would Boyd and Eddy need to make the rejection of their position “seem impossible”? Elsewhere, he comments on how no miracle is “required” to explain something in early Christianity (282). Again, if we’re looking for probability rather than possibility or certainty, why is Price objecting that the Christian position isn’t “required”? In another place in the chapter, Price tells us that it’s enough for a theory to be true “even possibly” (287). For somebody who criticizes Christians for appealing to possibilities, he appeals to them a lot himself in such a short chapter.

Both Christians and their critics appeal to possibilities in some contexts. Something that can be classified as a possibility in one sense can be classified as a probability in another sense. If you isolate a harmonization of two Biblical passages from the larger context of the evidence for Biblical inerrancy, for example, then the harmonization can be considered only a possibility rather than a probability in that situation. But if the evidence for inerrancy is taken into account, the harmonization can be considered probable in that context. All of us are trying to harmonize all of the relevant data in order to maintain a consistent worldview. One system can be more likely overall in spite of the unlikely nature of some element of it when considered in isolation.

Price criticizes the view that ancient people were “critical historians” following “Humean” thinking (280). He then poses the alternative that ancient people were “easy believers” (280). What’s more likely is that ancient people varied along a wide spectrum, with most being somewhere between the two alternatives Price mentions. We can accept the testimony of a modern court witness concerning a murder he claims to have seen even if he believes in horoscopes or is unreliable in some other context. Similarly, men like Peter and Luke don’t need to have been “critical historians” with “Humean” standards in order for them to have credibly reported something like an empty tomb or what Paul did during his journey to a particular city.

Like Richard Carrier later in the book, Price suggests a non-historical genre for the gospels (286) without interacting with the fact that both the early Christian and the early non-Christian interpreters treated the documents as attempts to convey history. To make judgments about genre with such a disregard for how the documents were received by such a wide diversity of early sources is irresponsible.

Christians often point out that the Jesus of the gospels doesn’t address some of the issues we’d expect Him to address if later sources were fabricating accounts of Jesus to serve

their own purposes. Price attempts to refute the argument, but ends up strengthening it in the process. In an attempt to find alleged references to issues like Gentile circumcision and speaking in tongues in the gospels, Price has to cite a passage in Mark on one issue, then appeal to the Gospel Of Thomas on another point, then go to Luke's gospel, etc. But appealing to the Gospel Of Thomas doesn't explain what Luke wrote, and a passage in Luke wouldn't prove that Mark covered the issue Luke addresses. Luke 10:7 is cited as a reference to "missionaries eating Gentile food" (288), because the missionaries in that passage would *later* go out to the Gentiles. But they weren't going to Gentiles in that context. Since eating meat offered to idols isn't addressed in the gospels, Price tells us that "Someone must have realized that Jesus could not plausibly be pictured addressing this in Jewish Palestine, so they left this one in the form of a post-Easter prophecy (Revelation 2:20), a concern for verisimilitude not often observed." (288) Why are we supposed to prefer that explanation over the traditional Christian explanation? He takes Luke 10:38-42 as addressing the issue of the role of women in the church. Why? Because the passage is referring to "women serving the Eucharist" or "women embracing the stipended, celibate life as 'widows' and 'virgins'" (288). If Price has to engage in that level of eisegesis to find the gospels addressing these issues of concern to the later church, then the Christian argument he's trying to refute is vindicated. Price has to resort to such eisegesis in an attempt to avoid the argument's implications. He concludes his bad argument by appealing to Matthew 6:7 and the inauthentic Mark 16:17 as evidence that the gospels address the issue of speaking in tongues. The Mark 16 passage is a later addition and thus irrelevant, and Price's reading of Matthew 6 is just more unconvincing eisegesis. Jesus is addressing what pagans say in their prayers, not speaking in tongues. We could assume that He's referring to speaking in tongues during prayer, but nothing in the passage suggests that interpretation. Why should we think it's correct, then?

Price has little to say about the patristic evidence relevant to early Christianity. But he does provide us with a facile dismissal of Papias (288-289). He doesn't interact with anything like Richard Bauckham's defense of Papias' credibility.⁹⁸ Rather, he dismisses Papias on the basis of the dubious nature of some of the extra-Biblical traditions he reports. But Josephus has similar material in his writings. (See the examples cited in my response to chapter 6.) Yet, skeptics, including other contributors to *The Christian Delusion*, trust Josephus on other issues. What Papias says about gospel authorship doesn't have the internal problems that we find in the other passages Price cites, and the external sources corroborate what Papias says about gospel authorship rather than contradicting it, unlike his Judas account. Information on gospel authorship probably would have been widely available, given how prominent the gospels were in early Christianity and the reading of the gospels in church services, for example. We have no reason to think the extra-Biblical traditions Price cites would have been as important to the early Christians or as widely examined and discussed. To the contrary, the interest that later sources show in the traditions of Papias that Price cites is much less than the interest they show in gospel authorship. What Price is saying is that since what Papias reports on one subject isn't reliable, we shouldn't trust what he reports on a significantly different subject that he was in a better position to judge. That doesn't make sense, which explains why even Price's fellow

⁹⁸ Jesus And The Eyewitnesses (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 12-38, 202-239, 412-437

contributors to The Christian Delusion reject his reasoning when it's applied to a source like Josephus.

A Review of Chapter Eleven

Steve Hays

XI. Why Carrier Has a Credibility Problem

In chap 11, Richard Carrier tries to show why the Resurrection is “incredible.” A fundamental problem is his methodology:

1. Carrier says, “If I tell you I own a car, I usually won’t have to present very much evidence to prove it because you’ve already observed mountains of evidence that people like me own cars. But if I say I own a nuclear missile, you have just as much evidence that ‘people like him own nuclear missiles’ is not true. So I would need much more evidence to prove I owned one, to make up for all the evidence I don’t have from any supporting generalization. Just think to yourself what it would take for me to convince you I owned a nuclear missile, and you’ll see what I mean” (298).

i) I find this illustration odd, since, on the face of it, the only evidence I need to prove I own a nuclear missile is a nuclear missile!

ii) So perhaps the unstated assumption in Carrier’s illustration is that if I don’t have direct evidence of such ownership, then I’d need extraordinary indirect evidence of such ownership.

But even that is far from clear. Suppose I could produce ID to show that I’m a nuclear scientist working at Los Alamos. Would that be ordinary evidence or extraordinary evidence?

Or suppose I’m the head of state of a state sponsor of terrorism. Is it still an extraordinary claim that I own a nuclear missile?

And what evidence would I need? Extraordinary evidence? What about the evidence that I’m the head of state of a state sponsor of terrorism?

Carrier says, “In contrast, the odds of winning a lottery are very low, so you might think it would be an extraordinary claim for me to assert ‘I won a lottery.’ But lotteries are routinely won. We’ve observed countless lotteries being won and have tons of evidence that people win lotteries. Therefore, the general claim ‘people like him win lotteries’ is already confirmed, and so I wouldn’t need very much evidence to convince you that I won. So ‘I won a lottery’ is not an extraordinary claim. But ‘I own a nuclear missile’ clearly is.”

“Now suppose I told you ‘I own an interstellar spacecraft.’ That would be an even more extraordinary claim—because there is no generalization supporting it at all. Not only do you have tons of very good evidence that ‘people like him own interstellar spacecraft’ is not true, you also have no evidence this has ever been true for anyone...Therefore, the

burden of evidence I would have to bear here is truly enormous. Just think of what it would take for you to believe I really did have an interstellar spacecraft, and again you'll see what I mean" (298).

i) But I don't see what he means. Why would I need a 'generalization' to support a specific claim as long as I had specific evidence? On the face of it, I could discharge my burden of proof by showing you the spacecraft.

Of course, you might insist on having it properly inspected (to eliminate a hoax). But would the inspection process be extraordinary evidence, or ordinary evidence?

ii) Take a rare coin. It's extraordinary that I own a very rare coin. Maybe the only one of its kind still in existence.

So what evidence would I need to prove that I own this unique coin? Would I need extraordinary evidence?

Ideally, the only evidence I'd need to prove that I own this unique coin is the coin itself. My ability to produce the coin upon request.

Maybe you'd demand that the coin be authenticated. Fine. Would the authentication process be ordinary or extraordinary?

iii) Another problem I have is that what's "extraordinary" is a comparative concept. "Extraordinary" in relation to what?

A resurrection would be extraordinary if metaphysical naturalism is true. Is it extraordinary if Christian theism is true?

And what if Jesus predicted his resurrection (to take one example)? Does that affect the probability calculus?

iv) Likewise, doesn't the evidence for or against the resurrection also turn on the anterior evidence for or against metaphysical naturalism? You could say a resurrection is improbable if Christian theism is improbable, but by the same token, the resurrection is only as improbable as metaphysical naturalism is probable. And how do we gauge the probability of that?

v) If we say that believability is indexed to probability, and probability is indexed to frequency, then probability is cumulative. The more instances, the more believable the next reported instance.

But if that's the criterion, then the first reported instance would be unbelievable, since, by definition, the first reported instance would be in the highest degree improbable. Yet unless one can establish the first instance, one can't establish a series—in which case probability ceases to be cumulative.

If an unprecedented event is incredible, then how can we ever establish ordinary events—which are just a series of similar events that have to begin at some point?

vi) Even if, for the sake of argument, we accept his condition of repeatability, he assumes, without benefit of argument, that extraordinary claims are a thing of the past, not the present.

Seems to me that Carrier is concealing the nested complexities of his own burden of proof, which ramify in many different directions.

2. Commenting on some stories in Herodotus, Carrier says, “Do you believe these things happened? Well, why not? Herodotus was an educated man, a critical historian, and he consulted eyewitnesses, and he clearly saw nothing to doubt these events” (292).

i) This is disingenuous from his standpoint. He doesn’t accept eyewitness attributions where Scripture is concerned. So it’s not as if this is a choice between accepting or rejecting testimonial evidence. Rather, he reserves the right, where Scripture is concerned, to automatically reject the claim that some event was actually based on eyewitness testimony—the statement of the Biblical writer or speaker notwithstanding.

ii) Carrier doesn’t think an ancient education is comparable to a modern education.

iii) Biblical miracles aren’t equivalent to weird events. Biblical miracles are purposeful events.

iv) There’s a rudimentary difference between believing that a particular event occurred, and believing that this kind of event occurs. We often believe that certain types of events take place without believing that a particular event of that general type occurred.

v) Carrier also sets up a false dichotomy. Belief and disbelief are not the only alternatives. I can believe something happened, believe it didn’t happen, or suspend belief.

I may believe that a reported event is possibly true, but have no firm opinion on its actual occurrence or nonoccurrence. So I reserve judgment.

3. Carrier says, “I bet you’d come up with several good rules of thumb about what kinds of stories to believe or doubt. You’ll say, for example, that these sorts of things don’t really happen because nothing like them happens today” (292).

i) That begs the question of whether miracles occur in modern times. There’s lots of testimonial evidence to the contrary.

ii) Moreover, if miracles continue to occur in modern times, that doesn’t mean they’d be public, spectacular miracles. Rather, from a Christian perspective, we’d expect most miracles today to be fairly private, small-scale miracles. Answers to prayer. Providential

timing. Domesticated miracles, suited to our little, individual needs. To expect a repeat performance of the ten plagues of Egypt is looking for a miracle in the wrong place.

iii) Even if they don't occur at present, that's not a reason to automatically doubt their occurrence in the past. For that also depends on the purpose of a miracle. I wouldn't expect the Resurrection to be repeated throughout church history, for that goes against the purpose of the Resurrection.

4. Carrier says, "But you also know people lie, even if for what they think is a good reason. They also exaggerate, tell tall tales, craft edifying myths and legends, and err in many ways" (292).

Yes, some people do that, including unbelievers. Take David Eller, who contributed the chapter on secular ethics. He denies moral realism. So, by definition, an unbeliever like Eller is untrustworthy. Would you trust a man who doesn't even believe in right and wrong?

5. Carrier says, "So what is more likely? That miracles like these really happen, while you and everyone else you trust, including every scientist and investigator for the last few centuries, just happens to have missed them all? Or that these are just tall tales" (292).

i) Of course, that's a very prejudicial way of framing the question. The way he put the question takes his own position for granted. That's what they call a loaded question.

ii) Paranormal researchers like Stephen Braude and Rupert Sheldrake would be surprised to find out that they missed them all.

iii) Everyone I trust doesn't have the type of experience which Carrier imputes to trustworthy people. For example, I have a friend with a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Oxford who has shared firsthand reports of paranormal activity. He strikes me as being a very credible witness.

iv) As a matter of fact, Carrier has given me a reason to be suspicious of people like Carrier. I distrust people with that dogmatic commitment to metaphysical naturalism. They are not reliable eyewitnesses. For they will reinterpret every experience naturalistically—despite any and all evidence to the contrary. Moreover, many of them reject moral absolutes. So they have no commitment to basic standards of honesty or decency.

v) Carrier is also assuming that readers like me have no personal experience of the supernatural or paranormal. That's a very presumptuous position for him to assume on my behalf. And it's also mistaken.

vi) Notice, too, that Carrier is schizophrenic about the value of testimonial evidence. Testimonial evidence for naturalism is reliable, but testimonial evidence for supernaturalism is unreliable. So he constantly oscillates between crediting testimonial evidence whenever it suits his agenda, but discrediting testimonial evidence whenever it conflicts with his

agenda.

6. Carrier says, “But that’s just one rule of thumb we all live by. Your doubts become stronger when you can’t question the witnesses...” (292).

i) That’s disingenuous. Carrier’s dogmatic commitment to metaphysical naturalism trumps testimonial evidence. For him, a paranormal claim automatically discredits the witness. Questioning the witness is irrelevant. He’d refuse to believe what the witness said, no matter how well the witness answered his questions.

ii) I don’t doubt a report just because I can’t question the witness. Neither does Carrier. After all, in this same paragraph, he just appealed to “every scientist and investigator for the last few centuries.” He told us that he trusted them.

Well, gee, how many scientists and investigators for the last few centuries has he questioned? What percentage of living scientists and investigators has he had occasion to investigate?

As for all the dead scientists and investigators, has he tried to question them? How would he do that, exactly? Conduct a séance? But the testimony of scientific ghosts to the unreality of the paranormal would be a bit self-defeating—or so it seems to me.

7. Continuing: “...when you don’t even know who they are...” (292).

He’s assuming that Biblical testimony is anonymous.

8. Continuing: “...when you don’t have the story from them but from someone else entirely...”

But we all rely on secondhand information—every day. The question is whether the secondary source is trustworthy, and whether the secondary source is in a position to vouch for the primary source.

For example, *The Christian Delusion* has a couple of pages listing the contributors. But for the reader, that’s secondhand information. And even if the reader were to double-check the sources, his fact-checking would ordinarily involve him in checking one secondary source against another secondary source.

9. Continuing: “...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 over-zealous” (292).

i) You mean, like the contributors to *The Christian Delusion*? Or what about all those deconversion testimonies? Carrier has one. So does Loftus.

Yet their deconversion testimonies were penned by men with an agenda. They are trying

to persuade the reader to share their irreligious outlook. They come across as disturbingly overzealous, dontcha think?

If there's something inherently suspect about having an agenda, about trying to persuade somebody, then we can safely discount The Christian Delusion.

10. Carrier says, "I see no relevant difference between the marvels in Herodotus and the many and varied tales of the resurrection of Jesus" (293).

That's true, if you compare Herodotus to apocryphal gospels. Which is irrelevant to the canonical gospels.

11. Carrier says, "When the Gospel of Peter (yes, Peter) says a Roman centurion, a squad of his soldiers, and a gathering of Jewish elders all saw a gigantic cross hopping along behind Jesus as he exited the tomb, and then saw Jesus grow thousands of feet tall before their very eyes, there isn't a Christian alive who believes this...So why don't Christians believe Peter's Gospel anymore?" (293).

i) "Anymore"? I never did believe it.

ii) One good reason to disbelieve it is because it's a 2C forgery. It was written too late to be written by Peter.

iii) Furthermore, that's hardly comparable to the theological purpose of the Resurrection.

12. Carrier says [quoting Mt 27:51-54], "Somehow all the educated men, all the scholars and rabbis of Jerusalem, failed to notice any rock-splitting earthquakes or any hoard of walking dead wandering the city, or any of the numerous tombs left behind...No Jew ever seems to have noticed this, apparently not even the priests whose only job was to attend to that very curtain...There also had to have been thousands of witnesses to so devastating an earthquake, and hundreds of witnesses to the hoard of resurrected dead" (293-94).

i) Ironically, Carrier is the one who is guilty of legendary embellishment, as he exaggerates the canonical record of the event. Was it a "devastating" earthquake? Can he infer that from the actual account? No. The Bible uses stock imagery to depict earthquakes.

I have lived through some earthquakes myself. People take notice. The TV station cuts away to live, local coverage. It's reported in the newspaper the next day.

And that's about it. After that, folks go back to business as usual. And, of course, they didn't have newspapers or TV news in the 1C.

ii) Suppose, for the sake of argument, we did have physical evidence of an earthquake around that time and place. How would Carrier respond? He'd downplay that event as a natural event, not a supernatural event. He'd accuse Matthew of taking a natural event,

and exploiting that event to score theological points. He'd say this demonstrates how superstitious people were back then, when they attributed naturally occurring events like earthquakes to the hidden hand of God.

iii) Given the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans, would we really expect to have records of the torn curtain? Moreover, that's the sort of rumor which the religious authorities would try to squelch.

iv) The resurrected OT saints weren't lumbering, moldering flesh-eating zombies. They could pass for normal men and women.

Depending on how long ago they died, no one would recognize who they were. They'd be strangers in the big city. Blend into the surroundings.

If a few of them still had living relatives, we'd expect them to visit their relatives. That would be a private affair. A subject of family lore.

But remember, once more, the dislocation caused by the sack of Jerusalem. How many records were lost?

What about "tombs left behind"? Unless it happens to be a tomb which relatives visit, who would notice?

Moreover, Carrier makes a big deal about tomb-robbers. But if tomb desecration was as common as he'd lead us to believe, then why would the sight of empty tombs be out of the ordinary? So he's contradicting himself.

13. Carrier accuses Matthew of embellishing the Easter account by turning Mark's "young man" into an angel (294-95).

But this assumes that Mark's "young man" was a human being rather than an angel. Yet, to take one example, Craig Evans interprets the Markan figure as an angel. And he cites Jewish literary parallels to justify his identification.⁹⁹ And this is despite the fact that Evans rejects the inerrancy of Scripture, so he has no prior commitment to harmonize the two accounts.

And it's symptomatic of Carrier's deficient scholarship that he doesn't bother to engage opposing arguments—even from a scholar of Evans' distinction.

14. Carrier then concocts an intentionally ludicrous story, then says, "Now be honest. Would you ever believe the second witness? I doubt you'd have much confidence even in the first one's already very odd story..." (295).

Here he tips his hand. He judges the witness by the story, and not the story by the witness. So all the business about knowing who the witness is, being able to interview the

⁹⁹ C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Nelson 2001), 365-66.

witness, &c., is just a decoy.

15. Carrier says, “There is no good reason to treat these stories any differently than those we find in Herodotus, certainly not as if these claims are to pass the OTF” (296).

i) Since I reject the OTF, I see no need to pass that test.

ii) However, Carrier is flunking his own test. Clearly he’s not judging Herodotus from the viewpoint of Herodotus. So this is a wholly one-sided application of the Outsider Test.

Carrier judges reported miracles by his own standards, and not by the standards of the reporter.

16. Carrier says, “If this were any other religion, say, the Heaven’s Gate cult...then that would be the end of it” (296).

i) Was the Heaven’s Gate cult a religious cult? I thought it was a secular cult.

ii) If Christianity were like “any other religion,” then that might well be the end of it. But Carrier’s invidious comparison begs the question.

17. Carrier says, “I’ll be honest with you: people who believe things like that scare me” (296).

I’m gratified to learn that we have such power over Richard Carrier. We’ve got him running scared.

18. Carrier goes on to say, “I’ve given them far more than they’re due...learning ancient languages, studying the relevant histories and cultures and documents...Now, with all that, and a PhD in ancient history to boot, they can’t say I don’t know what I’m talking about” (296).

i) Carrier is not the only one who’s studied ancient languages. Many moderate to conservative Bible scholars have studied far more ancient languages than he. For example, the only ancient languages he cites on his CV are Greek and Latin. That doesn’t make him an expert on the OT.

ii) Another problem with bragging about his education is that some of his co-contributors conspicuously lack his credentials. So if it’s important to have these credentials to evaluate the evidence, then he ipso facto disqualifies most of the contributors to The Christian Delusion. Robert Price and Hector Avalos are the only other two with comparable credentials. So does this mean we can say the rest of them don’t know what they’re talking about?

19. Carrier says, “Apart from just ‘feeling’ that it’s true, or being told so in a dream, or seeing ghosts or hearing voices, or other equally dubious grounds for belief (you

wouldn't believe such things from any other religion)...” (397).

i) Why are dreams inherently dubious grounds for belief? Ordinary dreams are unreliable, but what about predictive dreams? Suppose I have a detailed dream about a strange room. Then, a day later, I happen to walk into a certain room for the first time, and it's just the way I dreamt.

I'm not saying, for the moment, if that ever happens. But if it were to happen, how would that be “dubious”?

Likewise, in what sense is seeing ghosts a dubious ground for belief? If I see a ghost, why can't that be probative evidence for survival after death?

What if a ghost told me something only the decedent could know? And told me where to find the evidence?

I'm not saying, for the moment, if that ever happens. But if it were to happen, how would that be “dubious”?

What about hearing voices? What if the voice told me something that turned out to be true, something that couldn't be known by ordinary means? Would that still be dubious?

Carrier is tacitly assuming that there's nothing real behind these ostensible experiences, which is why they are dubious. But that begs the question.

20. Carrier says, “...any more than we should believe the angel Moroni gave Joseph Smith some magical gold tablets...” (297).

i) To begin with, Carrier mentions this as if Mormonism were a dead religion. But, of course, Mormons think we should believe that very thing. So how does that suffice to prove his point?

Carrier keeps using these circular arguments. He assumes that just becomes something is absurd to him, that it must be (or ought to be) absurd to the reader. He can't take the Christian faith seriously even for the sake of argument. Therefore, he chronically fails to engage the argument. His chapter is a running assertion.

ii) Since Joseph Smith already had a reputation for being a charlatan, even before he claimed to be a seer, that, of itself, is one reason to disbelieve his claims.

iii) In addition, there's his demonstrably bogus translation of an Egyptian text. And we could cite other evidence to undermine his claims.

iv) But having said all that, I have no antecedent objection to the possibility that Smith really did encounter an angel or numinous being. In Christian theism, preternatural agents aren't limited to God or the heavenly host. There are evil spirits as well as blessed spirits.

21. Carrier says, “Curiously absent from the record are any actual eyewitness accounts of what Jesus said or did...” (297).

That begs the question.

“...any records of events by historians or authorities or correspondents from the same time and place” (297).

What about Luke? He’s a historian. What about Peter, James, John, and Jude? They are contemporary correspondents.

“...any inscriptions erected or documents composed by the earliest churches” (297).

Of course, we wouldn’t expect public monuments at this time. Christianity wasn’t the state religion in the 1C. But what about the apostolic fathers?

“...any neutral or hostile accounts from outsiders observing the original events of the Christian religion” (297).

Well, that’s silly. If, say, an outsider were to observe the Resurrection, could he remain neutral?

“...any court documents from the many early trials reported in Acts” (297).

And suppose we had that. Would Carrier convert to the faith? No. He’d challenge the dates. And he’d dismiss court documents as hearsay evidence. And he’d also say the evidence for naturalism invariably outweighs the evidence for supernaturalism. In practice, his own position is unfalsifiable.

“...or anything written by Jesus” (297).

And suppose we had that. Would Carrier become a Christian? No. He’d challenge the authorship. And even if the documents were authenticated to his satisfaction, he’d simply dismiss the claims that Jesus made about himself, in his own words. You think he’d accept something Jesus says just because Jesus says it? No. So this is just another decoy that Carrier tosses over the back of the sled to keep us at bay.

“...or in fact anything of his disciples, since hardly any scholar today believes Peter’s Epistles are authentic...and no other document in the NT claims its author was a disciple—not even the Gospels, contrary to popular assumption” (297).

i) This disregards the stated or implicit authorship of many NT documents without benefit of argument.

ii) Moreover, it’s just another diversionary tactic. Even if we had documentation which,

to his satisfaction, came from the hands and lips of Jesus' disciples, that wouldn't change his mind. He'd say they were liars. Prone to exaggeration. Fond of tall tales.

Indeed, he says in the very next paragraph, "we have no reason to believe the authors of the NT documents were any more honest or critical or infallible than any other men of their time, and there's plenty of evidence to suspect they were less so" (297-98). And if he says that about the NT writers, he'd say the same thing about Jesus' disciples.

So his entire essay is padded with this diversionary filler. He raises objections, to the point of tedious redundancy, which he himself doesn't take seriously. So why should we?

If he is this disingenuous about his own objections, then why should we take his objections any more seriously than he does—which is to say, not at all?

Same thing with this statement that Paul "never mentions anyone finding an empty tomb, for example, or the testimony of Doubting Thomas" (301).

But Carrier doesn't believe the testimony of Doubting Thomas. So what difference would it make if Paul mentioned it?

Likewise, Carrier doesn't believe the gospel accounts of the empty tomb. So he wouldn't believe it if Paul mentioned someone finding the empty tomb. He'd dismiss that as hearsay. Or he'd attribute the empty tomb to grave robbers. Or the wrong tomb. Or whatever.

Carrier stuffs his essay with these repetitious, disingenuous objections.

22. Carrier says, "Paul reveals the earliest Christians were hallucinating on a regular basis, entering ecstatic trances, prophesying, relaying the communications of spirits, and speaking in tongues... The whole book of Revelation, for example, is a veritable acid trip... That's how respectable even the craziest of hallucinations were... Not only were they constantly channeling spirits and speaking in tongues and having visions of angels and strange objects in the sky, they were also putting on faith-healing acts and exorcising demons by laying on hands and shouting words of power. In other words, the first Christians behaved a lot more like crazy cultists than you'd ever be comfortable with" (300).

i) As far as the reader's comfort level is concerned, there are well-educated, level-headed Pentecostal scholars like Wayne Grudem, Craig Keener, Gordon Fee, and Graham Twelftree (to name a few) who'd be right at home with that. Likewise, exorcists like Kurt Koch and Gabriel Amorth wouldn't have to move outside their comfort zone in reading these accounts.

My point, at the moment, is not to take a position on the charismatic movement or the claims of exorcists. My point, rather, is to ask, who does Carrier think he's writing for? Who's the intended audience?

Apparently, Carrier is only writing with his fellow infidels in mind. So, once again, he

flunks the Outsider Test. He makes no attempt to consider how this same material would come across to Christian readers who don't share his outlook or experience.

Carrier is simply a demagogue who plays to the galleries. He figures that he's got a sympathetic ear, since the natural audience for *The Christian Delusion* is like-minded unbelievers. So he doesn't even go through the motions of making a case for his key assumptions. Instead, he just panders to readers who already agree with him. An exercise in mutual flattery.

But in that case his essay is a failure. It has no apologetic force. No argumentative value. It's just a longwinded pep talk to make other atheists feel good about themselves. A pat on the head. Avuncular assurance from Yoda.

ii) To say early Christians were "hallucinating" is prejudicial. He hasn't begun to show that. That is something he actually needs to demonstrate, not merely assert. The level of Carrier's intellectual conceit is disproportionate to the level of Carrier's intellectual performance. To be smug and sneering is not an argument.

iii) Is Revelation a "veritable acid trip"? How would he know? Is he speaking from personal experience?

Even liberal scholars like David Aune don't think Revelation is a "veritable acid trip." Has Carrier actually delved into the standard exegetical literature on Revelation? Does he have any inkling of what the book means?

A "veritable acid trip" is just a catchy one-liner to use in the talks he gives to fellow unbelievers. That's fine if his ambition in life is to be a stand-up comedian who books appearances at fan conventions for the faithless. Does he also do birthday parties, making animal balloons for junior infidels?

iv) He also makes it sound as if this was a regular happening in the early church. But he gives no evidence for that portrayal.

23. Carrier says, "We can't even establish that the four Gospels are independent, since Luke and Matthew clearly copied extensively from Mark (often verbatim)..." (301).

The fact that they copied Mark verbatim shows how faithful they are to their sources.

24. Carrier says, "They have Jesus saying these things in completely different times and places, as if their sources really didn't know when or where Jesus said them" (302).

Aside from the fact that Jesus probably repeated himself, it's also evident that Matthew and John arrange their material topically.

25. Carrier says, "What we do know is that the Gospels were written with an agenda, a deliberate aim to persuade, to turn people toward belief in Christ and the embrace of

Christian morals” (302).

We also know that The Christian Delusion was written with an agenda, a deliberate aim to persuade, to turn people away from Christian belief and make them embrace secular mores.

26. Carrier says, “And we know that they [the Gospels] were written long after Paul’s Epistles...” (302).

How do we know that?

“...by members of a fanatical cult who believed their dreams were communications from God” (302).

How does that make them a fanatical cult? Where’s the argument? As usual, Carrier flunks the Outsider Test.

“...and that they could find information about Jesus secretly hidden in the Bible” (302).

What does that even mean? In their public preaching, they appeal to Messianic prophecy. Nothing “secretly hidden” in the Bible.

“...John’s Gospel appears to have ended originally at 20:30-31. But someone seems to have tacked on a whole extra ending (John 21)” (302).

What if the Apostle John originally wrote 1-20, then after he heard about Peter’s demise, added that postscript? It fits the setting. What’s wrong with that?

“...We know that many of the canonical Epistles were outright forged” (303).

Which conveniently disregards all the arguments to the contrary.

“The existence of improbabilities, contradictions, propaganda, evident fictions, forgeries and interpolations, and legendary embellishments in them has been exhaustively discussed in the modern literature...” (303).

This is not an argument. This is a string of question-begging assertions. But a row of pejorative words does not add up to a single cogent argument.

“[Mark] was not even written as history, but as a deliberate myth” (303).

Among other issues, that attributes a high degree of sophistication to the Gospel of Mark.

Carrier then contends that the story of Barabbas is an “obvious imitation of the Yom Kippur ceremony of Leviticus 16” (303).

But treating Barabbas as a scapegoat makes no sense, for the release of Barabbas has no expiatory value. He doesn't bear away the sins of Israel.

"Acts is similarly untrustworthy, proven by the fact that it gets completely wrong fundamental events in the church, as we know from the letters of Paul..." (304).

Well, commentators like Darrell Block, F. F. Bruce, and David Peterson disagree. Where is Carrier's counterargument? What we get, instead, is his drive-by shooting.

27. Carrier says, "the Heaven's Gate cult dismissed all evidence against their claim that an alien spaceship was photographed behind comet Hale-Bopp" (305).

Since the Heaven's Gate cult was a secular suicide cult, why is that a problem for believers rather than unbelievers?

And that's not an isolated incident. Consider Climategate. Or the way in which Darwinians run to the courts to stifle dissent.

28. Carrier says, "When other bodies go missing we never assume they rose from the dead—because we know it's far more likely they were misplaced or stolen" (305).

NT Christians didn't believe that Jesus rose from the dead because his body went missing. They believed he rose from the dead because he predicted his resurrection, then showed himself to them, tangibly, after his death.

There is no expectation that others will rise from the dead (before the parousia), since that is not analogous to the case of Jesus. There's a theological rationale for the resurrection of Jesus which is absent for ordinary men and women (prior to the parousia).

It's not as if the resurrection of Jesus is predicated on a naturally occurring phenomenon. As usual, Carrier isn't even trying to engage the argument.

29. Carrier says, "...especially in religious cults populated by regular hallucinators and trancers—as the Christians demonstrably were, prophesying and speaking in tongues en masse (as shown in 2 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14:26-30)" (305-306).

Where does 2 Cor 12 indicate mass glossolalia or mass prophecy? It's all about the exceptional experience of one individual.

Even 1 Cor 12 doesn't describe mass glossolalia or prophecy. Rather, different Christians have different spiritual gifts.

30. Carrier says, "It's also possible that the first Christians claimed to have had these visions even when they didn't... We know this would have been a successful strategy of social mobility" (306).

i) To be a 1C Christian might be a successful strategy of downward social mobility. To be a member of a despised and powerless minority group. But that's a disincentive.

ii) By contrast, a book like *The Christian Delusion* can give a bunch of losers and nobodies their 15 minutes of fame. Look at how Loftus is trying to make a whole career out of his fling with a stripper, and name-association with William Lane Craig.

31. Carrier says, "The fact that his conversion elevated Paul from a relative nobody taking orders from a Jewish elite he had come to despise to a respected and powerful authority taking orders from no one..." (308).

i) There's no evidence that Paul had come to "despise" the Jewish elite before his conversion—or even afterwards.

ii) Carrier has it backwards. Paul had a promising career before he became a Christian. As a Christian, he led a thankless, hand-to-mouth existence, ministering to often ungrateful churches. Constantly on the road.

32. Carrier says, "Christianity originated from natural phenomena, and not from any encounter with a walking corpse—indeed, flying corpse...or a teleporting corpse" (308).

Is this another laugh line he uses at fan conventions? Does he use that before or after his routine with animal balloons?

A glorified body is not a corpse. Once again, Carrier isn't attempting to engage the argument. He just wants to be funny, like a washed-up comedian at a strip club.

33. Carrier says, "If Jesus was god and really wanted to save the world, he would have appeared and delivered his Gospel personally to the whole world" (308).

i) Since I'm a Calvinist, I deny the premise.

ii) And even if Jesus personally appeared to Carrier, he'd write that off as a mere hallucination.

34. Carrier says, "It's perfectly reasonable to conclude that people simply don't rise from the dead because we can plainly see no god is doing anything like that" (310).

Carrier then backs this up by footnoting his *Sense and Goodness without God*. However, that was eviscerated in a book review.¹⁰⁰

35. Carrier says, "If I were God, I would appear to everyone and prevent any meddling with my book..." (309).

Well, if Carrier were God, then that would be a uniquely compelling reason to lose one's

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.answeringinfidels.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=86>

faith in “God.” And any book inspired by Carrier would richly deserve to be meddled with.

Jason Engwer

Richard Carrier opens his chapter on the resurrection with some accounts of apparently supernatural events in Herodotus. Carrier expects his readers to reject those accounts, and he assumes that they'll reject the accounts for the reasons he lays out. Supposedly, we should reject the accounts because such events don't happen today and because we know that people often make unreliable claims about such things, for example (292). He goes on to say that it's unlikely that miracles like those reported by Herodotus occurred, since it's unlikely "that miracles like these really happen, while you and everyone else you trust, including every scientist and investigator for the last few centuries, just happens to have missed them all" (292).

Actually, Christians do accept some modern reports of the miraculous or paranormal, and they sometimes accept such reports in non-Christian sources. See the examples I cited in my response to chapter 4 and Steve Hays' citations of Rupert Sheldrake and Stephen Braude in his reply to chapter 10.

Here are some reasons why readers would tend to not believe what Carrier cites from Herodotus:

- They know that Carrier is trying to set up a parallel to the resurrection accounts, which he rejects. He would be expected to cite something dubious as the parallel.
- The miracles reported by Herodotus aren't part of the readers' current worldview and in many cases would be significantly disruptive of that worldview, so they're inclined to reject what Herodotus reported. The fact that people often have such an inclination doesn't prove that it's correct.
- They don't know much about Herodotus or the miracle accounts Carrier has cited. They'd prefer to know more about the miracle reports before trusting them. Even after learning more, they may not trust the accounts out of a desire for still more evidence. It doesn't necessarily follow that their initial skepticism or their later skepticism is warranted. People can be too quick to trust somebody, but they can also be too slow to trust. Both are faults that we should try to avoid.

Carrier is assuming that a negative reaction to Herodotus is appropriate, but he only takes a few steps toward justifying that conclusion (both unreasonable and reasonable steps). He doesn't actually justify it.

I don't know much about Herodotus. I don't assume that every miracle he reported didn't occur. Maybe one or more of them did happen. But I have some cause to doubt that the miracles Carrier refers to, as Carrier tells us Herodotus reported them, were performed by God. I'm not aware of any reason why God would want to perform acts such as "a mass resurrection of cooked fish" (292) in the context Herodotus is addressing (as Carrier reports it). What does such a miracle accomplish? Why would God take such interest in the context Herodotus is discussing? Maybe demons would have an interest in furthering a

false religious system associated with one or more of those miracles, for example, but I don't see any reason to think that God produced the miracles.

In contrast, Christianity is the largest religious movement in history, and it remains prominent in the world to this day. The resurrection of Jesus doesn't have the insignificant nature of something like a mass resurrection of cooked fish, and God's interest in Christianity makes more sense than His interest in the context addressed by Herodotus.

Since Christianity has better evidence supporting it, how much interest should I have in the miracles associated with Herodotus? If a neighbor tells me that he met somebody whose kitchen table levitated one day fifty years ago, how much interest should I have in investigating the claim? It may be true, but not much is at stake. I already believe in miracles, and my current belief system is better evidenced than the alleged miracles associated with Herodotus, so what is there at stake that's so significant as to warrant further investigation of Herodotus' claims?

The evidence we have for Jesus' resurrection is better than the evidence Carrier cites for Herodotus' miracles: the eyewitness testimony of a former enemy of Christianity who converted upon seeing the risen Christ (Paul), the willingness of resurrection witnesses to suffer and die for a faith that had belief in the resurrection at its core, hostile corroboration of the empty tomb, etc. Other evidence, such as Biblical prophecy, the pre-resurrection miracles of Christ, and the miracles of the apostles, create a context in which the resurrection makes more sense.

Carrier goes on to say that our doubt in a source should increase if we can't question the source, we don't know who he is, etc. (292) That's good advice, but it's mixed with other advice that's bad.

Carrier repeatedly appeals to the popular notion that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Steve Hays has already replied to that argument, and I'll summarize some of my thoughts on the issue:

- The term extraordinary is vague. All of us use vague terminology at times. Still, we should keep in mind that a vague word is being used that the critic can define and redefine on dubious grounds, sometimes without letting others know what he's doing.
- Why are we supposed to think that the evidence for the resurrection isn't extraordinary? Something like the conversion of an enemy of Christianity after seeing the risen Christ (Paul) doesn't seem to be an ordinary thing. Likewise, the miracles that Paul apparently had the power to perform after seeing Christ, as he describes in his letters (including in contexts in which his audience was questioning him) and as Luke describes in Acts, don't seem ordinary.
- If we need extraordinary evidence for extraordinary claims, then do we also need extraordinary evidence for our extraordinary evidence? That seems to create an infinite regress.

- If extraordinary is being defined as supernatural, then is the claim being made that we need supernatural evidence for supernatural claims? If, instead, we define the first term extraordinary differently than the second term within the phrase “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”, then the phrase loses the initial appeal that it has due to the parallel use of the term extraordinary. If the term is being redefined later in the phrase, then the phrase loses the force it initially seemed to have.

- Or is it being said that we need highly unusual evidence for highly unusual claims? But ordinary eyesight is commonly considered sufficient to make a witness to an unusual murder credible in a court of law. If you throw a rock into water, you don’t expect the water to respond with the properties of a rock. “Rocky claims require rocky evidence.” Rather, you expect the water to respond with the properties of water. The water doesn’t take on the rock’s properties. It reacts to the rock in a way similar to how it reacts to something more common in its context, like a fish that’s jumping. If the risen Christ appears to James when James is alone, then we don’t expect His appearance to James to produce ten thousand other witnesses to that appearance. We’d prefer to have more witnesses, but that preference doesn’t prove that a miraculous appearance of a resurrected man should produce ten thousand additional witnesses. The fact that the resurrection appearance is supernatural doesn’t change the fact that the supernatural act is being perceived by natural means. If Jesus appears to one man on a particular occasion, then we’d expect only one witness, a witness who perceives the appearance with ordinary means, like ordinary eyesight, rather than with extraordinary means.

Carrier makes some ridiculous claims about the Gospel Of Peter. He tells us that it was “among the most popular Gospels in the Christian churches of the second century” (293). He cites no supporting evidence. Saying that a document was “popular” doesn’t identify the sense in which it was popular. Science fiction books can be as popular as newspapers, yet the readers aren’t perceiving the two documents in the same manner. And saying that the Gospel Of Peter was “among the most popular” is like saying that some little-known brand of soda that has a small percentage of the sales of Coke and Pepsi is “among the most popular sodas”. If the fifth most popular soda is far behind the ones that are more popular, yet it’s doing better than the sixth and seventh most popular, what does that prove? If Carrier’s assessment of the Gospel Of Peter is relying on the usual distortions of what Serapion wrote concerning a Petrine document in his day, then he needs to justify the conclusion he’s drawing from Serapion’s comments. I’m not aware of any evidence for the Gospel Of Peter that’s anywhere close to what we have for the canonical gospels. Think of the early sources we have that speak highly of one or more of the canonical gospels: Matthew and Luke’s use of Mark, the elder Papias refers to, Papias, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, the earlier Roman source Irenaeus apparently used, Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, early heretics who corroborated what mainstream Christians were saying about the canonical gospels, etc. What does the Gospel Of Peter have in comparison?¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Paul Foster has recently argued that there’s no reason to conclude that Justin Martyr even used the Gospel Of Peter, much less that he viewed it as highly as he viewed the canonical gospels. See Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, edd., *Justin Martyr And His Worlds* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2007), 104-112.

Carrier goes on to try to cast doubt on the gospels by citing the lack of corroboration for the resurrection of the saints and other events in Matthew 27:51-54 (293-294). I've addressed the resurrection of the saints in that passage elsewhere.¹⁰² As I said earlier in this review, we can trust a source on one issue while distrusting it on another, as the authors of *The Christian Delusion* sometimes do with Josephus, for example. Even if we reject the passage Carrier is citing in Matthew's gospel, that does little to diminish the overall case for Jesus' resurrection.

Then we have Carrier's claim that the gospel authors are "complete unknowns" (294). Acts seems to have the same author as Luke's gospel, and the author of Acts refers to himself as traveling with Paul (Acts 16:10). Yet, we're supposed to believe that the author is a "complete unknown"? John 21:24 most naturally suggests that the author of the gospel is the beloved disciple, who's described as being with Jesus and His other disciples on various occasions earlier in the gospel. That tells us he was an eyewitness of some significant events and a companion of other relevant witnesses. The fourth gospel also tells us that the beloved disciple had a particularly close relationship with Jesus, is often associated with Peter, and was involved in fishing, characteristics the other three gospels, Acts, and Galatians associate with John, the son of Zebedee. Does Carrier want us to believe that the early Christians thought there was some *other* close disciple of Jesus who was also close to Peter and involved in fishing? The similarities with John, the son of Zebedee, don't help us identify the beloved disciple? Carrier mentions that the gospels don't name their authors within the main body of their text, but he doesn't interact with the arguments Martin Hengel and other scholars have made concerning the early and widespread use of titles, tags, and other means of identifying a document's author.¹⁰³ And it's not as though Carrier's unreasonable rejection of the widespread external authorship attestation for these documents (from both Christian and non-Christian sources) makes that external evidence irrelevant. The early Christians often questioned the authorship of books, including some that are canonical (2 Peter, Revelation, etc.). Why were the authorship attributions of the gospels more widely accepted? It doesn't seem that the early Christians were just fabricating or accepting authorship attributions uncritically if they liked the content of a document. And what about the heretical and non-Christian corroboration of those authorship attributions?¹⁰⁴ Carrier should say something like, "If you adopt a less natural interpretation of the internal evidence, and you reject the external evidence, the gospel authors are complete unknowns." So what?

Carrier says that the gospel authors are using "unidentified sources", but a disciple of Peter (Mark), a companion of Paul (Luke) who had met James (Acts 21:18), and two disciples of Jesus (Matthew and John) would have been in a good position to attain a lot of reliable information. The idea that people would have needed an explanation of where a

And see Craig Evans' comments about the Gospel Of Peter in Craig Evans and Emanuel Tov, ed., *Exploring The Origins Of The Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 158-163.

¹⁰² <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/01/bad-argument-against-resurrection-thats.html>

¹⁰³ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels And The One Gospel Of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000)

¹⁰⁴ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/06/hostile-corroboration-of-new-testament.html>

disciple of Peter or a disciple of Jesus Himself, like John, got his information is ridiculous. Even when a gospel author relied on other sources that people wouldn't tend to associate with that author, the author's general credibility would have rendered him trustworthy to an early audience. It's not as though somebody like Luke or John would need to cite other sources in order to have any credibility. Carrier doesn't interact with the arguments for the traditional authorship attributions. He also doesn't interact with less explicit means of identifying sources, such as what Richard Bauckham and other scholars have cited regarding traces of Petrine influence in Mark's gospel.¹⁰⁵ It was common in antiquity for authors to say little about their sources.¹⁰⁶

And it's not as though authorship and sources are all we have to go by. We know little about most ancient authors¹⁰⁷, yet historians reach many probable conclusions on the basis of the writings of such sources. Even without knowing much about the authors, the earliness of the gospels adds to their credibility (that general principle can't be overturned by citing exceptions). And the reaction to those documents by early Christian and non-Christian sources tells us how the documents were perceived. Later in the chapter, Carrier will argue that Mark's gospel was written in a non-historical genre (303), but he doesn't address the genre implications of how that gospel was used by Matthew and Luke or how other early Christian and non-Christian sources interpreted Mark. The idea that Mark was written in a non-historical genre, but was then misunderstood so early and so widely is far from the most natural interpretation of the evidence.

Step back and think of the absurdity of Carrier's position. All of the external sources are wrong about the authorship of all four gospels? The early Christians and their opponents were mistaken about the genre of Mark? Carrier has even argued for the non-existence of Jesus. The early Christians and their opponents were collectively wrong about that as well?

Carrier criticizes the gospel authors for having an "agenda" (296). That can be bad. It can also be good. Sometimes an agenda involves a concern for truth and making people aware of the truth.

Though people could suffer and die for an error, the general tendency is for the suffering of the early Christians to suggest their sincerity and interest in accuracy at least on the most foundational elements of their faith. If Jesus didn't even exist, or if He existed and

¹⁰⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus And The Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 155-182

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill refers to ancient historians as "habitually shoddy" at citing sources (Suetonius [London, England: Bristol Classical Press, 2004], 64). As he goes on to say later on the same page, "Silence is no argument for ignorance." An absence of citation doesn't prove a lack of sources, and an absence of detail doesn't prove ignorance of detail. See, also, pages 21 and 176 in the same book and Ronald Melior, Tacitus (New York, New York: Routledge, 2009), 33-34, 116; Steve Mason, *Josephus And The New Testament* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 95; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus And The Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), n. 35 on 304.

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill comments that "There are few ancient authors of whom it is possible to construct more than the sketchiest of biographies." (Suetonius [London, England: Bristol Classical Press, 2004], 2). Steve Mason comments that the "good deal" of information Josephus gives us about himself is more than the information we have for "the vast majority of ancient authors whose works have survived" (*Josephus And The New Testament* [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005], 35).

was radically different than the gospels and Paul and other early sources suggest, then the activities of the early Christians, including their willingness to suffer and die, make less sense. The sort of radical inaccuracy that Carrier thinks we see in the gospels and other early Christian sources is possible, but the issue here is probability. The suffering of the early Christians doesn't have to make the correctness of their beliefs certain in order to make it more likely.

Carrier says that he'd like to have some early non-Christian sources who comment on Christianity (297). But even if the non-Christian sources we have (whether we have them independently of Christian sources or as recorded within Christian sources) are later than what Carrier would prefer, they still have *some* significance. The evidence suggests that the early opponents of Christianity corroborated Christian claims on issues where Carrier questions the Christian view, like Jesus' existence and the empty tomb. Does Carrier think that the earliest opponents of Christianity were ignorant on such matters or opposed the Christian perspective, but then later opponents of the religion began corroborating it? If so, where's his argument for that conclusion? That's not the sort of thing we'd expect to happen. Just as Christians would tend to pass down arguments from generation to generation, so would non-Christians. It's not as though the enemies of Christianity would have waited until some time in the late first or early second century to start coming up with arguments to use against the religion. If Jewish opponents of Christianity in Matthew's day and in Justin Martyr's day acknowledge that Jesus' tomb was found empty, that's most likely because earlier Jews believed the same, which is what Matthew tells us (Matthew 28:15). There could be some discontinuity from generation to generation, especially on lesser matters, but how many times does Carrier have to assume some sort of radical discontinuity in order to maintain his theory?

Carrier's assessment of the canonization process of the New Testament (299-300) is ridiculous. I addressed many of the issues surrounding the canon in a series of articles last year.¹⁰⁸

Carrier's dismissal of Paul ignores much of the relevant evidence.¹⁰⁹ For example, he says nothing of the corroboration Paul received from one of Jesus' brothers and some of Jesus' disciples and his apparent good standing with at least one other brother of Jesus (1 Corinthians 9:5, 15:11, Galatians 2:7-9). And if Carrier is right in distancing Paul's view of the resurrection from the sort of view we find in the gospels, then why were the gospels and gospel-like traditions so popular among the early Pauline churches? There are many traces of the gospels or gospel-like material on the resurrection in Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, and other early sources writing from or to Pauline churches. Did all of those individuals and churches quickly abandon Paul's view and adopt the view of the gospels in its place? Again, the fact that Carrier's theory keeps suggesting such radical discontinuity doesn't reflect well on the likelihood of the theory.

His comments on the textual record are highly misleading. His comment that "we have no way of knowing what got added" (302) would be true if he defined "knowing" in the

¹⁰⁸ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/06/new-testament-canon.html>

¹⁰⁹ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/07/pauls-conversion.html>

sense of certainty. But probability is good enough. Carrier cites Bart Ehrman's material to support his comments on the textual record (n. 13 on 312), but Ehrman's textual conclusions are highly similar to those of a conservative Evangelical. He tells his readers to consult Ehrman regarding "how rampant Christian forging and meddling with documents was" (n. 13 on 312), but Ehrman states, in the first book cited by Carrier, that most ancient Christian scribes were honest.¹¹⁰

Carrier suggests that we can't trust the canonical gospels any more than other gospels (302-303). When he won't even acknowledge that something like the gospel of Mark is at least more credible than something like the Gospel Of Peter or the Gospel Of Judas, he's damaging his own credibility more than he's damaging the credibility of the canonical gospels.

Carrier claims that nobody says the grave of Jesus was empty in Acts (305). As if referring to a resurrection in an ancient Jewish context doesn't most naturally imply an empty tomb. The contrast between Jesus and David referred to in Acts 2:29 also implies an empty tomb. Acts is a sequel to Luke, and Luke explicitly refers to the empty tomb, so at a minimum Luke's readers would know of it. Is Carrier suggesting that the speeches in Acts that don't mention the empty tomb are historically reliable speeches or at least speeches derived from or based on a time when there wasn't a belief in an empty tomb? But that would go a long way in furthering the historical credibility of Acts, which Carrier has argued against (304).

Carrier has a hard time dismissing the testimony of Paul, who had been an enemy of Christianity before seeing the risen Christ. So, he doesn't want to add to his burden by having to try to dismiss the testimony of other critics of Christianity who saw the risen Christ. Thus, he tries to cast doubt on the common perception that James was a skeptic prior to Jesus' resurrection appearance to him (307). He remarks, "only the Gospels suggest James had ever doubted" (307). So what? Why should we reject the agreement of all four gospels that James was a skeptic? And it's not as though the absence of discussion of the issue in other sources, like Philemon and 3 John, is problematic. Where would we *expect* the subject to be discussed in other sources? Then Carrier tells us "there is no evidence he was not already a loyal believer by the time Jesus died" (307). Nothing occurred prior to the appearance to James (1 Corinthians 15:7) that would suggest a major change in James' view of Jesus. Apparently, James still couldn't be trusted with Jesus' mother as late as the time of the crucifixion (John 19:26-27). He probably wasn't a believer yet. And since Carrier keeps appealing to scholarly majorities (299-300, 302), here's what Gary Habermas has written about James' conversion in modern scholarship:

"Critical scholars usually recognize that James, the brother of Jesus, was a rather skeptical unbeliever prior to Jesus' crucifixion (Mk. 3:21-35; Jn. 7:5). Not long afterwards, James is a leader of the Jerusalem church, where Paul finds him during his two visits (Gal. 1:18-19; 2:1-10; cf. Acts 15:13-21). In-between, the pre-Pauline statement in 1 Corinthians 15:7 states that the risen Jesus appeared to James. Scholars find several reasons for believing that James was an unbeliever before this event. John Meier points out that

¹¹⁰ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/01/bart-ehрман-on-new-testament-text.html>

James' unbelief is multiply attested. Further, the criterion of embarrassment is probably the strongest consideration, since it would be highly unlikely that the early church would otherwise sponsor what would potentially be some 'deeply offensive' statements regarding Jesus' brother, as well as a major leader. To a lesser extent, the criterion of coherence indicates a similarity between Jesus' frequent call to place God before one's family, and Jesus' own example, in that he did the same although some of his own family members were unbelievers. Surprisingly, Fuller concludes that even if the New Testament had not referenced the resurrection appearance to James, 'we should have to invent' one in order to account for his conversion and his promotion to his lofty position in the Jerusalem church! The majority of recent scholars, including many rather skeptical ones, agree that James was converted from unbelief by Jesus' personal appearance."¹¹¹

In an attempt to dismiss Paul's conversion, Carrier suggests that he may have had some sympathies for Christianity prior to converting, may have been experiencing guilt, etc. (307-308) Contrast Carrier's speculation about Paul's condition with what Paul himself said of his state of mind as an unbeliever (Philippians 3:5-6).

Carrier ignores some other hostile witnesses to the resurrection, the travel companions of Paul mentioned in Acts. I've written elsewhere about the probability of the basic reliability of what Acts records regarding them.¹¹²

After irrationally dismissing or ignoring the hostile witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, Carrier dismisses the resurrection witnesses who had been followers of Jesus as "die-hard believers" and "fanatical" (308). All of the gospels suggest they were slow to believe in the resurrection. Should we once again assume that the early sources were collectively wrong, so that Carrier's theory can be maintained?

He raises the issue of why Jesus didn't appear to more people (308). I've written about that subject elsewhere.¹¹³ It's not as though resurrection appearances are the only evidence people would have. They'd also have the testimony of resurrection witnesses and the empty tomb. The appearances wouldn't have to be widespread in order for the evidence for the resurrection to be widely available. And Jesus' resurrection is one line of evidence for Christianity among others (prophecy fulfillment, Jesus' pre-resurrection miracles, the miracles of the apostles, etc.).

¹¹¹ http://garyhabermas.com/articles/dialog_rexperience/dialog_rexperiences.htm

¹¹² <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/07/pauls-conversion.html>

¹¹³ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/03/why-didnt-risen-christ-appear-to-more.html>

A Review of Chapter Twelve

Steve Hays

XII. At Best, Loftus is a Failed Everything

1. In chap. 12, Loftus tries to show that Scripture in general, and Jesus in particular, falsely predicted the end of the world. According to him, later Bible writers keep revising the eschatological timetable to save face.

A methodological error which vitiates his entire argument is the way his evidence for a moving goalpost parallels his dates for canonical books. This generates a circular dating scheme. What's his evidence that some books are later than others? Why, that would be evidence of moving goalposts. And what's his evidence that some writers are moving the goalposts? Why, the fact that this takes place in later books. So he's using eschatology to date a book, only to turn around to use the book to date its eschatology. Or vice versa. Whatever.

2. Loftus has a conspiracy theory about Biblical prophecy. Because Bible prophecies fail, later Bible writers devise face-saving reinterpretations. And Loftus applies his conspiracy theory to Christians as well. Because OT and NT prophecies fail, conservative Christians devise face-saving interpretations. Among other prooftexts, he applies this theory to Mt 10:23 and 16:28.

But one of the problems with his theory is that it isn't just conservative Christians who do this. For instance, Loftus quotes Allison several times in this chapter. However, Allison coauthored a major commentary on Matthew with Davies. Neither one was committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. Yet, see how they interpret Mt 10:23 and 16:28:

There are, as we shall see, a number of items in 10:16-23 which show us that Matthew's text here goes beyond the historical situation of the twelve to include the situation of missionaries in Matthew's own day. The evangelist has accordingly passed from the past to the present without explicitly noting the fact...the unheralded transition from past to present results naturally from Matthew's typification of the twelve; they stand for the Christian readers—especially missionaries—of Matthew's time. All that Jesus says to the twelve he says to the church; and the mission of the church is a continuation of the mission carried out in Jesus' lifetime.¹¹⁴

But on this interpretation (of Mt 10:23), the fulfillment of the oracle isn't tied to the lifetime of the twelve. Rather, it could come at any point during the church age—and thereby terminate the church age. Likewise:

¹¹⁴ W. D. Davies & D. Allison, *Matthew 8-18* (T&T Clark 1991), 179-180; cf. J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2005), 426-28.

The resurrection is, for Matthew, an eschatological event (see esp. on 27:51-3). Moreover, both the resurrection and the parousia are associated with Danielic Son of man imagery; see, for example, on 24:30 and 28:18. Consequently the resurrection is a foretaste of the second advent, a preview of what is to come. More than this, it is the first act in the eschatological installment of Jesus.¹¹⁵

But this interpretation (of 16:28) is also consistent with the parousia occurring long after the demise of the twelve. Yet Davies and Allison don't favor these interpretations because they are trying to salvage the inerrancy of Scripture.

3. Loftus also disregards other interpretations which run counter to his own. Now, he might chalk these up to special pleading. But he needs to show why these alternate interpretations are inferior to his own. Let's run through some examples:

Haggai 2:20-23

In what sense are these great promises made to and expected to be fulfilled in Zerubbabel? Many commentators hold that Haggai believed Zerubbabel to be the Messiah and that the turn of events proved him to be mistaken. But to interpret the passage in this way is to forget the way in which the kings of David's line were addressed. Jones (Haggai, p53) reminds us that in principle this sort of identification of king with Messiah was made in relation to every king...We have seen in the foregoing context how key events of the past (David's coming to power, Sodom, the exodus, Gideon) became symbols of the coming day, and the same is true of key people. David became so identified with what the Lord would yet do that not only was every successive king compared with him but the Messiah was even called David (Ezk 34:23). Many psalms are royal anthems, designed to hold up before the actual king the mirror of the true. Ps 2 (a coronation anthem), 45 (a wedding anthem), and 72 each delineate a parsonage larger than life and more than human.¹¹⁶

Zech 6:9-12

Some scholars suggest that Zechariah recognized Zerubbabel as the Messiah...The use of the high priest in the prophetic symbolism of this passage, however, makes Zerubbabel an unlikely Messiah, since the point of the symbolism is that the offices of priest and king will peacefully coalesce in the Branch (6:13). While Zerubbabel was indeed of Davidic lineage, he was not a descendant of a priestly family.¹¹⁷

Mt 10:23

To speak of the "Son of man coming" leads most Christian readers to assume an

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 679. Cf. Nolland, *ibid.* 426-29.

¹¹⁶ T. McComiskey, ed. *The Minor Prophets* (Baker 1998), 3:1002b.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 3:1113b-1114a.

eschatological “parousia” setting which is far removed from a mission of the Twelve in the early thirties AD. ...It is widely agreed that the wording of these passages is based on Dan 7:13... In Dan 7:13-14 this “son of man” comes before God to be enthroned as king. There is nothing in the imagery of Daniel to suggest a coming to earth...He comes in the clouds of heaven to God...The term parousia in fact occurs only four times in the gospels, all in Mt 24, where we shall see that that future parousia is carefully distinguished from the “coming in the clouds of heaven” described in Mt 24:30...when the gospels speak of “the Son of Man coming” the presumption must be that they are speaking not of an eschatological parousia but of a heavenly enthronement...It seems, then, that the sovereign authority envisaged in Dan 7:13-17, first inaugurated when Jesus has risen from the dead, works itself out in successive phases throughout history until it finds its ultimate fulfillment in the last judgment.¹¹⁸

Mt 24:34

If Jesus is speaking only of the signs that augur his coming he does not err. Jesus simply predicts that his contemporaries will see those signs, including the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE.¹¹⁹

Mk 9:1

In its present setting just before the account of the transfiguration, however, option 6 [“the transfiguration as a proleptic preview and preliminary fulfillment of the coming of the kingdom”] appears to capture best the Markan meaning. Because of their presence at the transfiguration, some of the disciples (Peter, James, and John [9:2) experienced “already now” a foretaste of the “not yet” of the kingdom’s future consummation at the parousia of the Son of Man (see 1:15).¹²⁰

Mk 13:29-31

The event being referred to by “these things” and “all these things” in 13:29-30 is the same as “these things” and “all these things” in 13:4—Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in 13:2. Like the “some” of 9:1 who would not taste death before they saw the kingdom of God come with power, “this generation” would also not taste death before they saw “all these things” take place. For the former this was fulfilled in the experience of Jesus’ transfiguration; for the latter it was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2007), 395-97.

¹¹⁹ D. Turner, *Matthew* (Baker 2008), 586.

¹²⁰ R. Stein, *Mark* (Baker 2008), 411; “...the kingdom of God has arrived in the ministry of Jesus [Mk 1:15]... Yet the ultimate consummation of all things awaits the return of Son of Man... Thus the kingdom of God is both ‘already but not yet,’” *ibid.* 73; Nolland, *ibid.* 694-96.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 619.

2 Thes 2:6-16

Loftus alleges that, according to the “pseudonymous” author, “additional signs must take place first” (332). However, the Antichrist figure is hardly someone whom Paul (or a “pseudonymous” author) invented as a stalling tactic. Indeed, Paul is alluding to two OT passages (Dan 11:36 LXX; Ezk 28:2). So this motif was already a traditional fixture of OT theology and eschatology.

2 Pet 3:8-9

Loftus chalks this up to a belated NT stalling tactic. However, the theme of eschatological delay is a common motif in Old Testamental and Intertestamental literature, tied to God’s mercy and forbearance.¹²²

Rev 1:1

We need to keep several things in mind:

i) Inaugurated eschatology

John operates with an inaugurated eschatology. It’s not a case where “final things” are either frontloaded or backloaded. Rather, the first advent of Christ initiates a new, final phase in redemptive history. It’s not a case where everything either happens all at once, or else everything is pushed off into the future.

ii) Retrospective viewpoint

1:1 (par. 1:19) contains an allusion to Dan 2:28-29 and 45. As such, the timeframe is mainly backward looking rather than forward looking. The time is near in comparison with Daniel’s viewpoint (in the 6C BC). “Near” in relation to the past, not in relation to the future. What Daniel foresaw long ago is now underway. So the viewpoint is primarily retrospective rather than prospective. The past in relation to the present, rather than the present in relation to the future.

Of course, this still has implications for the future. The age of fulfillment has begun—which is not to say the fulfillment has run its course.

iii) Visionary revelation

One must make allowance for the genre of the Apocalypse. John is a seer. The Apocalypse belongs to the genre of visionary revelation. And text of the Apocalypse is basically a transcription of John’s visions and auditions.

¹²² E.g. R. Bauckham, “The Delay of the Parousia,” *The Jewish World Around the New Testament* (Baker 2010), 65-88; P. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Eerdmans 2006), 279; G. Green, *2 Peter & Jude* (Baker 2008), 328.

This, in turn, means that we need to distinguish between the visionary level and the referential level. There is what John heard and saw, then there is what his visions and auditions stand for. It's important not to collapse the former into the latter, or vice versa.¹²³

In other words, the fact that events are recorded in a certain sequence in the Apocalypse doesn't necessarily (or even probably) imply that this is the order in which they will actually unfold, for what we are reading is a visionary sequence, not a historical sequence. John had a series of visions. The Apocalypse is the record of what he saw (or heard) in his visions. The fact that something is nearby or far away in a vision doesn't mean it's necessarily nearby or far away in real time and space. That confuses mental succession with extramental succession, a psychological process with a historical process.

iv) Stock themes & images

a) "Soon-ness" language and "nearness" language are used synonymously, where "near" is a graphic spatial metaphor for "soon."

b) "Nearness" language is already stock eschatological usage in OT discourse (e.g. Ps 85:9; Isa 13:6; 51:5; Jer 48:16; Ezk 7:7; 12:23; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:15; Obad 1:15; Zeph 1:7). So the NT is simply reusing the same traditional jargon.

What is "soon" or "near" to an earlier seer can't be equally "soon" or "near" to a later seer. What was "soon" or "near" to someone who is now dead can't literally be the same interval to someone living centuries later. And they'd be smart enough to know that.

So this is something of an eschatological idiom. Not something we were meant to measure with a stopwatch.

c) Alongside this idiom there's a dialectical interplay in eschatological usage between the "nearness" motif and the "how long?" motif (e.g. Ps 74:9-10; 89:46; Zech 1:12). Since the OT alternates between the nearness of Yahweh's coming in judgment and salvation, on the one hand, and pious impatience with his tardiness, it's not as if Bible writers thought the "nearness" perspective supplanted the theme of eschatological delay.

And we see the same alternation in John's Apocalypse (Rev 1:3; 6:9-11; 22:10).

4. Loftus alleges that Matthew and Luke redact the "failed" prophecies of Jesus recorded in Mark. Since, however, liberals give Mark a post-70 date, we'd expect Mark to redact the "failed" prophecies.

5. Loftus says, "The Davidic dynasty... was never reestablished as predicted (Jer 33:14-18; Isa 11:1-9)," which led to revised prophecies.

¹²³ Cf. G. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans 1999), 52-55; J. R. Michaels, *Revelation* (IVP 1997), 24-26; 219-21; V. Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6," *JETS* 36 (1993), 41-54, http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1993Genre.htm

However, this begs the question regarding the right interpretation of Isa 11 and Jer 33.

6. Loftus attributes a “major reinterpretation” to N. T. Wright. However, this goes back to his old teacher, G. B. Caird. As Caird documented, OT prophets sometimes use endtime language for historic judgments, knowing full well that this is not the end of the world. And NT writers reuse the same stock imagery.¹²⁴ Loftus hasn’t shown that Caird’s analysis is wrong.

7. Loftus says, “The author of 1 John [says] he knows it’s the ‘last hour’ and even expects to be alive when ‘the Holy One’ comes (2:18,28)” (322).

Unfortunately, his prooftexts don’t say that John expects to be alive when Jesus returns. If Loftus thinks that this is what they mean, he needs to present his argument.

8. Loftus says, “Many cult groups survive after experiencing a failed prophecy of the end of time. Whether or not they survive depends on how they reinterpret what took place.” (325).

That oversimplifies the issue. Even when they survive, there are defectors. The cult leader loses a percentage of disenchanted followers. Some dropouts cease to believe while others form a schismatic rival group. So while there are diehards who follow their leader no matter what, failed prophecy does lasting damage to the reputation of the cult leader. Moreover, the cult leader must have a sufficient following in the first place so that he can absorb the rate of attrition.

Incidentally, that’s one of the problems with treating Daniel as a failed prophecy. For from the liberal view, the author of Daniel wasn’t the leader of a religious movement. To the contrary, he was so obscure and easily forgettable that Jewish history has preserved no memory of his true identity.

Yet liberals would have us believe that after the oracles of this nobody plainly failed, the Jewish community responded by canonizing his collection of failed prophecies.

¹²⁴ *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Eerdmans 1997), chap. 14.

Jason Engwer

John Loftus suggests a scenario in which the gospels accurately record a false generational date that Jesus predicted for His second coming. The early Christians began reinterpreting that false prophecy as early as the lifetime of Paul (327-328). The failure of Jesus' prophecy is still being addressed in the New Testament as late as the second century, when 2 Peter was written (333).

I've addressed this issue of Jesus' alleged false eschatology in the past.¹²⁵ I'll just summarize some of the relevant points here in response to Loftus.

Given how malleable early Christianity was according to the authors of *The Christian Delusion*, why didn't the early Christians just ignore or change Jesus' false prophecy? Why, instead, would they accurately preserve it in multiple passages in multiple gospels, gospels that critics like the authors of *The Christian Delusion* often date so late?

If Jesus' false prophecy was still recognized as false and discussed in that context as late as the second century, we'd expect to see that fact reflected explicitly and widely in the early post-Biblical literature. Is that what we see? No. The Jewish opponents Justin Martyr interacts with in his *Dialogue With Trypho* show no knowledge of such a false prophecy. Celsus says nothing of it in his treatise against Christianity, which suggests that the Jewish sources he consulted weren't making an issue of it either.

What we do see is an objection to a *delay* in Jesus' return (2 Peter 3:9, First Clement 23), much as there were critics of a delay of the Day of the Lord within Judaism. There was criticism of the *slowness* of the promise's fulfillment, not a *failure* of fulfillment. And even the slowness wasn't much of an issue to the early Christians or their opponents. As David Aune notes, "The very paucity of references to a supposed delay of the eschaton is indicative of the fact that the delay of the Parousia was largely a nonproblem within early Christianity"¹²⁶.

Loftus' claim that 2 Peter 3:9 is addressing a failure of fulfillment (333) is incorrect. It's addressing slowness of fulfillment, and even that slowness wasn't much of an issue to the early Christians or their opponents. Neither 2 Peter 3:9 nor its surrounding context says anything about a generational date or claims to be correcting a misunderstanding of something Jesus said.

Rather than speculate that Christians began reinterpreting Jesus' prophecy as early as the time of Paul, while simultaneously preserving the false prophecy in multiple places in the gospels, we should consider the possibility that Loftus is doing the reinterpreting. I've already addressed 2 Peter 3. Let me work my way backward, from later sources to earlier ones, until we get to the words of Jesus Himself preserved in Mark.

¹²⁵ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/08/did-jesus-and-earliest-christians.html>

¹²⁶ cited in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, ed., *Dictionary Of The Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 873

Loftus suggests that John 21:20-23 was another New Testament attempt to reinterpret Jesus' false prophecy (331). Let's repeat a question I raised concerning 2 Peter 3. Does the text or context of John 21:20-23 say anything about correcting a misunderstanding of what Jesus said in Mark 13:30 and the other passages Loftus has cited? No. Rather, John is addressing *another* statement Jesus made, and he's explaining how that other statement was misunderstood. If Loftus wants us to assume that the explanation of the John 21 statement was meant to address other statements Jesus made as well, then he needs to explain why. Bringing up the John 21 statement doesn't most naturally suggest that earlier statements are being addressed. If the earlier statements are in view, why not just address them directly? Loftus' interpretation of John 21 is an unverifiable possibility, not a probability.

Moving backward to Paul, we find Loftus selectively citing passages in which Paul speaks as if he and his audience will be alive at the time of Jesus' return (321). But the phrase "we who are alive" in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 doesn't reflect an assurance that Paul and all of the living people he was writing to would live until Jesus' return. People in the churches of the first century were dying on a regular basis, just like people outside the church. Paul would have known that some of the people living when he wrote could die, just as he knew that his own death was a possibility once he finished the work he was called to do (Acts 21:13, Philippians 1:22-23, 2 Timothy 4:6). Thus, in 2 Corinthians 5:1-9, Paul can refer to how "we" might be in the body or out of the body through death. The same Paul who refers to "we" who are alive at the time of Jesus' second coming in 1 Thessalonians 4 goes on in the next chapter to refer to how "we" might be alive or dead (1 Thessalonians 5:10). Similarly, Paul refers elsewhere to how "we" will be raised (1 Corinthians 6:14, 2 Corinthians 4:14), which assumes that "we" would first die, in contrast to other passages where "we" are transformed without having died (1 Corinthians 15:51). Apparently, Paul thought it was possible that he and his contemporary Christians would be alive or dead at the time of Jesus' second coming, so he assumes one possibility in some places and the other in other places. Paul also repeats, in a passage addressing children, the Old Testament concept that children will tend to live lengthy lives on earth if they obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1-3), suggesting that Paul thought it was possible for people who were only in childhood at that time to live to an old age. Those children wouldn't reach an old age until after Jesus' generation had passed. When Paul wrote Ephesians, it had been more than fifty years since Jesus' birth. Paul doesn't support Loftus' theory. He contradicts it.

What about Jesus' generational prediction in Mark 13:30? Loftus argues that Jesus didn't know the day or hour, but did know the generation in which He would return (325). As Ben Witherington explains, however:

"This [the use of 'time' in Mark 13:33 to correspond with 'day or hour' in verse 32] rules out the artful and somewhat humorous dodge suggesting that while Jesus did not know the exact time of the parousia, he knew the generational time it would transpire, namely, within a generation, if not sooner."¹²⁷

¹²⁷ The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 349

How, then, can Jesus not know the time while setting a generational date? He's addressing two different issues. The generational prediction is for the general signs that lead up to the second coming. Those signs ("these things" in Mark 13:30) will be in place within that generation. (The "these things" wouldn't include the second coming and the events that follow, since Jesus is addressing signs pointing to the second coming in verse 29, not the second coming itself or later events.) He could return in any generation, including His own. But He doesn't know when the return will occur.

The sort of language Loftus cites in the New Testament as evidence of its false eschatology (322) is often found in later sources as well. Ignatius of Antioch refers to Christ's first coming, more than a century earlier, as occurring "in the end" (Letter To The Magnesians, 6). Such language was commonly used without any one-generation time limit in view. Christian sources of the second century (Ignatius of Antioch, Letter To The Ephesians, 11; The Epistle Of Barnabas, 4; Second Clement, 12; etc.) make the same sort of references to living in the end times, the imminence of Christ's return, etc. that we find in first-century sources. Most likely, the early Christians were using such terminology in a broader sense than Loftus' theory assumes. Ben Witherington comments:

"It has often been ignored that in early Jewish literature, in particular some of the apocalyptic material in 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, Apocalypse of Baruch and elsewhere, wrestles with the concept of the 'flexible' imminence of God's day of vindicating justice. In many ways, the discussion of the so-called delay of the parousia is just a continuation of this early Jewish discussion. In texts like Apoc. Bar. 85:10 we already see the tension between already and not yet, between eschatological hope and the delay of final vindication. That other early Jews could continue to maintain a strong faith in the possible imminence of 'the day' coupled with a discussion of its delay and possible reasons for it should warn us against the assumption that when someone like Jesus or Paul used the language of imminence it precluded any idea of flexibility about the timing or an interval before it happened."¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Jesus, Paul And The End Of The World (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), n. 29 on 263

Paul Manata

Loftus barely engages the preterist position. He mistakenly attributes “full preterism” to N.T. Wright (334) and doesn’t take the Bible on its own terms. If Jesus returned in judgment on Israel in 70 AD, then he is not a failed apocalyptic prophet, period.

He claims that “Reconstructionists” adopt partial preterism to “advocate a theocracy” (335), which is just dumb. Even though it still would have been wrong, he should have attributed the adoption of *postmillennialism* to the desire to “advocate a theocracy.”

Loftus reads the cosmic language with his old fundy glasses on. But scenes of cosmic destruction is common judgment language. In the Old Testament, God spoke of destroying nations in terms of “stars falling,” and other cosmic catastrophes. The OT saints did not take this literally since they saw the destruction of those nations while not seeing any stars fall. The Bible uses cosmic language of human rulers, calling them suns, stars, and moons. This is the backdrop to the language used in Mt 24. Jesus said he would “ride on the clouds” or “come with the clouds,” which, again, is common judgment language. Loftus thinks verses like this:

Mark 13: 24 “But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; 25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken

were read literally. But, wouldn’t Jesus’ audience remember other passages in the Old Testament where stars and heavenly bodies were used to represent authorities and the judgment of authorities?

Chilton comments (Paradise Restored, ch. 11):

...[T]hese heavenly lights are used to speak of earthly authorities and governors; and when God threatens to come against them in judgment, the same collapsing-universe terminology is used to describe it. Prophesying the fall of Babylon to the Medes in 539 B.C., Isaiah wrote:

Behold, the Day of the LORD is coming,
Cruel, with fury and burning anger,
To make the land a desolation;
And He will exterminate its sinners from it.
For the stars of heaven and their constellations
Will not flash forth with their light;
The sun will be dark when it rises,
And the moon will not shed its light. (Isa. 13:9-10)

Significantly, Isaiah later prophesied the fall of Edom in terms of de-creation:

And all the host of heaven will wear away,
And the sky will be rolled up like a scroll;
All their hosts will also wither away
As a leaf withers from the vine,
Or as one withers from the fig tree. (Isa. 34:4)

Isaiah's contemporary, the prophet Amos, foretold the doom of Samaria (722 B.C.) in much the same way:

"And it will come about in that day,"
Declares the Lord GOD,
"That I shall make the sun go down at noon
And make the earth dark in broad daylight." (Amos 8:9)

Another example is from the prophet Ezekiel, who predicted the destruction of Egypt. God said this through Ezekiel:

"And when I extinguish you,
I will cover the heavens, and darken their stars;
I will cover the sun with a cloud,
And the moon shall not give its light.
All the shining lights in the heavens
I will darken over you
And will set darkness on your land,"
Declares the Lord GOD. (Ezek. 32:7-8)

It must be stressed that none of these events literally took place. God did not intend anyone to place a literalist construction on these statements. Poetically, however, all these things did happen: as far as these wicked nations were concerned, "the lights went out." This is simply figurative language, which would not surprise us at all if we were more familiar with the Bible and appreciative of its literary character.

We see in the Old Testament passages that speak of contemporary events with "Jehovah comes with the clouds" language. Loftus thinks Jesus really thought stars would fall from the sky, but Jesus was simply speaking according to the established context of the day. Since similar claims were made many times in the Old Testament, and no one saw or thought stars would fall, or that God was surfing clouds, then why think Jesus thought that? There's an established context:

But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and **coming in the clouds of heaven.** (Mat 26:63-64)

You see, the Old Testament Jews knew what Jesus was getting at. They understood, though John Loftus does not. They read the words as they were intended to be understood by them. Jesus wasn't using 21st century terminology, John.

And so this is why we see this reaction from the High Priest. He spoke very familiar words to the High Priest, and the High Priest knew exactly what Jesus was insinuating. And for that reason, the Priest cried, "Blasphemy!"

Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. (Mat 26:64-65)

Now why would that be, John? Could it be that a Jew, familiar with the Old Testament, would have remembered these passages:

Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne. (Psalm 97:2)

Behold, **he shall come up as clouds**, and his chariots shall be as a whirlwind: his horses are swifter than eagles. Woe unto us! for we are spoiled. O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved. How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee? (Jer 4:13-14)

The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, **and the clouds are the dust of his feet**. (Nah 1:3)

That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, **a day of clouds** and thick darkness, A day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers. And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung. (Zep 1:15-17)

Let's also note that Jesus said he would come "sitting at the right hand of power." If the "coming on clouds" is taken literally, why not this? Maybe Jesus will surf clouds next to a big hand? How about this prophecy?

The Lord said to my Lord:
"Sit at my **right hand**
until I put your enemies
under your feet." (Matt. 22:44)

or this:

God exalted him to his own **right hand** as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. (Acts 5:31)

Back to Jesus' claim that the High Priest would see him coming on the clouds: Why did the high Priest shout, "Blasphemy!"? He, and everyone else, knew precisely what Jesus was getting at. In the Old Testament, it is *the LORD* who comes upon the clouds.

Why those Jews, at that time? Why were they judged?

As Jesus tells the Jews in Matthew 23 (interestingly right before he talks about the destruction of the temple in Matt 24),

that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of Abel the righteous unto the blood of Zachariah son of Barachiah, whom ye slew between the sanctuary and the altar.

And so we see that all the blood of the prophets, whom the Jews had constantly put to death, was going to come on them. Who's "them"? Maybe "this generation"? Loftus thinks my view is "absurd" but his view, where Jesus surfs clouds to earth throwing lightning bolts (or something), is not absurd.

Given the belief that there was a coming in judgment in AD 70, Loftus's argument is rendered impotent.

Jesus predicted that he would return in judgment on Jerusalem. He predicted that not one stone would be left on another and the temple would be destroyed. Jesus is a successful prophet. Loftus's argument brings up an uncomfortable prophecy that cannot be dismissed by claiming that Jesus meant literal stars would fall and he would literally surf clouds to earth. John Loftus has been reading too many comic books. He thinks Jesus is a Silver Surfer and, as I pointed out in chapter 7, that God should have made us with wings and chocolate milk oceans.

Part 5: Why Society Relies on Christianity

A Review of Chapter Thirteen

Steve Hays

XIII. Self-Foot-Shooting Machine

1. In chap. 13, Eller says, “It cannot even be claimed that Christianity is the only basis for a single morality, let alone all morality. For example, some Christians think that dancing is bad, while others do not; some think that coffee or alcohol are bad, while others do not” (354).

This objection commits a level-confusion by failing to distinguish between a moral norm (e.g. the Bible) and the interpretation and/or application of that standard.

2. Eller says, “There is nothing ‘moral’ (in the sense of ‘prosocial’ or ‘altruistic’) in having no other gods before some god” (355).

If Yahweh is the Creator and Redeemer of the Jews, then the Jews have social obligations to Yahweh.

(At the moment I’m limiting this to Jews because that’s the historical context. It does, of course, have a broader application.)

3. Eller says, “sin in ancient Judaism was more akin to uncleanness or impurity” (355).

That’s a serious overstatement. While cultic holiness was one aspect of the Mosaic law, it was hardly the only aspect.

4. Eller says, “Among these mandates are that...one not kiss or hug or wink at or skip with a relative lest one commits incest [Lev 18:6],” (355).

Is this his attempt to be humorous, or is he really that clueless? In this context, nudity is a euphemism for incestuous intercourse.¹²⁹

5. Eller says, “The question that is generally not asked in the discussion of morality, but that should be asked, is not ‘what is the basis of morality?’ and certainly not ‘what is the true morality’ and not, as some well-intentioned thinkers have done, ‘why be moral?’ Asking ‘why be moral?’ is no more sensible than asking ‘why be linguistic?’ or ‘why be bipedal?’ Rather, the correct question is ‘why are humans a moral species?’ That is, what is it about us that makes us the kind of beings who are capable of ‘morality,’ who have ‘moral’ interests or invent ‘moral’ systems?” (361).

But what’s the point of asking that question? For unless the moral systems we “invent”

¹²⁹ J. Currid, *Leviticus* (Evangelical Press 2004), 328; J. Hartley, *Leviticus* (Word 1992), 293-94.

correspond to what is truly right and wrong, unless morality is grounded in moral facts about the world, then the question is a waste of time. Why not take up stamp collecting instead?

6. Eller says, “The key to the evolutionary theory of morality is that social beings tend reasonably to develop interests in the behavior of others and capacities to determine and to influence that behavior...Or, as Shermer puts it, the capacity and tendency to have ‘moral sentiments’ or moral concerns evolved out of the ‘pre-moral’ feelings and tendencies of prehuman species” (362).

i) But even if we accepted the evolutionary trappings of this explanation, it would only explain the formation of moral beliefs. It does nothing to show that our beliefs align with reality. To the contrary, it reduces moral “sentiments” to mental projections and social constructs. There is no objective fact of the matter to which these moral sentiments correspond. Nothing “out there” that actually makes something right or wrong, obligatory, permissible, or impermissible.

Rather, natural selection has fostered the illusion of right and wrong, duty and guilt. And human beings have evolved to the point where we can recognize the illusory nature of these imperatives.

ii) Apropos (i), since we are not brute beasts, but self-aware animals, we no longer feel bound by our evolutionary programming. Although natural selection has conditioned us to think that matricide is wrong, we now know that this is just a trick of the mind.

If I believe in evolutionary ethics, then I believe that there is nothing wrong with killing or torturing an atheist for the sheer sport. Much more fun than hunting a stupid deer.

Jason Engwer

David Eller rejects objective morality (358). And he claims that sources of morality like nature and culture are “no more inadequate” (358) than a religious source like God.

But what about accountability? A non-personal source of morality can’t hold us accountable to its standards to the extent that God could. If nature or culture, for example, usually eventually brings about a particular negative effect upon people who behave in a particular way, what about people who have the means to avoid those cultural consequences or expect to die before nature has the negative effect in question?

Eller thinks that religion was “never much help” with morality (365). We know that many thousands of charities, hospitals, and universities have been established in the name of religion. The United States and other nations commonly perceived to have had a positive effect on the world were founded on religious concepts and often continue to operate on such premises today. Does Eller think that we wouldn’t be worse off to any significant degree if all of the individuals involved had been atheists, for example? Why? Earlier in the book, John Loftus had argued that religious motivation intensifies the evil that people do (193). But the intensifying potential of religion is applicable to good as well, not just evil.

Eller discusses the moral standards of non-Christian religions, and at one point he cites something in Islam (a “Miss Beautiful Morals” pageant) that “is a commitment to morality the likes of which Western Christianity has not achieved” (356-357). Muslims do have a system of morality, and they sometimes behave better than Christians. Overall, though, would Eller rather live in a Christian or Muslim society?

Paul Manata

Eller denies objective morality and affirms an “evolutionary theory” of morality (362).

Of course:

1. We have no reason to believe that our moral beliefs are *true*. If they confer survival value, we would have them whether they were true or not. This leads to moral skepticism.
2. This view cannot claim that one *ought* to, say, not molest children for fun. At best, it tells us why one *does* not molest children for fun, or why one feels bad for molesting a child for fun. Eller’s theory does nothing to answer the *normative* question of whether we *ought* not molest children. But morality seems *irreducibly normative* in nature. So, Eller’s not talking about morality.
3. Eller’s only “argument” for relativism seems to be that people disagree about moral beliefs. But this is a notoriously bad argument. Eller doesn’t address the idea that what is mostly disagreed on is a matter of non-moral facts. Eller doesn’t show how disagreement entails relativism (would disagreement on a math test entail that math is relative?). Eller doesn’t explain why realism makes better sense of moral disagreement. Eller doesn’t address the crippling problems with relativism.
4. Eller tries to give several “alternatives” to morality other than religious ones (359-360). He appeals to egoism, utilitarianism, and Kantian ethics. But he nowhere engages the severe criticisms of these views. Merely announcing some non-religious system of morality does nothing whatsoever to show that a godless account of morality can succeed.
5. He considers contracts for survival purposes as “moral” systems (362) without addressing the central problem that morality is about *norms*. That such and such social group punishes a cheater does not get you to the claim that one *ought* not cheat. At most it’s a claim about practical rationality: if you don’t want to get punished, do not have cheating as an end. But even here, acting for *purposes* seems an irreducible component to explaining the member’s course of action. But in naturalism, irreducible purpose makes no sense.
6. Morality is about *obligations*. Naturalism cannot fit moral obligations into the picture. How could they? At best, Eller’s evolutionary story tells us why we act the way we do or why we have the psychological states we have. That’s not morality, thought. That’s not what ethicists are talking about. So, Eller may be right that we don’t need God to ground facts about why someone might not murder or cheat, but that’s not to make the argument that we don’t need God to ground universal or objective normative moral facts. The latter argument is what Eller needed to make, the former argument is what he did make. His chapter fails.

A Review of Chapter Fourteen

Steve Hays

XIV. Methinks He Protests Too Much

In chap. 14, Avalos tries to refute the charge that atheism caused the Holocaust. There are several basic problems with this chapter.

1. One wonders why Avalos is so touchy. After all, Avalos is a self-styled moral relativist. So why does he get so defensive at the charge that atheism is complicit in the Holocaust—or other atrocities which happened under secular regimes?

If an atheist is a moral relativist, then even if atheism was directly and solely responsible for the Holocaust (or some other atrocity), that wouldn't be culpable. If moral relativism is true, then there's nothing wrong with Nazis exterminating Jews.

The very fact that Avalos feels like his cause is under the gun betrays the insecurity of his position. On the one hand, he admits that atheism is inadequate to ground objective moral norms. On the other hand, he rankles at the charge that atheism is responsible for various atrocities in 20C world history.

2. His essay is also an exercise in misdirection, as if the question of causality is the only relevant question. But that dodges the deeper issue. It's not so much a question of whether atheism causes unbelievers to commit mass murder, but whether atheism can offer any rational or morally compelling disincentive to the contrary. Can atheism lay a foundation for human rights? Can atheism erect an ethical barrier to genocide? Or is it a moral free-for-all?

And, in fact, Avalos has already answered that question in the negative. Moral relativism can offer no principled buffer to genocide.

Jason Engwer

Earlier in this review, I said that I'm not familiar with some of the Christians who are critiqued at length by the authors of *The Christian Delusion*. I don't have much familiarity with Dinesh D'Souza's work, and I don't use the argument Hector Avalos is criticizing in chapter 14, so I don't have much to say about that chapter. Avalos is an intelligent man who seems to have done a lot of research on the issue he's addressing, and a lot of what he writes on the subject sounds credible to me. He may be correct in the main point he's making. But I'll address some disagreements I have with comments he makes along the way.

Avalos cites Acts 4-5 to argue that "the principle of killing those who did not conform to collectivization of property is already a biblical one" (369). But the collectivization is voluntary, not only in the sense of the absence of state enforcement, but also in the sense that the people involved were morally free to keep their property to themselves if they wanted to (Acts 5:4). And the killing in chapter 5 was done by God, not a state or any man. The earlier Biblical context, the remainder of Acts, and the context of later Biblical books demonstrate that collectivization wasn't always practiced. It, again, was voluntary. Avalos' claim that "the value of life was put below handing over all their property" (369) assumes that a failure to hand over property without an accompanying lie would have resulted in death. But Peter says the opposite of what Avalos is assuming (Acts 5:4). And what happened to Ananias and Sapphira serves as a lesson to other people (Acts 5:11), so that their death serves multiple purposes. Do we find anybody in early church history reaching Avalos' conclusions about Acts 4-5? How common has his interpretation been? Have Christian societies tended to take Acts 4-5 as justification for "killing those who did not conform to collectivization of property"? Avalos' attempt to find a Biblical parallel to atheistic communism is unconvincing.

Avalos disapprovingly refers to "perversions of Darwinism" and "misinterpretations of Darwin" that are classified as part of Darwinism (385). But the authors of *The Christian Delusion*, including Avalos, frequently lump together all forms of professing Christianity, including forms that the vast majority of professing Christians would consider perversions of the religion.

He comments that "anti-Judaism" is something early Christianity and Nazism have in common, then he cites John 8:44 and Revelation 2:9-10 (385). That's an improvement over John Loftus' claim that John 8 represents anti-Semitism, not just anti-Judaism (191). Still, it's not as though Christianity is anti-Judaism in the same sense that Nazism was. Jesus' comments about unrepentant Jews in John 8 aren't applied to all Jews, and similar comments are made by scripture elsewhere concerning humans in general (Romans 3:9-23, Ephesians 2:3). Avalos is anti-Judaism in the sense that he considers it a false belief system. That doesn't make him significantly similar to Nazis.

Avalos repeatedly goes back and forth between Biblical passages and later sources, sometimes citing a later source's interpretation of the Bible without commenting on the credibility of that interpretation (386-389). Thus, the overall picture that emerges from

Avalos' chapter, as far as his representation of Christianity is concerned, is a patchwork of disparate sources whose association with each other is often dubious or unclear.

Avalos comments that "both theistic and nontheistic morality can result in genocide" (389). Yes, but theistic systems can condemn it on an objective basis, whereas atheism can't.

Paul Manata

Atheism Was not the Cause of the Holocaust

Granting the title, so what? Like this does anything whatsoever to undermine Christianity.

Avalos looks at war and genocides in this chapter and doesn't show a familiarity with studies on war and genocide. For example, there's no interaction with David Livingstone-Smith's book *The Most Dangerous Animal*, no interaction with the works of R.J. Rummel, no interaction with Meic Pearse's *The Gods of War*, no interaction with *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, by James Waller, and no interaction with Richard Overy's, *The Dictators*. Avalos pretends that he will show that "the cause" of the holocaust was Christianity and the Bible.

On the other hand, one historian educated at Oxford tells us that, "the secularist establishment's accusations against religion as the primary cause of war are simplistic and ill-motivated; they have some important superficial validity but are far from the whole truth" (Pearse 15). So perhaps religion is not the only, or even the main cause of war. Rather than Avalos's cheap and simplistic attack on religion, scholars know better than to assign the cause of war, genocide, etc., to one or two causes.

That is why even after a massive study on genocide and mass killing; James Waller could not confidently assert that he fully understands the causes (*Becoming Evil* 297). Gathering scientific data on the causes of war is labyrinthine because the scientific study of war is a recent phenomenon. A survey of leading sociological journals between 1986 and 2000 reveal that "fewer than 1% deal with war, and none of them considered the causes of war" (Livingstone-Smith 35). Thankfully, especially for Harvard educated speculators speculating about the causes of war, there has been tremendous effort to fill this void.

A survey of recent literature shows the causes of war to be bounteous. David Livingstone Smith points out that we can look at the causes of war from multiple angles, such as from the "standpoint of economics, politics, history, ideology, ethics, and various other disciplines" (xiii). To complicate matters even more, Smith finds that greedy multinational corporations eager to acquire resources often cook up genocides (219). Pearse also agrees with the greed factor, but "where that is too harsh a judgment," wars arise from "the need for security" (118).

This is why Pearse could claim that "the secularist establishment's accusations against religion as the primary cause of war are simplistic and ill-motivated; they have some important superficial validity but are far from the whole truth." But even a scholar as cautious as Pearse could claim, after a blistering survey of "the bloodiest century of all," that irreligion "has proved more lethal than religion ever was" (41). Avalos is simply on a jihad of his own, failing to look at disconfirming arguments, evidencing his confirmation bias.

In Richard Overy's magisterial work, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia*, we are greeted with "the one question that is seldom asked of the two dictatorships yet is fundamental to understanding how they could behave as they did towards the populations under their power: why did they think they were right?" (ibid, p.265). Overy points out that they did not think what they were doing was immoral. That it is doubtful that they spent sleepless night tortured by the thoughts of countless millions suffering at their commands. Why? "In each dictatorship a unique moral universe was constructed in order to justify and explain what appear otherwise to be the most sordid and arbitrary acts" (ibid, p. 265).

Many have dismissed the ethics of these men as mere rhetorical devices to justify their outrageous actions. But to do so, according to Overy, distorts the historical reality and undermines any attempt to understand these dictators on their own terms. Overy's work has been called a masterpiece. It is the result of 30 years of hard thinking and research by an expert on dictatorship. Overy dismantles the idea that that Hitler and Stalin did what they did for Christian or religious reasons (cf. ibid, pp. 265-304).

Both regimes were driven by powerful moral imperatives that challenged and transcended the norms derived from the heritage of Roman antiquity and Christianity.... The most evident examples of this moral contest can be found in their attitudes to organized religion and the law. Both institutions were rooted in moral traditions that long pre-dated dictatorship; both institutions offered a moral sphere, or a moral reference point, for those who wanted to stand outside the predatory ideology of the systems. The moral plane of dictatorship was not an irrelevance, but a battleground between differing interpretations of justice and moral certainty (ibid, p. 266).

"Communism was understood to be the most progressive and highly developed stage of history, and hence, by definition, ethically superior to all other forms of society" (ibid, p. 267). For Hitler, "Racial purity the highest law" (ibid, p.268). "[T]he German people, or 'Aryan' people, who had climbed the 'endless ladder of human progress', represented the pinnacle of historical achievement" (ibid, p. 268), and thus the highest ethic was their preservation. Therefore, "dictatorship was justified not by subjective factors (the ambition of powerful men, for example) but by objective laws of nature and history. The result was a moral displacement that relieved the regimes and their agents of direct responsibility for their actions" (ibid, p.268).

As I said, Overy utterly decimates any real connection between Hitler and Stalin and religion. Discussing his arguments, and offering his direct quotes from both Stalin and Hitler, will take us too far off target. I did provide the references and so any dissenters are free to check the detailed historical work presented by Overy.

Avalos also doesn't consider that leaders will use religion to deceive the masses. Thus Overy:

Protected by this warped moral armor, the perpetrators of state crime carried out orders whose fulfillment is otherwise incomprehensible. ... The dictatorship used this moral distinction to win popular approval, to legitimize the otherwise illegitimate exercise of state power, to applaud the brutality and lawlessness that state power unleashed, but, above all, because both assumed that the imperatives of history made them right. ... Neither the dictatorships nor the behavior of the dictators can be understood without recognizing that it was essential for them to be viewed as the moral instruments of an irrepressible and redemptive historical movement (ibid, p. 303).

A Review of Chapter Fifteen

Steve Hays

XV. Oedipal Science

Carrier's essay (chap. 15) on the roots of modern science is an exercise in misdirection. He's framed the issue in a way that deflects attention away from the deeper issue.

The important question is not the historical, causal question of whether Christians are the pioneers of modern science. Rather, the important question is the normative question of which worldview (atheism or Christianity) can warrant the scientific enterprise.

1. The Christian worldview warrants the scientific enterprise in the following ways:

i) The natural world is a rational world because the natural world was designed by a rational Creator.

ii) Likewise, man is a rational observer because man was designed by a rational Creator.

iii) Finally, God designed the world for man (among other species), and also designed man for the world. The human observer and his natural environment coexist in a state of mutual preadaptation.

That lays a solid foundation for the scientific enterprise.

2. By contrast:

i) According to naturalistic evolution, human cognition is the byproduct of an aimless, mindless process. That, in itself, is sufficient to undermine confidence in human reason.

ii) What is more, methodological naturalism disallows teleological explanations in scientific explanations. There are no ends and means in nature. No forethought. No prevision. And that has come to the fore in secular objections to intelligent design theory.

But imagine if we consistently applied methodological naturalism to medical science. In that event, doctors could never diagnose a physiological disorder or malfunctioning organ. You can't say the heart was made to pump blood, for that's a teleological claim. That assigns a goal-oriented status to the heart. But if methodological naturalism makes the rules, then the heart serves no purpose.

iii) Secularism is also saddled with the problem of induction. Any empirical argument for the uniformity of nature is viciously circular.

By comparison, a Christian doctrine of divine creation and providence can ground natural regularities. If God made natural kinds, if God conserves natural kinds through time, then

that affords a basic degree of continuity and predictability. Secular science commits patricide against the worldview which underwrites science.

Jason Engwer

Richard Carrier's chapter on the history of science is much better than his chapter on the resurrection. Carrier is well-qualified to address the history of science, and a lot of what he says on the subject makes sense to me. I don't have much familiarity with the Christian authors he's focused on (Rodney Stark and Stanley Jaki), and I don't use the argument Carrier is critiquing.

I'll use this opportunity, then, to reinforce a point I made earlier. While it's understandable that the authors of *The Christian Delusion* would want to address issues like atheism's role in the Holocaust and Christianity's role in the history of science, the presence of such material accompanied by the absence of so much else they could have addressed represents a bad judgment on the part of the authors (or at least one or more editors). They could easily have reduced some of the chapters in the book to a few summary paragraphs or a footnote in order to give more space to more significant issues.

And I agree with Steve Hays' point about atheism's problems with grounding science. That's a more important issue than what Carrier's chapter focuses on.

Paul Manata

As Steve Hays points out, Carrier focuses on the wrong facts. The question is whether naturalism or Christianity provides a worldview in which the scientific enterprise makes sense.

Science presupposes the reliability of our cognitive faculties, but what does the conjunction of naturalism and evolution—Carrier’s position—do to this? (I rely on Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism for the below. See *Naturalism Defeated: Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (Cornell, 2002)).

We begin with the notion of reliable cognitive faculties. A cognitive faculty is that faculty that produces beliefs based on memory, perception, and reason, and it is reliable if a great deal of its deliverances are true. But given the story offered to us by naturalistic evolution (the belief that there is no designer who has a goal or purpose in the makeup of his creatures; that all life evolved according to neo-Darwinian assumptions via a process of random mutation coupled with rigid natural selection), means only that mutations that help the organism survive are passed on to the next generation. So fitness enhancing traits are the goal. That is, if any purpose could be attributed to this process, which is doubtful, the purpose would be simply the survival of the genes which obviously entailed the survival of the gene machine, us.

According to this process there is some doubt as to whether the production of reliable cognitive faculties, that is, cognitive faculties aimed at the production of true beliefs, should be expected. This doubt was expressed by Charles Darwin himself:

With me, the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind? (Letter to William Graham, see: <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-13230>)

That survival and not true beliefs is the principle function of any system was also made clear by eliminative materialist Patricia Churchland. She wrote:

Boiled down to its essentials, a nervous system that enables the organism to succeed in...feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing. The principle [*sic*] chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive. Improvements in their sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous so long as it is geared to the organism’s way of life and enhances the organism’s chances for survival. *Truth, whatever that is, takes the hindmost* (“Naturalism Defeated: Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism” Cornell 2002, pp. 3-4).

And atheist materialist Richard Rorty expresses this same basic tenant of naturalistic evolution when he says:

The idea that one species of organism is, unlike all the others, oriented not just toward its own increased prosperity but toward Truth, is as un-Darwinian as the idea that every human being has a built-in moral compass—a conscience that swings free of both social history and individual luck (*Untruth and Consequences*, cited in Plantinga, *Darwin, Mind, and Meaning* <http://www.veritas-ucsb.org/library/plantinga/Dennett.html>).

And for just one more quote, atheist David Livingstone Smith writes that,

The human brain did not evolve primarily to discover truth. Like any other organ, it evolved to maximize the reproductive success of its owner (*The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature and the Origins of War*. St. Martin's Press 2007, p. 128).

It seems that across the board these top-notch evolutionary naturalists are claiming that evolution is only concerned with *adaptive* behavior. Natural selection doesn't care what you believe, it cares how you behave. And if you behave in such a way that your genes are well represented in future generations, than that behavior will be selected. If our belief is appropriately related to our behavior then the belief would be selected, but since we are here, all we know for sure is that our behavior is at least adaptive. And so given what these thinkers have stated, then it may be taken that the probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable given naturalism and this picture of evolution is rather low. Perhaps that is what they are claiming implicitly or explicitly in the quotes I mentioned earlier.

This seems right. Natural selection seems concerned with behavior and therefore only belief when it is appropriately related to a successful behavior. And so if adaptive behavior guarantees or makes likely reliable cognitive faculties, then the probability of their reliability on the conjunction of naturalism + evolution would be fairly high. But if not, the probability would seem to be low. For example, if behavior is not caused or governed by belief, then beliefs would be invisible to the whole process. And then it would be unlikely that the evolutionary process would give us reliable cognitive faculties. So the relationship between belief and behavior seems an important notion here. Our having survived means our cognitive faculties are reliable only so far as it is unlikely that creatures like us could behave in fitness-enhancing ways but hold mostly false beliefs.

Well to determine this we should look at the relationship between belief and behavior. At this point Plantinga asks us to think not about ourselves but about creatures a lot like us who arose in a way identical to how we are said to have: evolution unguided by God. So what do we think the probability of having reliable cognitive faculties on this naturalistic evolutionary story is for them? Well there seems to be four mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive possibilities of the relationship between belief and behavior.

(1) The first is epiphenomenalism: this simply means that their behavior is not caused by their beliefs. Belief does not play a causal role in behavior, other things like organic conditions and sensory stimulations and neural activity does. This is a popular position among many evolutionary biologist and more than a few philosophers of mind. But on this view, beliefs are invisible to the whole process. Natural selection doesn't care a whit about them. They do not enter into the causal nexus and so do not matter to behavior that has survival value. On this view the probability that we would have reliable cognitive faculties is low, then.

(2) Another possibility is called semantic epiphenomenalism. This position would state that beliefs have causal efficacy with respect to behavior but *not* by virtue of their *content*. This means that physical operations of the belief, like a neural firing pattern, are what enter into the causal chain leading to behavior. So the belief has two different kinds of properties. Neurophysiological and electrochemical properties on the one hand (these consist of the rate of fire between neurons, the connections between them, etc.) and what is called semantically properties. This includes the content of the belief. The content is simply the proposition entertain by a belief, for example the proposition, "I am here in Gene's studio, is the proposition content of my belief. Other semantically properties are truth, falsehood, belief entailment, etc. So on this view the content of belief plays no role in behavior, it is invisible. Some have called this view "the received view." Of course on this view the probability of reliable cognitive faculties on evolutionary naturalism is low, since the truth of a belief is a semantic epiphenomena invisible to natural selection. And it is quite apparent that the physical structures of the brain would remain the same regardless of the immaterial content of a belief. The truth or falsity of the belief has no bearing on the physical structure of the neurons. For example, if an opera singer shattered a glass singing in a high C $2+2 = 4$, the physical properties would all remain the same if she sang $2+2=5$ the next time. The output would be the same.

(3) The third view is that beliefs are causally efficacious both in virtue of their content and their physical properties but that they are maladaptive. These creatures would then be better off without these beliefs. No need to point out that the probability of reliable of cognitive faculties on this view would be low.

(4) The last view is that our hypothetical creatures have beliefs that are causally efficacious in virtue of physical makeup and content, *and also* adaptive. Would the probability of reliable faculties on this view be high? Not as high as you might initially think. That is because if behavior is caused by belief it is also caused by desires, fears, suspicions, doubts, etc. But for any adaptive action there seems to be a multitude of belief-desire combinations. For example, say we have a prehistoric hominid named Richard. Richard is approached by a hungry saber-tooth tiger. It seems reasonable to suppose the fleeing is the most reasonable adaptive behavior. But you could have any number of belief-desire pairs. For example, Richard might desire to lose weight and think that the tiger is a re-occurring hallucination and so he vows to take it as a signal to begin running in the opposite direction. Or Richard might desire to be eaten by the tiger, but form the belief that this tiger before him will not do the job and so he always runs off looking for another prospect. Or suppose that Richard thinks it cute and cuddly and so desires to pet it but

believes the best way to pet it is to run away from it. We could go on and on with these stories. The point is that any one of them is adaptive.

A response is that these false belief-desire combos may be adaptive in certain instances but won't work if we look at all of Richard's beliefs in all types of situations. How could it be that all of them could be this messed up? But here we need only look at belief systems. For example, I view everything as a creature that God created, and I think all things I do should be done to the glory of God. I suppose Carrier might claim that these beliefs are false. Yet men like Dennett and Dawkins have argued how they have survival value. So, my beliefs are mostly false and yet adaptive. Others, like atheist David Livingstone Smith, have argued in multiple places that mankind has evolved massive self-deception capacities. We deceive ourselves about the world around us in large scale ways. Or suppose creatures evolved using language in a Russellian way. So all their sentences are of the form "that such and such is a such and such." And suppose they formed beliefs that everything was a spirit or a witch. So they would say "that witch fork is made of witch metal."

So it looks as if there are multitudinous ways creatures in this scenario could have evolved and had adaptive yet false beliefs.

But another problem arises. We can reduce the above four ways belief and behavior is involved down to two: cases where content is involved and where it is not. Where content is not involved we noted that the reliability of the cognitive faculties would be low. And here arises the problem. Given materialism, how does one escape the claim that content doesn't enter into the causal nexus? I made arguments to this effect when I discussed naturalism and beliefs in chapter 3. It is therefore very hard to get around semantic epiphenomenalism if you're a naturalist. One can also add the insights of Victor Reppert's argument from reason to bolster this view. Thus it looks as if the probability of semantic epiphenomenalism on naturalism and evolution is high, and this in turn makes the probability of reliable cognitive faculties on naturalism and evolution low. Thus it looks as if the probability of reliable cognitive faculties for these creatures given they arose by naturalistic evolution is rather low. And if the probability is low specified to them, it would also to us, being in virtually the same position that they are given the naturalist story.

But say that all this probability calculus is too hard to figure out. Perhaps you would say that we just don't know the probability, that it is inscrutable. But here we would also obtain the defeater. To have no clue about the origin or purpose of our cognitive faculties would give us reason to doubt that they are reliable. If the probability that we are in the Matrix right now is inscrutable for us, then we have a defeater for our beliefs. Or the same with our being the victim of a Cartesian demon that wants to give us mostly false beliefs or with an Alpha Centauri alien scientist bent on producing cognitive disaster in my life. If I have looked at all of those options, and it is inscrutable as to the probability whether I am in the Matrix or a victim of a Cartesian demon or Alien super scientist or have developed reliable faculties, then I have a defeater for my belief that my faculties are in fact reliable.

And so by holding to evolution, and then by giving up God and his design of our cognitive faculties, since you have no need for that hypothesis, you thereby obtain what is called a defeater, a reason to doubt, your belief that your cognitive faculties have as their purpose the production of true beliefs. And it follows from there that you have a defeater for your belief that “Modern science *does not* depend on the Christian worldview.”

Next, science presupposes logical and mathematical truths. But Jerrold Katz argues that “naturalists do not have a satisfactory account of [these] formal truths, and hence they fail to meet the epistemological challenge to antirealism. Much of this argument depends on the notion of irreducible normativity (Katz, *Realistic Rationalism*, MIT, 82).

Speaking of antirealism, Robert Koons has argued that naturalism cannot hold to scientific realism (which the book presupposes) “since scientific realism entails the falsity of naturalism.” Worse, *The Christian Delusion*’s lauding of the success of the natural sciences “provides support for scientific realism . . . to that extent it provides grounds for rejecting philosophical naturalism” (Robert Koons, “Naturalism and Scientific Realism,” *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, Routledge, 61-62).

This isn’t to make these arguments. It’s to point out that Carrier focused on the wrong argument.

Appendices

Appendix I: Antiochus or Antichrist

Steve Hays

I. Postdiction?

Tobin says, “Modern scholars are now in agreement that Daniel was written a year or two after 167 BCE. Why did the author of Daniel do this? Obviously the answer is that if he could present some of his ‘postdictions’ as accurate, people would give more credence to his book and to its predictions of the future. The one ‘real’ prediction in it that could be verified—the location of the death of Antiochus IV [Dan 11:45]—has been shown to be completely off the mark” (165).

Loftus says, “Sparks argues that when we consider the prophecies in the book of Daniel, it becomes clear that they are ‘amazingly accurate and precise’ up until a certain point where they ‘fail.’ He wrote: ‘Scholars believe that this evidence makes it very easy to date Daniel’s apocalypses. One merely follows the amazingly accurate prophecies until they fail. Because the predictions of the Jewish persecutions in 167 BCE are correct, and because the final destiny of Antiochus in 164 BCE is not, it follows that the visions and their interpretations can be dated sometime between 167 and 164 BCE’” (341n37).

II. Pseudonymity

1. Why would a 2C Jewish writer name a book after a nonexistent 6C prophet and statesman? If the figure of Daniel isn’t a famous Jew from the past, but a fictitious character whom the author invented on the spot, then Daniel isn’t a book made famous by a famous author. Rather, the book itself is the author’s only claim to fame.

So why would the author name the book after a nonentity, rather than luminary from the past—like Enoch or Adam? Name it after somebody with name-recognition? Somebody whose reputation preceded him? A reputation which would excite interest in the book?

Think about it for a moment. If Daniel never existed, and if the book bearing his name hadn’t been written, then what would we think about when we heard that name? Nothing. We’d draw a blank.

2. If Dan 11:40-45 doesn’t correspond to Antiochus, then an obvious explanation is that this passage didn’t refer to him in the first place! It doesn’t accurately describe him because it was never meant to describe him at all.

3. Tobin’s imputed incentive is psychologically counterintuitive. As one scholar explains:

Finally, we may look at that section of the book which more than all others raises the question of its dating. It is the majority view that the long, detailed prophecy of chapters 10-12 must be, and is, largely a vaticinium ex eventu. By creating the impression that all these historical events, which his readers would know had ac-

tually taken place, had in fact been predicted in detail and fulfilled inexorably to the letter, the author aimed, on this view, to produce in his readers overwhelming confidence in his few, but major, real predictions. These were that Antiochus would make a third invasion of Egypt, this time very successfully, but that on his return journey he would suddenly meet his end, when encamped between Jerusalem and the sea; that there would then follow a time of unprecedented trouble for Israel, out of which nonetheless they would be delivered; that then the resurrection of the dead would take place, and thus the End would have arrived; and that all this would take place within a period of about 3 years measured from Antiochus' setting up of the abomination of desolation.

But this last event, according to the majority view, must have already taken place before the book was written and published (for had the book been published before that event, the prediction of it would have been a genuine predictive prophecy). How long after the setting up of the abomination of desolation it took our author to compile this book with its remarkably complex structure the majority view does not tell us; nor how long it took to get it published and into circulation. Practical sense suggests that by the time it was written and published, a considerable part of the 3 years must have gone by. The book would now be promising that the End would occur within an even shorter time than 3 years. Fortunately, when the book was published, Daniel's reading public, close-knit though they must have been, never realized who the author was - the publisher never spilt the beans - and took the book for an ancient book without wondering why they had never heard of it before. They believed its vaticinium ex eventu to have been a genuine prophecy, and put their faith in the author's prediction, were very encouraged by it, and prepared to meet the End. Unfortunately, of course, nothing happened. Antiochus did not invade Egypt again. He did not encamp between Jerusalem and the sea. He died, but not there: he died in fact far away out east. There was trouble for Israel as always, but nothing unprecedented. And the resurrection of the dead did not take place. The other things which other chapters in Daniel had promised would happen at the End, did not take place either: all Gentile imperial power was not everywhere removed, and universal dominion was not given to Israel. The only thing that took place within the time was the deliverance and cleansing of the sanctuary. Nevertheless the faithful having discovered the predictions to be false were not discouraged. They still accepted the predictions as genuine predictions and the whole book as authoritative; and they carefully preserved it and quoted it (e.g. 1 Macc. 2:60). Later they canonized it.

At this point the majority view, based as it is on the alleged incredibility of predictive prophecy, becomes itself so incredible that it will be worthwhile looking again at the structure and thought-flow of this part of Daniel to see what they may suggest as to the purpose of this section and the time of its composition.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ D. Gooding, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel and its Implications," *TynB* 32 (1981), 43-80; http://www.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull_1981_32_02_Gooding_LiteraryDaniel.pdf

III. Transition?

1. Apropos (I), liberal Goldingay says,

The quasi-prophecy [11:36-39] closes with an evaluative summary of Antiochus's religious attitudes as king...The 'him' [11:40-45] again presupposes that 'the northern king' is the same person as that in vv21-39. There is no hint of a transition to Antichrist or Antiochus V or Pompey and his associates...But vv40-45 cannot be correlated with actual events as 21-39 can...These facts suggest that v40 marks the transition from quasi-prediction based on historical facts to actual prediction.¹³¹

Likewise, liberal Collins says,

Modern scholarship marks the transition from ex eventu prophecy to real (and erroneous) prediction at this point [11:40ff.]...There is nothing to indicate a change of subjects from the preceding passage, so there can be no doubt that the reference is to Antiochus.¹³²

2. By contrast, conservatives generally view 11:36ff. as marking a transition from Antiochus to Antichrist.

3. Is the conservative disjunction ad hoc?

i) To begin with, v40 explicitly demarcates a new stage of some sort ("At the time of the end").

Whether that signals an event in the near future or distant future is inconclusive.

ii) It's true that the text doesn't indicate an explicit shift in the referent (Antiochus>Antichrist) as we go from 35-36 or 39-40.

However, both liberals and conservatives generally posit a basic shift in orientation.

Liberals posit a shift from pseudo-prophecy to failed prophecy as we move from 39 to 40ff. In other words, they view 21-39 as postdicted history (*vaticina ex eventu*) whereas they view 40-46 as a genuine, albeit false, prophecy of Antiochus' demise.

Conservatives, by contrast, generally posit a shift from Antiochus to Antichrist as we move from 35 to 36ff.

It's true that conservatives can't point to an explicit textual clue to justify their postulated transition, but by the same token, it's equally true that liberals can't point to an explicit textual clue to justify their postulated transition. It's not as if Daniel says at this point,

¹³¹ J. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Word 1989), 304-305.

¹³² J. Collins, *Daniel* (Fortress 1993), 388-89.

“From 21-39, I pretended to forecast the future, but now I’m really going out on a limb!”

So both sides are taking additional factors into consideration. If the conservative disjunction is ad hoc, so is the liberal disjunction.

iii) Conservatives don’t generally share the view of liberals that 35-39 fit the career of Antiochus.¹³³ Therefore, they don’t posit an abrupt transition from 39 to 40ff. Rather, conservatives view 39 to 40 as a smooth, seamless continuum—with the same referent (the Antichrist). At that point it’s liberals rather than conservatives who interpose a major discontinuity into the flow of argument by postulating a shift from quasi-prophecy to real prophecy.

As such, it’s hard to see, on purely textual grounds, that liberals have any advantage over conservatives when it comes to demarcating different phases in the text. Both sides do that, at different places in the text. For liberals, v40ff. marks a transition from the quasi-predictive stage to the truly predictive stage, whereas for most conservatives, v35ff. marks a transition from one referent (Antiochus) to another referent (Antichrist).

iv) Even the shift in referent is a difference of degree rather than kind, for conservatives view Antiochus as a type of Antichrist.

v) Apropos (iv), it’s not merely conservatives who see a shift in the nature of the referent. Collins goes on to say,

The passage does, however, recall other eschatological oracles that speak of a final invasion of Israel, where the aggressor is indefinite (Ps 2; Sib Or 3:663-68; 4 Ezra 13:33-35) or is a mythic figure (God in Ezk 38-39; Rev 20:7-10). In short, Antiochus is assimilated to a mythic pattern that underlies later Christian traditions about the Antichrist.¹³⁴

Likewise, as another liberal notes:

It appears that the author saw the ultimate enemy of the Most High God and his people not as Antiochus IV or any human empire, but as a more radical power persisting among the succession of empires. In Dan 7:2-3, the four beasts (empires) come from the great sea, and in Dan 12:1-3, the ultimate enemy that is overcome is death. Antiochus is only an agent of a more radical evil.¹³⁵

Therefore, the conservative identification can’t be dismissed as special pleading when even liberals admit a similar identification. Both sides understand that the adversary in vv40-45 transcends the figure of Antiochus.

vi) Moreover, liberals don’t see the correlation between 35-39 and Antiochus as all that

¹³³ Cf. G. Archer, “Daniel,” *ECB* 7:144-45.

¹³⁴ Ibid. 339.

¹³⁵ R. Clifford, “History and Myth in Daniel 10-12,” *BASOR* 220 (Dec., 1975), 26.

straightforward. Collins says,

Daniel's statement [v37] that the king did not attend to the gods of his fathers is problematic... This is probably a deliberate polemical distortion, to depict the impiety of the king in the most extreme terms possible.¹³⁶

Here again [v38] Daniel is probably indulging in polemical exaggeration... Daniel takes the king's break with tradition to an extreme by denying any continuity with his fathers.¹³⁷

While there's nothing inherently wrong, even from a conservative standpoint, in appealing to literary conventions like hyperbole to harmonize the text with the actual career of Antiochus, the same harmonistic devices could also be deployed in vv.40-45. Put another way, if we make allowance for these literary conventions, then we could still identify vv.40-45 with Antiochus, without thereby impugning the accuracy of the author, or we could just as well apply that rhetorical license to a different referent (e.g. the Antichrist).

vii) Furthermore, liberal scholars say Daniel is ransacking stock themes and imagery in his depiction of the king:

Antiochus's raising himself against the divine assembly and even the Most High God [v36] is a reuse of the old Canaanite myth of the rebellion in the heavens which finds its OT reflex in such passages as Isa 14:3-21 and Ezk 28:1-19... The total success of the arrogant king in Egypt in Dan 11:40-45 can only lead to his downfall. The author here draws upon OT depictions of the humbling of the king at the height of his power, such as those of Isa 10:5-34; 14:3-21; 47:1-15; Ezk 27; 28:1-20; 31. Rumors from the north and east will cause him to return home, a detail probably based upon Isa 37, esp. v 7 (2 Kings 19)... The events of Dan 11:40-12:3, the death of Antiochus and the raising of the just, are a unified action. The single picture of divine victory and the procession of the people in triumph to the land may have its remote Canaanite ancestry in the victorious return of the divine warrior from battle with his entourage, and is found in many OT texts of return from the exile, e.g. Jer 30:4-11; Isa 10:5-34; the addition of Isa 14:1-2 to ch. 13; Isa 34:1-17, esp. vv.16-17. The New Exodus in Second Isaiah often follows Israel's atonement and Yahweh's victory. Another ancient tradition appears in the death of the enemy between the sea and the glorious holy mountain (Dan 11:45). Ezk 38-39 depicts the final battle in the holy land. Pss 2, 46, 48, 76 describe the enemy kings raging against the holy mountain only to be destroyed upon it or at the base...¹³⁸

Here [v36], as there, the most obvious background is provided by biblical passages such as Isa 14 and Ezk 28... This figure [v37] was first identified as Tammuz-Adonis by Ewald... Compare Ezk 8:14..."Libyans and Ethiopians will be in his

¹³⁶ Collins, *Daniel*, 387.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 388.

¹³⁸ Clifford, *ibid.*, 25-26.

train” [v43]: Compare the exotic entourage of God in Ezk 38:5: Persia, Ethiopia, and Put.¹³⁹

In doing so [vv40-43], he is recapitulating Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion, once again sparing the old enemies who had taken advantage of Israel then (v41; cf. Ezk 25).¹⁴⁰

In the same vein is E. J. Young’s observation:

It should be noted that, at the time of Antiochus, Moab no longer existed as a nation. These three nations were ancient enemies of God’s people, the Israelites. They are mentioned here as symbolical representatives of nations which are enemies of God’s people and who will escape the wrath of the king of the North.¹⁴¹

But recycling stock imagery and standard plot motifs involves a one-to-many rather than one-to-one correspondence, where the same type of imagery or stereotypical themes can be applied and reapplied to a variety of times, people, places, and events. Given such fluid, open-textured rhetoric, it would be quite arbitrary to single out Antiochus as the intended referent.

viii) Apropos (vii), one scholar has noted the cyclical shape of Daniel’s prophecy:

After the predicted demise of the final kings of Persia and then the death of Alexander the future is divided into four great movements (11:5-19; 11:20-28; 11: 29-35; 11:36-12:3). By a very precise and consistent use of terms the author indicates that only the last of these movements is ‘the time of the end’; it alone introduces the End itself. Before 11:40 the only reference in the chapter to ‘the time of the end’ (11:35) indicates that it is still future; only with the event of 11:40 is it announced as having begun. But then by a deliberate repetition of vocabulary, this preview of history calls attention to the fact that while only the last movement is the time of the end and finally the End itself, all four movements show features in common, and witness the repetition of almost identical situations: a king will stage an enormous attack upon Egypt, and either on his outward or return journey, or both, will station armies in ‘the glorious land’, threatening or actually perpetrating destruction and outrage of one kind or another. In other words, each of the first three movements, though lacking the distinctive features, and the distinctive combination of events, of the time of the end, will to some extent look like the time of the end, and yet will not be the time of the end.¹⁴²

ix) The fact that Dan 11 shares so many parallels with Ezk 38-39 would be consistent with a common Exilic setting as well as a common eschatological referent.

¹³⁹ Collins, *Daniel*, 386-89.

¹⁴⁰ Goldingay, *Daniel*, 305.

¹⁴¹ E. J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (1980), 252.

¹⁴² Clifford, *ibid*.

x) According to Jason Parry, “Desolation of the Temple and Messianic Enthronement in Daniel 11:36-12:3,” there are allusions in 11:36-45 to 9:26-27 showing that 11:36-45 is the fulfillment of v. 26b and v. 27b, and he shows how 11:36-45 can be understood as a reference to the events of A.D. 67-70.¹⁴³

IV. Where Did Antiochus Die?

Liberals regard Dan 11:40-45 as a false prophecy because it conflicts with extracanonical regarding the setting of Antiochus’s demise. We “know” from other sources that he “really” died in Persia, but Daniel places his death in the Holy Land.

Conservatives usually reply by denying that Dan 11:45 refers to Antiochus. However, even if it did refer to Antiochus, this doesn’t mean that Daniel got it wrong.

1. Given the iconic status of Mt. Zion in OT theology, where it frequently denotes symbolic geography, it’s terribly ham-handed for liberals to insist on taking the place names (e.g. “the beautiful holy mountain”) literally rather than figuratively in Dan 11:45. What we have here is popular code language for eschatological events:

Zion is a symbol or metaphor for the historical city of Jerusalem. But behind this metaphor lies a complex cluster of interlocking themes of immense theological significance.¹⁴⁴

2. In addition, liberals typically act as though alternate accounts of Antiochus’s demise are undoubtedly true—at least in comparison with Daniel. If Daniel contradicts extracanonical sources, then Daniel is mistaken. In comparing and contrasting Daniel with other sources, liberals rarely subject the other sources to the same scrutiny. Instead, the reader is simply treated to liberal conclusions without exposure to the supporting material. When, however, we examine the supporting material, one is puzzled by why liberals find these accounts more believable than Daniel. For the alternate accounts turn out to be conflicting accounts.

To my knowledge there are six alternate accounts of his death—in Polybius (31:9), 1 Macc 6:1-17, 2 Macc 1:14-16, 2 Macc 9:1-29, Josephus (Ant. 12.9.1), and Appian (Wars, 66). And how do these stack up?

Polybius

As one scholar explains,

The basic source for the death of Antiochus IV is the Greek politician and historian Polybius (c. 200-115 BCE) (Histories 31:9).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Cf. P. Gentry, “Daniel’s 70 Weeks and the New Exodus,” 43-44n39, http://www.sbts.edu/resources/files/2010/05/sbjt_v14_n1_gentry.pdf

¹⁴⁴ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 980.

¹⁴⁵ J. Bartlett, *1 Maccabees* (Sheffield 1998), 78.

However, as Collins admits:

This account has itself a legendary quality, and the story of attempted temple robbery in Elymais is suspiciously similar to that of the death of Antiochus III.¹⁴⁶

And that's our major, extracanonical source!

1 Macc

Regarding 1 Mac 6, one scholar questions the accuracy of the setting:

The province of Babylonia lay just to the west of Elymais (Susiana)...One would expect the repulsed king to withdraw in that direction. In Hebrew, "Babylon" (the city) and "Babylonia" (the region) are both bbl; the translator was probably mistaken in writing "Babylon" here. Nevertheless, to judge by the probable location near Isfahan of Tabai, the place where Antiochus died...Antiochus "withdrew" northward or even northeastward, not toward Babylonia.¹⁴⁷

And another scholar says,

Elymais was a mountain region (not a city) lying roughly west of (not in Persia). There is perhaps some confusion here with Antiochus III, who died raiding the temple of Bel in Elymais. 2 Macc 1:11-17 says that Antiochus IV was killed plundering the temple dedicated to a goddess Nanaea (no location given).

2 Macc 9:1-3 tells of Antiochus' retreat to Ecbatana after an unsuccessful attempt to plunder the temples of Persepolis, and his death in the mountains of a foreign land. The Greek historian Polybius (a contemporary of Antiochus) says that he died at Gabae (Isfahan), half way between Persepolis and Ecbatana. In fact, he died at a place called Tabae, between Persia and Media.

A retreat to Babylon after a campaign in Elymais or Persia, followed by a return to Persia (v5, cp. 56) for Antiochus's illness and death, seems most unlikely. Antiochus refounded Babylon, but its mention here is out of place.

The news that reaches Antiochus summarizes events described in 4:28-61, but if Antiochus died in November or early December 164 BC, he could not have heard of Judas' rededication of the temple and his fortifications...In any case, the author was hardly well placed to know what was reported to Antiochus.¹⁴⁸

This suggests that the account of Antiochus's demise in 1 Macc is unreliable.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 389.

¹⁴⁷ J. Goldstein, *I Maccabees* (Doubleday 1981), 309.

¹⁴⁸ J. Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees* (Cambridge 2008), 81-2.

2 Macc

And according to another scholar,

Second Maccabees also tells the history of the Hellenization crisis under Antiochus IV and the successful resistance movement and restoration of the Jewish way of life but with emphases markedly different from those of 1 Maccabees (with which it was unfamiliar and may even have antedated).¹⁴⁹

The relative order in which books were written can be important, both in assessing how close to the events they were written, and the possible literary dependence between one book and another. As DeSilva also notes

This leaves the matter of the date and authenticity of the second prefixed, “archival” letter (1:10-2:18). Its authenticity is often rejected... Wacholder (1978: 102-04) offers an impressive defense of its authenticity, however, suggesting that the letter reflects a situation prior to the first anniversary of the rededication of the temple (winter of 163 BCE).¹⁵⁰

Another scholar says,

The author of First Maccabees erred through his ignorance of the difference between the two Seleucid eras, whereas Jason probably followed his own (correct understanding of the Common Source; see p58).¹⁵¹

Ecbatana lies hundreds of miles northwest of Tabai in Paraitakene (near Isfahan), where Antiochus died. No other source mentions Ecbatana in connection with the king’s death. How did Jason come to do so? We cannot be sure, but he or his source may well have done so by interpreting the obscure word *‘pdnw* in the prophecy of the death of the King of the North in Dan 11:45... In fact, “Ecbatana” could easily be viewed as a phonetic variant of “Ephadano,” and an ancient observer might have thought it lay “between the seas” (Dan 11:45), namely, the Caspian and the Persian Gulf. If Jason knew something of the geography of the regions, he could confirm the identification of Ephadano with Ecbatana by reflecting that a road ran from Persepolis through Persis, Paraitakene, and Media to Ecbatana and another ran from Ecbatana to Babylon. The king in retreat could indeed have followed that route (cf. I 6:4-5).¹⁵²

This suggests, both that 2 Macc 9 is harmonious with Dan 11:45 and, what is more, that this harmonization is also realistic. Goldstein also says

We may conclude that Jason of Cyrene [2 Macc] was almost certainly right

¹⁴⁹ D. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Baker 2004), 266.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 270.

¹⁵¹ J. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (Doubleday 1984), 348.

¹⁵² Ibid. 350-51.

against his rival [1 Macc] in distinguishing two Philips, just as he was in distinguishing two Timothei (see Notes on 8:30,32)...The narrative at 1 [Macc] 6:55-56, indeed, contains a gross improbability, make all the worse by the mistaken chronology in First Maccabees placing the expedition of Antiochus V and Lysias in 150 Sel. (See AB vol. 41, pp315-19). Antiochus IV died in 149 Sel.¹⁵³

Jason [2 Macc] took care to present the death of Antiochus IV as bearing out the predictions of Daniel, never as contradicting them; see pp66-69.¹⁵⁴

Of the two accounts of Antiochus' death in 1-2 Macc, the account which seems to contradict Dan 11 is less reliable than the account which seems to agree with Dan 11.

Another scholar notes that:

"Ecbatana" [v3]. The capital of Media, found to the north of Elymais; today: Hamadan. According to Polybius 31:9, however, death overtook him at "Tabae which is in Persis," hundreds of kilometers southeast of Ecbatana.¹⁵⁵

So the alternative accounts conflict on the location of Antiochus' death. Yet liberals assure us that Dan 11 is wrong because it allegedly mislocates the death of Antiochus according to other presumably better sources! But the other sources contradict each other on the place of death. Schwartz also notes:

"Smote him" [2 Macc 9:5]. Already Polybius knew that there were those who thought that it was God who inflicted disease upon Antiochus, in His wrath at him for attempting to violate the temple; but Polybius was referring to the temple of Artemis in Elymais. Just as Josephus was to "wonder" (Ant. 12:358-359) at Polybius' failure to connect the king's death to the temple of Jerusalem, other Jews may have been bothered by the same problem.¹⁵⁶

These accounts attribute Antiochus's demise to divine judgment. Yet Richard Carrier assures us that a naturalistic explanation is always preferable to a supernaturalistic explanation.

Josephus & Diodorus

1. According to Bartlett,

The main source used by Josephus is 1 Maccabees, at least until the death of Jonathan is reached...Diodorus is not always reliable.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Ibid. 373.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 345.

¹⁵⁵ D. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (DEU 2008), Ibid. 353.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 355.

¹⁵⁷ Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees*, 11-12.

Goldstein adds that,

Only here and at I [Macc] 6:1 (and at Josephus' paraphrase of I [Macc] 6:1 at AJ xii 9.1.354) is a city involved in Antiochus attempt to sack the temple in "Per-sis."¹⁵⁸

So Josephus' version is a secondary account which relies on the unreliable account in 1 Macc. Josephus is also aware of Polybius' account, which is also unreliable (as Collins points out). And Diodorus is problematic, too.

2. In his commentary on 1 Maccabees, Goldstein has an appendix on how, according to Goldstein, Josephus bent over backwards to salvage the veracity of Dan 7-12.¹⁵⁹ Goldstein himself takes the standard liberal line on Daniel. But this generates a dilemma for the liberal view of Daniel.

If, on the one hand, Daniel was a 6C book by the Jewish prophet and statesman, then Daniel time to become firmly entrenched in the OT canon by the time Josephus wrote his history. In that event, it's easy to understand why Josephus would defer to Daniel and defend the accuracy of his oracles.

If, on the other hand, Daniel was a 2C forgery, then it's hard to see how it had time to achieve such unquestionable standing in Judaism that Josephus went out of his way to defend it even if he found perplexities in the terms of the fulfillment.

V. Evaluation

Let's take stock of this material. Liberals classify Dan 11:45 as a false prophecy because Daniel allegedly mislocated the death of Antiochus. And we "know" this because extrascriptural sources tell us where he really died.

However, when we turn to these extrascriptural sources, what do we find?

1. The alternative accounts disagree on where he died. Yet the true location of his death was the very point in dispute!
2. They also disagree on how he died. They give conflicting accounts about the manner of his death. Not to mention chronological problems.
3. In general, they indulge in legendary embellishment.
4. Polybius, who's the main source of information, conflates the death of Antiochus III with the death of Antiochus IV.

¹⁵⁸ Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 350.

¹⁵⁹ Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, Appendix V: "How Josephus Interpreted Daniel and Rewrote First Maccabees 1:20-64," 558-68.

5. Several sources also attribute his death to supernatural causes (i.e. divine punishment). By contrast, Dan 11:45 doesn't specify death by supernatural causes.

Yet Carrier, in chap. 11, assured us that a naturalistic explanation is invariably preferable to a supernaturalistic explanation.

6. The account in 2 Macc 9, which may well be more reliable than the account in 1 Macc 6, dovetails with Dan 11.

So even if the Danielic account of Antiochus' death comes into conflict with extrascriptural sources, the extrascriptural sources give conflicting accounts of his death.

So why would conflict between Daniel and other sources reflect badly on Daniel? Why treat the other sources as the standard of comparison when they disagree with each other on key details of his demise, and when they introduce supernatural elements which, according to Carrier, automatically vitiates the credibility of the reported event?

Conversely, if 2 Macc 9 is treated as an independent account, then it's confirmatory rather than disconfirmatory.

VI. Primary Sources

Dan 11:40-45

40 At the time of the end, the king of the south shall attack him, but the king of the north shall rush upon him like a whirlwind, with chariots and horsemen, and with many ships. And he shall come into countries and shall overflow and pass through. 41 He shall come into the glorious land. And tens of thousands shall fall, but these shall be delivered out of his hand: Edom and Moab and the main part of the Ammonites. 42 He shall stretch out his hand against the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape. 43 He shall become ruler of the treasures of gold and of silver, and all the precious things of Egypt, and the Libyans and the Cushites shall follow in his train. 44 But news from the east and the north shall alarm him, and he shall go out with great fury to destroy and devote many to destruction. 45 And he shall pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the glorious holy mountain. Yet he shall come to his end, with none to help him.

1 Macc 6:1-16

1 King Antiochus, meanwhile, was making his way through the Upper Provinces; he had heard that in Persia there was a city called Elymais, renowned for its riches, its silver and gold,

2 and its very wealthy temple containing golden armour, breastplates and weapons, left there by Alexander son of Philip, the king of Macedon, the first to reign over the Greeks.

3 He therefore went and attempted to take the city and pillage it, but without success, the citizens having been forewarned.

4 They resisted him by force of arms. He was routed, and began retreating, very gloomi-

ly, towards Babylon.

5 But, while he was still in Persia, news reached him that the armies which had invaded Judaea had been routed,

6 and that Lysias in particular had advanced in massive strength, only to be forced to turn and flee before the Jews; that the latter were now stronger than ever, thanks to the arms, supplies and abundant spoils acquired from the armies they had cut to pieces,

7 and that they had pulled down the abomination which he had erected on the altar in Jerusalem, had encircled the sanctuary with high walls as in the past, and had fortified Beth-Zur, one of his cities.

8 When the king heard this news he was amazed and profoundly shaken; he threw himself on his bed and fell sick with grief, since things had not turned out for him as he had planned.

9 And there he remained for many days, subject to deep and recurrent fits of melancholy, until he realised that he was dying.

10 Then, summoning all his Friends, he said to them, 'Sleep evades my eyes, and my heart is cowed by anxiety.

11 I have been wondering how I could have come to such a pitch of distress, so great a flood as that which now engulfs me -- I who was so generous and well-loved in my heyday.

12 But now I recall how wrongly I acted in Jerusalem when I seized all the vessels of silver and gold there and ordered the extermination of the inhabitants of Judah for no reason at all.

13 This, I am convinced, is why these misfortunes have overtaken me, and why I am dying of melancholy in a foreign land.'

14 He summoned Philip, one of his Friends, and made him regent of the whole kingdom.

15 He entrusted him with his diadem, his robe and his signet, on the understanding that he was to educate his son Antiochus and train him for the throne.

16 King Antiochus then died, in the year 149.¹⁶⁰

2 Macc 1:14-16

14 On the pretext of marrying Nanaea, Antiochus came to the place with his friends, intending to take its many treasures as a dowry.

15 The priests of Nanaea had put these on display, and he for his part had entered the temple precincts with only a small retinue. As soon as Antiochus had gone inside the temple, the priests shut him in,

16 opened a trap-door hidden in the ceiling and struck the leader down by hurling stones like thunderbolts. They then cut him into pieces and threw his head to those who were waiting outside.

2 Macc 9:1-29

1 At about the same time, Antiochus was beating a disorderly retreat from Persia.

2 He had entered the city called Persepolis, planning to rob the temple and occupy the city; but the population at once sprang to arms to defend themselves, with the result that

¹⁶⁰ Maccabean quotes are from *The New Jerusalem Bible*.

Antiochus was routed by the inhabitants and forced to beat a humiliating retreat.

3 On his arrival in Ecbatana [modern Hamadan] he learned what had happened to Nicanor and to Timotheus' forces.

4 Flying into a passion, he resolved to make the Jews pay for the disgrace inflicted by those who had routed him, and with this in mind he ordered his charioteer to drive without stopping and get the journey over. But the sentence of Heaven was already hanging over him. In his pride, he had said, 'When I reach Jerusalem, I shall turn it into a mass grave for the Jews.'

5 But the all-seeing Lord, the God of Israel, struck him with an incurable and unseen complaint. The words were hardly out of his mouth when he was seized with an incurable pain in his bowels and with excruciating internal torture;

6 and this was only right, since he had inflicted many barbaric tortures on the bowels of others.

7 Even so, he in no way diminished his arrogance; still bursting with pride, breathing fire in his wrath against the Jews, he was in the act of ordering an even keener pace when the chariot gave a sudden lurch and out he fell and, in this serious fall, was dragged along, every joint of his body wrenched out of place.

8 He who only a little while before had thought in his superhuman boastfulness he could command the waves of the sea, he who had imagined he could weigh mountain peaks in a balance, found himself flat on the ground and then being carried in a litter, a visible demonstration to all of the power of God,

9 in that the very eyes of this godless man teemed with worms and his flesh rotted away while he lingered on in agonising pain, and the stench of his decay sickened the whole army.

10 A short while before, he had thought to grasp the stars of heaven; now no one could bring himself to act as his bearer, for the stench was intolerable.

11 Then and there, as a consequence, in his shattered state, he began to shed his excessive pride and come to his senses under the divine lash, spasms of pain overtaking him.

12 His stench being unbearable even to himself, he exclaimed, 'It is right to submit to God; no mortal should aspire to equality with the Godhead.'

13 The wretch began to pray to the Master, who would never take pity on him now, declaring

14 that the holy city, towards which he had been speeding to rase it to the ground and turn it into a mass grave, should be declared free;

15 as for the Jews, whom he had considered as not even worth burying, so much carrion to be thrown out with their children for birds and beasts to prey on, he would give them all equal rights with the Athenians;

16 the holy Temple which he had once plundered he would now adorn with the finest offerings; he would restore all the sacred vessels many times over; he would defray from his personal revenue the expenses incurred for the sacrifices;

17 and, to crown all, he would himself turn Jew and visit every inhabited place, proclaiming the power of God.

18 Finding no respite at all from his suffering, God's just sentence having overtaken him, he abandoned all hope for himself and wrote the Jews the letter transcribed below, which takes the form of an appeal in these terms:

19 'To the excellent Jews, to the citizens, Antiochus, king and commander-in-chief, sends

heartly greetings, wishing them all health and prosperity.

20 'If you and your children are well and your affairs as you would wish, we are profoundly thankful.

21 For my part, I cherish affectionate memories of you. 'On my return from the country of Persia I fell seriously ill, and thought it necessary to make provision for the common security of all.

22 Not that I despair of my condition, for I have great hope of shaking off the malady,
23 but considering how my father, whenever he was making an expedition into the uplands, would designate his successor

24 so that, in case of any unforeseen event or disquieting rumour, the people of the provinces might know to whom he had left the conduct of affairs, and thus remain undisturbed;

25 furthermore, being well aware that the sovereigns on our frontiers and the neighbours of our realm are watching for opportunities and waiting to see what will happen, I have designated as king my son Antiochus, whom I have more than once entrusted and commended to most of you when I was setting out for the upland satrapies; a transcript of my letter to him is appended hereto.

26 I therefore urge and require you, being mindful of the benefits both public and personal received from me, that you each persist in those sentiments of goodwill that you harbour towards me.

27 I am confident that he will pursue my own policy with benevolence and humanity, and will prove accommodating to your interests.'

28 And so this murderer and blasphemer, having endured sufferings as terrible as those which he had made others endure, met his pitiable fate, and ended his life in the mountains far from his home.

29 His comrade Philip brought back his body, and then, fearing Antiochus' son, withdrew to Egypt, to the court of Ptolemy Philometor.

Polybius, Histories, 31:9

In Syria King Antiochus, wishing to provide himself with money, decided to make an expedition against the sanctuary of Artemis in Elymaïs. ² On reaching the spot he was foiled in his hopes, as the barbarian tribes who dwelt in the neighbourhood would not permit the outrage, ³ and on his retreat he died at Tabae [modern Isfahan/Esfahan] in Persia, smitten with madness, as some people say, ⁴ owing to certain manifestations of divine displeasure when he was attempting this outrage on the above sanctuary.¹⁶¹

Disodorus Siculus, Library of History, 29.15

Antiochus, pressed for funds and hearing that the temple of Bel in Elymaïs had a large store of silver and gold, derived from the dedications, resolved to pillage it. He proceeded to Elymaïs and after accusing the inhabitants of initiating hostilities, pillaged the temple; but though he amassed much wealth he speedily received meet punishment from the gods.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/31*.html

¹⁶² http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/29*.html

Appian, History of the Syrian Wars, 66

He [Antiochus Epiphanes] was terrified and withdrew from the country, and robbed the temple of Venus Elymais; then died of a wasting disease, leaving a son nine years of age, the Antiochus[V] Eupator already mentioned.¹⁶³

Josephus, Antiquities, 12:9:1

About this time it was that king Antiochus, as he was going over the upper countries, heard that there was a very rich city in Persia, called Elymais; and therein a very rich temple of Diana, and that it was full of all sorts of donations dedicated to it; as also weapons and breastplates, which, upon inquiry, he found had been left there by Alexander, the son of Philip, king of Macedonia. And being incited by these motives, he went in haste to Elymais, and assaulted it, and besieged it. But as those that were in it were not terrified at his assault, nor at his siege, but opposed him very courageously, he was beaten off his hopes; for they drove him away from the city, and went out and pursued after him, insomuch that he fled away as far as Babylon [ὥστ' αὐτὸν ἐλθεῖν εἰς βαβυλῶνα φευγοντά], and lost a great many of his army. And when he was grieving for this disappointment, some persons told him of the defeat of his commanders whom he had left behind him to fight against Judea, and what strength the Jews had already gotten. When this concern about these affairs was added to the former, he was confounded, and by the anxiety he was in fell into a distemper, which, as it lasted a great while, and as his pains increased upon him, so he at length perceived he should die in a little time; so he called his friends to him, and told them that his distemper was severe upon him; and confessed withal, that this calamity was sent upon him for the miseries he had brought upon the Jewish nation, while he plundered their temple, and contemned their God; and when he had said this, he gave up the ghost. Whence one may wonder at Polybius of Megalopolis, who, though otherwise a good man, yet saith that "Antiochus died because he had a purpose to plunder the temple of Diana in Persia;" for the purposing to do a thing, but not actually doing it, is not worthy of punishment. But if Polybius could think that Antiochus thus lost his life on that account, it is much more probable that this king died on account of his sacrilegious plundering of the temple at Jerusalem. But we will not contend about this matter with those who may think that the cause assigned by this Polybius of Megalopolis is nearer the truth than that assigned by us.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ http://www.livius.org/ap-ark/appian/appian_syriaca_14.html#66

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/ant-12.htm>

Appendix II: “Extraordinary Claims”

Steve Hays

I asked Dr. James Anderson, of Reformed Theological Seminary, to comment on some of Carrier’s statements. Anderson said:

[Carrier] “Literally: rejecting this principle [extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence] constitutes rejecting logic.”

This seems confused to me. On the face of it, the ECREA principle is an epistemic norm; it’s a claim about the rational acceptability of a claim. But epistemic norms should be distinguished from logical axioms or probability theorems. They’re different kinds of truths. And it’s hard to see how denying a putative epistemic norm could constitute the denial of a logical axiom or a probability theorem.

The idea that p is believable just in case $P(p) > 0.5$ is very questionable. In the first place, I presume Carrier means *rationally* believable (otherwise the claim is obviously too strong).

Second, there seem to be obvious counterexamples. Suppose I throw a die and it rolls out of sight. The probability that I’ve thrown a 3 or higher is approx. 0.67. Should I believe that I’ve thrown a 3 or higher? Surely not. Is it rationally permissible for me to believe that I’ve thrown a 3 or higher? That doesn’t seem right either. Our commonsense view, I think, is that I ought to withhold judgment. In general, it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to try to correlate rational believability with absolute numerical probability values.

Third, Carrier assumes an implausible evidentialism with regard to rational believability which implies that S has to have evidence for p in order for p to be (rationally) believable for S . Again, it’s not difficult to come up with counterexamples. That my cognitive faculties are reliable is rationally believable, of course, but what kind of evidence do I have for it? The only way Carrier could accommodate these exceptions is to broaden his definition of evidence, or what he’ll allow as background knowledge, to the point where his heavily-qualified evidentialism won’t do the work he needs it to do.

Whether or not X should be considered ‘commonplace’ is a highly context-relative judgment.

One final remark: I don’t think Carrier does himself any favors by casting his claims in terms of ‘extraordinariness’. Perhaps he sees some rhetorical benefit in parroting Sagan. But suppose I call you up and tell you I’ve just won the lottery (and on the first occasion I’ve ever bought a ticket). Surely that’s an extraordinary claim. Naturally you’re skeptical, so I invite you over to my house, where you see with your own eyes both my ticket and the newspaper reporting the winning numbers. I’d say that would be sufficient for you to rationally believe that I’ve won the lottery. But did you have *extraordinary* evidence? Hardly. The evidence you had was of the most ordinary kind.

[On the lottery]:

Then he confuses two distinct events:

E1: The event of the lottery being won (by someone or other).

E2: The event of the lottery being won by someone in particular.

The probability of E1 is, of course, much higher than that of E2. But my example was a case of E2. So it was a case of a highly improbable event that required evidence of a quite ordinary (but admittedly powerful) kind in order to be rationally believed. Whether it was the first lottery in history or the millionth one is entirely irrelevant.

It seems to me that Carrier is still guilty of the confusion I mentioned. The degree to which the claim “I won such-and-such a lottery” is extraordinary depends only on the specific odds of that lottery (and certain background information about me) and not on whether there have been previous winners of lotteries (which is a trivial piece of information, statistically speaking).

Yes, I think his error is a form of the Gambler’s fallacy. At the heart of the fallacy is the mistaken idea that the odds of an independent event are affected by the outcome of prior instances of the same kind of independent event (e.g., if I toss a fair coin 10 times and get a head every time, I conclude that I’m more likely than not to get a tail next time, as though there were some ‘quota’ that had to be observed).

The difficulty with lottery examples (like the one I used earlier) is that because millions of people play lotteries on a weekly basis, there are regularly lottery winners, which gives the false impression that the odds of a particular player winning a particular lottery aren’t all that high (an illusion which those who *run* lotteries benefit from greatly). But the odds of person X winning lottery Y depend only on the set-up of that lottery (if it’s a standard lottery); they don’t depend on how many other people play that lottery or how many other lotteries there are (or have been in the past).

Appendix III: Comparative Mythology

Steve Hays

If we're dealing particularly with the OT, then the problem is greater because of the lack of extrabiblical material from Palestine...Externally written material from Palestine that will illumine things such as cosmological beliefs is nonexistent. The resort to Ugaritic material to fill the gap left by the lack of Palestinian material brings its own problems of being certain that Ugarit is fully representative of Palestinian beliefs and practices. Mute archaeological findings may somewhat fill that gap but material remains speak to a limited range of issues.¹⁶⁵

One crucial assumption is that biblical revelation cannot hold a different position on the issue in question from the surrounding world...How does one construct an argument to prove that the Bible may not depart from universal practice? The Bible frequently tells Israel not to be like the nations. Since an unstated premise of the apologetic that sees cosmological and historical statements as a concession to their time is that we may distinguish religious statements in Scripture from other statements...Yet, there is a theoretical possibility that the Bible, for whatever reason, deviates from surrounding cultures even on 'non-religious' issues...The argument to negate this possibility has to establish a universal, or near universal, external situation and then argue that what the Bible describes is identical to or at least close to that universal situation. Of course, it can be attempted, but it is well to be aware of the pitfalls. If there is a common or near universal modern mind and it is clear that premodern practice deviates from that, then the tendency can be to combine together all premodern expressions as being the universal converse of the modern, when actually there are considerable differences among premodern beliefs and practices. It follows that the whole argument must collapse if there are actually varying beliefs and practices in the premodern period, especially in cultures contemporary with the Bible.¹⁶⁶

When we identify a certain element of Scripture as coming from the scientifically naïve assumptions of the time, and therefore distinguishable from the theological content of the biblical message, are we interpreting Scripture in its historical context? To some people we are, because the cosmology and prehistory of Scripture must be separable from its theological message because the cosmology and prehistory is the area that Christian apologists find difficult to defend. Yet, the same question could be answered quite differently. Is a distinction between the cosmological and theological demonstrably part of the common conception of the world in which Scripture originated? The answer is an unambiguous negative! That distinction is a modern one and thus is part of what we bring to the past.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ N. Weeks, *WTJ* 68 (2006), 284.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 284-85

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 285.

It is common to postulate that the Bible shared the common view of primitive societies that the land was surrounded by sea upon which it floated and was surmounted by solid heavens...One does not need to prove what the ancient Japanese, for example, believed in order to weaken his argument. The force of Seely's argument depends upon there being a uniform premodern belief. All that is needed to undermine the argument is an example of a different belief, preferably from a culture close to ancient Israel. The culture contemporary with the writing of the OT that gives us the most information about cosmological beliefs is Mesopotamia.¹⁶⁸

Significant Mesopotamian evidence exists in a text which shows a drawing of land surrounded by a circular ocean. In reference to this drawing, Seely does not mention that the map also shows regions beyond the sea. Horowitz is undecided whether these regions are islands or larger landmasses. Whatever the case, the drawing is not evidence for a simple picture of the earth as land surrounded by a circular ocean...Further evidence of land beyond the sea comes in the Etana Epic when Etana, looking down from a great height, compares the sea to a ditch—presumably with banks on either side.¹⁶⁹

A Neo-Assyrian text gives three levels to the earth: the earth's surface; the region of the god Ea, which is generally seen as the watery Apsu; and the underworld. Yet, there is not a consistent belief that below the solid surface was a watery Apsu. Building texts describe the foundations of a building being placed on the underworld or the surface of the underworld. The roots of mountains also go down to the underworld. Further complicating the picture is a text where the gods dig a ditch for the sea with a plough so that the sea would actually rest on the earth's surface. These varying pictures should warn us that there is not a simple, uniform physical picture being presented.¹⁷⁰

Through recent discussions of the relationship of the Bible to other cosmologies, one text has been disproportionately used: the Babylonian Creation Account, or Enuma Elish. There are some problems with its common comparison with the Bible because it is a text known for its aberrant character and is not typical of the oldest Mesopotamian cosmologies.¹⁷¹

Further, the cosmology of Enuma Elish is by no means straightforward...The common identification is that Apsu is sweet (fresh) water, based on texts where apsu, as a common noun, refers to springs and canal waters. Tiamat is obviously related to the noun tamtu, meaning 'sea,' thus the common explanation that Apsu and Tiamat stand for fresh and salt water respectively.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 286.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 286.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 286-87.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 287.

¹⁷² Ibid. 287-88.

Immediately there is difficulty in deriving a physical picture from this action. The ‘deep’ or Apsu, is often pictured as the domain of Ea. In such cases it seems to be in the Persian Gulf, which is salt water. Apsu can also be found in fresh water, and Apsu is also the name of Ea’s temple in Eridu... Yet, if that is the case, was drawing a physical picture the text’s purpose?¹⁷³

Older translations such as by P. Jensen and A. Heidel saw the following lines (IV: 142-145) as describing the formation of the earth over Apsu, thus giving a three-tiered universe of sky, earth, and Apsu. This translation cannot be sustained and it is now clear that these verses are still talking about the sky. The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary puts forward an alternate translation: ‘The esgalla (great temple) (called) Esarra which he created, is the sky.’ The text says that this temple is equivalent in dimension to the Apsu. Note that the text is once again concerned with a temple, but it would seem to be one of cosmic dimensions. An index to the difficulty of this passage is that yet a different interpretation is presented by A. Livingstone. He believes that the Esarra is a new level of the cosmos, situated between heaven and the Apsu.¹⁷⁴

The fate of the other half of Tiamat is continued in an incomplete text. What is clear is that the Euphrates and Tigris rivers are described as coming out of her eyes (V:55)... There are problems in trying to form a physical picture from this description. We have seen that Tiamat is generally equated with the sea, or at least a watery body. In his treatment of ‘the waters above the firmament,’ Seely concedes the point that, contrary to his other attempts to argue universal prescientific notions, primitive peoples do not generally think of water above the sky. Hence, he has to argue that the biblical account is closely related to Enuma Elish. Thus, it is crucial to his whole argument that a guard be set to prevent the waters of the half of Tiamat, now become the sky, from escaping. Here Tiamat is very clearly watery, and that is crucial to Seely’s argument.¹⁷⁵

Let us consider the other half of Tiamat. Surely it must also be watery, yet it seems to be laid over Apsu, which we have seen was also a body of water. Seely’s solution is to suggest that it is the water of Apsu which is emerging through Tiamat. That is in a way logical in that springs and the Tigris and Euphrates are fresh water; however, the text itself does not mention Apsu in this context. Anyway, why did water need to come from Apsu in this lower half if Tiamat was also watery?¹⁷⁶

One suspects that behind these difficulties there is a problem. If prescientific people think in terms of the world as a flat disk, surrounded by sea and floating on that sea, then the waters from below that emerge as springs must be the waters of the sea, namely, salt water. Yet, they are fresh. If we are correct in seeing Apsu as

¹⁷³ Ibid. 288.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 288.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 288-89.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 289.

sweet water and Tiamat as salt water, then the composer at least recognized the distinction. Further, if the waters of Tiamat's half that was raised to the sky are the source of rain, then one would expect rain to be salt water.¹⁷⁷

What physical and geometric model can we form from Enuma Elish if Apsu, the dwelling of Ea, which, according to other texts is watery, is built upon Apsu which is fresh water? If half of Tiamat is the sky, is the sky conceived of as salt water? What about the other half of Tiamat? If that becomes the earth, should not the earth become salt water? If Livingstone is correct and there is a level below the half of Tiamat that became the heavens, what does that do to the geometry of the cosmos?¹⁷⁸

What this examination shows us is that one can form a physical and geometric model if one is selective in what one chooses to quote from Enuma Elish, but not if one takes each passage that should be relevant. This situation raises a fundamental issue. Was the author thinking in terms of a physical and geometric model? For modern thinkers cosmology primarily implies a physical model. In trying to abstract the cosmology of an ancient text, we naturally look for what physical model we can extract. By selective quotation, we can obtain such a model. Yet, if all the details will not fit a physical and geometric picture, are we engaging in correct exegesis?¹⁷⁹

I strongly suspect that the aim of Enuma Elish is not to build a physical cosmology, but to provide a background for Esagila, the temple of Marduk at Babylon...If that is the case, is it legitimate to take parts out of context and to try to form a physical cosmology?¹⁸⁰

Take for example Ps 24:2. Seely makes a point of the fact that the relationship of the land to the waters in this passage and in Ps 136:6 is explained by the preposition 'al which has 'upon' as its primary meaning. The problem is that there are also passages where this preposition has a primary sense of 'above.'¹⁸¹

Judgment by water is a recurrent theme in the biblical text. We find it first in the flood, with its clear connections to the creation account. It appears again in the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan. It is frequently invoked as a metaphor of threat and judgment...I am suggesting that it is in that context that we interpret passages that describe the relationship of land and water.¹⁸²

It may be objected that we may still discern the underlying physical cosmology in such passages. Perhaps! Attempts to do so take us back to the already mentioned

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 289.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 289.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 289-90.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 290.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 291.

¹⁸² Ibid. 291.

problem of the relationship of fresh water and salt water. The threat from water to the earth involves both sweet and salt water. Rivers may overflow their banks; sea may invade the land...there is no need in this picture to investigate the relationship of salt water to fresh water; however, once we attempt to turn this into a physical picture, we cannot avoid the issue of the physical relationship of fresh to salt water. If both biblical and other ancient texts were not thinking in terms of a comprehensive physical model, then the problem does not arise.¹⁸³

Seely argues that there is a common premodern conception of the sky as a solid dome...Seely's view has been contested...Birds fly in heaven (Deut 4:17) and God is enthroned in heaven (Ps 11:4), so it cannot be conceived as a solid structure. Seely attempted to deal with this in his original article by saying that heaven is wider than *raqia*. However, the prooftexts that he cites for that proposition are all texts which show that heaven is not solid. Thus, they prove that heaven is wider than the *raqia* only if we accept the point at issue that the *raqia* must be solid; therefore, a non-solid heaven cannot be completely synonymous with *raqia*. This is a clear example of assuming the point at issue.¹⁸⁴

Mesopotamian texts are not a great help to us because there seem to be different views in Mesopotamia... Even if we ignore the problem in assuming that biblical views must be the same as external cultures, if there is no unanimity in the Mesopotamian tradition, then we cannot invoke the tradition to explain the Bible.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Ibid. 291.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 291-92.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 292.

Appendix IV: Reviewing the Reviewers

Steve Hays

Enns says:

The ideological connection between houses of worship and cosmology is a well-known topic among biblical scholars. Beale enters that discussion in chapter 6. His handling of this issue is not without its shortcomings, but the far greater problem is Beale's desire to co-opt that discussion to speak to the Bible/science debate in chap. 7, which yields at best an idiosyncratic use of the evidence. Beale insists that cosmic temple imagery in the OT is in no way mythic or guilty of promoting an errant cosmology. Instead the imagery is merely of a theological/symbolic nature that employs phenomenological language. Other reviewers will hopefully address this arbitrary view in more detail, but no one I know of, least of all the scholars Beale cites in support of his cosmic temple theory, would even think to make such a claim. Myth is the conceptual and narrative foundation of ANE cosmic temple imagery. Separating the two is only required in a theological framework where the OT needs to be shielded from its environment.¹⁸⁶

i) Enns fails to define "myth."

ii) At issue is not the generic question of the intended conceptual and narrative foundation of such imagery in ANE usage, but the specific question of what Bible writers intended when they creatively appropriated that imagery. A secondary source isn't bound by the original intent of the primary source. And it's not uncommon for a secondary source to apply the primary source in ways that might be at variance with the intentions and/or conceptual scheme of the primary source. Take the Christian use of Classical sources in Milton and Dante.

Before I comment on Lamoureux's review,¹⁸⁷ I'd like to draw attention to Babinski's double standards. On the one hand, Babinski tried to discredit the article by Noel Weeks (without bothering to actually interact with his article) by saying, "Do you honestly believe that one Young Earth creationist ancient historian Noel Weeks who writes for 'Answers in Genesis' is on par with the scholars I mentioned in my blog reply (and in my chapter) whose specialties are ANE cosmologies?"

And this despite the fact that Noel Weeks has a doctorate in Mediterranean Studies from Brandeis.

But Ed then turns around and cites Lamoureux's review of Beale. Yet Lamoureux's primary field of specialization is dentistry! Likewise, Ed also plugs the work of Paul Seely. But does Seely have a doctorate in the field of ANE studies?

¹⁸⁶ <http://aboulet.com/2010/01/14/enns-reviews-beales-erosion-of-inerrancy-in-evangelicalism/#more-2292>

¹⁸⁷ <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF6-10Lamoureux.pdf>

Turning to Lamoureux's review:

First, Beale presents a temple that reflects a two-tier universe when, in fact, ancient Near Eastern peoples and the Bible embraced a three-tier cosmos—the heavens, the earth, and the underworld.

Is that a fact? Well, here's what two scholars have to say on the subject:

As indicated above, the world can be described not only as the sum of two parts, but of three or more as well.¹⁸⁸

Enuma Elish includes seven cosmic regions... When considered by themselves, the Heavens, Esarra, the earth's surface, and Apsu/Esgalla provide a cosmography of two heavens and two earths that may be compared with the three heavens and earths of KAR 30.¹⁸⁹

A number of Sumerian incantations may preserve a Sumerian cosmographic tradition of seven heavens and seven earths that can be compared to the three heavens and earths of the Akkadian mystical-religious text KAR 307 30-38.¹⁹⁰

So it sounds as though ANE cosmography was pretty fluid on the number of cosmic "tiers."

Continuing with Lamoureux:

Beale is actually aware of the existence of the "netherworld,"¹⁹ and Scripture often refers to this region using the Hebrew sheol (sixty-five times) and the Greek hades (twenty times) and katachthonion (once as the chthonic realm). In particular, the New Testament refers to this place as "under the earth" (Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:3, 13; see also Eph. 4:9–10). If Israel's temple is supposed to be a model of the cosmos, then where is the underworld depicted?

i) This criticism is fairly inept. His objection seems to be that there is no "room" for the "netherworld" if the world is a cosmic temple. But that misses the point of symbolic cosmography. Metaphors don't need to be literally consistent with each other. Scripture frequently uses mixed metaphors. Since a figurative depiction is not a literal place, you don't have to add up the number of different "stories" or "compartments."

The real question is not if Scripture ever uses conventional triple-decker imagery, but if this imagery is literal or figurative.

ii) Lamoureux also ignores the evidence that this downward motion is an idiomatic meta-

¹⁸⁸ O. Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World* (Eisenbrauns 1997), 35.

¹⁸⁹ W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Eisenbrauns 1998), 123.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 208.

phor for the grave.¹⁹¹

Second, Beale argues that the seven lamps on the lampstands in the Holy Place represent seven heavenly light sources—the sun, moon, and the five planets visible to the naked eye. However, Genesis 1 does not differentiate the five “wandering stars,” and the seven lamps of equal size do not distinguish the “two great lights” from the stars (Gen. 1:16). Moreover, there were ten lampstands in the Holy Place. Does this mean that there were ten suns, ten moons, and so forth?

i) The suggestion that the luminaries in Gen 1 foreshadow the lampstands in the tabernacle doesn’t depend on a precise correlation between the number of heavenly bodies and the number of lampstands. Rather, it’s based on the specialized wording.

ii) Lamoureux seems to be confusing the number of lamps with the number of lampstands. A single lampstand could have seven branching lamps (e.g. the Menorah).

iii) Moreover, Beale is not the only scholar to draw this connection.¹⁹² It’s disingenuous of Babinski to cite Lamoureux’s review of Beale when Walton does the very same thing, and Babinski plugs no fewer than five of Walton’s books and articles!

Third, the walls in both the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies featured garden imagery with “palm trees and open flowers” (1 Kings 6:29). This is not expected if the Holy Place is supposed to represent the visible heavens. In attempting to resolve this problem, Beale claims that the Holy Place “was also intended to mimic the garden of Eden.”²⁰ Yet there is garden imagery in the Holy of Holies as well. Is God’s dwelling place “also intended to mimic the garden of Eden”? I am not convinced by this ad hoc line of argumentation.

i) Lamoureux commits a level-confusion. Both the tabernacle and the garden are micro-cosmic representations of the cosmic temple (i.e. “heaven”). Heaven is the exemplar, of which the garden and the tabernacle are the exempla. The garden and the tabernacle share common motifs because they both exemplify a common exemplar.

i) However, it’s also true that the garden foreshadows the tabernacle. And Beale isn’t the only scholar to argue that point.¹⁹³

The sandy foundation upon which Beale’s cosmic temple rests is further seen with his biblical justification for his thesis...Beale later states that Ps. 78:69 is “the

¹⁹¹ Cf. H. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Baker 2003), 535-36.

¹⁹² E. g. T. D. Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (IVP 2008), 39; V. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Wolgemuth & Hyatt 1991), 18-19; W. Vogels, “The Cultic & Civil Calendars of the Fourth Day of Creation (Gen 1, 14b),” *SJOT* 11 (1997): 163-80; J. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Zondervan 2001), 123-24. On Biblical temple cosmography in general, cf. J. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Harper & Roe 1988); Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, <http://www.meredithkline.com/files/books/kingdomprologue.pdf>

¹⁹³ E. g. G. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” R. Hess & D. Tsumura, eds. *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood* (Eisenbrauns 1994), 399-404.

most explicit Old Testament” passage.²² However, if this is the best biblical support for his thesis, most will agree that it is, indeed, sparse.

Once again, Beale is not the only scholar to document cosmic temple motifs in Scripture. It goes well beyond Ps 78:69. Indeed, John Walton has written a whole monograph on the subject, which Babinski plugs in his essay!¹⁹⁴ As such, it’s disingenuous for Babinski to cite Lamoureux’s review of Beale when Walton makes the same case at length, and Babinski points the reader to that very monograph! Does Babinski actually read the books he cites? If so, does he even understand what he’s reading?

In a second strategic move to alleviate tension between the Bible and modern science, Beale recycles the phenomenological language argument, a popular approach often heard in evangelical circles...There is, however, a fundamental error in this argument. It fails to distinguish the ancient phenomenological perspective embraced by ancient peoples from our modern phenomenological perspective. What the biblical writers saw with their eyes, they believed to be real, like the literal rising and setting of the sun. In fact, the belief that the sun actually crossed the sky every day was held by nearly everyone right up until the seventeenth century.

i) That’s a valid distinction. However, Lamoureux fails to show that Beale is guilty of blurring that distinction. Instead, Lamoureux merely asserts his own position.

ii) Is it true that “what the biblical writers saw with their eyes, they believed to be true?” Did Bible writers think mountains were really smaller at a distance, just because they appeared to be smaller at a distance? Did Bible writers think mountains actually get taller as you approach them, and shorter as you move away?

Beale’s interpretation is another example of the failure of concordism.²⁸ First, Scripture clearly states that the firmament (expanse) was under the waters above, not in them or part of them. Second, if the writer of Genesis 1 had intended the waters above to mean clouds, vapor, or mist “from which rain comes,” then there were three well-known Hebrew words (‘anan, ‘ed, nasî’; Gen. 9:13, Jer. 10:13, Gen. 2:6, respectively) that he could have used. But the inspired author never did. Instead, he employed the common term for water (mayim) five times in Gen. 1:6–8.

i) This confuses a figure of speech with what the figure stands for. If the business of the upper waters and sluice gates are picturesque metaphors for rain and rain clouds, then it wouldn’t be surprising if different terminology is used. You use one term (or set of terms) for the metaphor, and another term of the thing it represents.

ii) Lamoureux also contradicts himself. If, as he’d have it, the Hebrews judged by appearances, then they could see for themselves that rain came from rain clouds. That’s an observable phenomenon. And, indeed, we have scriptural examples (e.g. Judg 5:4; Ps

¹⁹⁴ *The Lost World of Genesis 1* (IVP 2009).

77:17; Eccl 11:3; Isa 5:6).

On the other hand, a cosmic ocean above a solid vault would be invisible to the naked eye. No human observer could detect its existence.

Appendix V: Babinski's Tall Tales

Steve Hays

I. Ed Babinski

After claiming to summarize his email communications with Gregory Beale and John Oswalt, Babinski says, “both agree that the wealth of parallels between the Bible and the ancient Near Eastern myths are impinging uncomfortably on a belief in the ‘inerrancy of Scripture’...” (134).

I contacted each man, both of whom were kind enough to answer me. After comparing their replies with Babinski's “summation,” I'd say Babinski personally illustrates the observation of Richard Carrier, his co-contributor, that we “also know people lie, even if for what they think is a good reason. They also exaggerate, tell tall tales, craft edifying myths and legends...” (292).

II. Gregory Beale

Of course, he is wrong. I do not remember having much email correspondence with him, and I certainly know that what you say that he says is my position is absurd. If this is how he is representing me, please tell him that he is not representing me correctly.

Blessings,

Greg Beale

[Private email 6/22/10]

III. John Oswalt

Dear Mr. Hays,

You are right that the statement you quoted does not reflect my position accurately. Mr. Babinski contacted me by e-mail, asking my opinion on the creationist/evolution debate in regards Gen 1-2. I was upset to discover after the fact that he was actually intending to use my informal comments in the way he did. I do not have my reply in front of me, but I am quite sure that I did not say what he says there. In fact, I do not believe those accounts impinge on a belief in inerrancy at all. I suppose they might cause problems for some dictation theory of inspiration, but that would be all. I suspect I did say that they cause problems for a strictly literal interpretation of Gen 1-2, but that would be as far as I would go. I believe that what is said in those chapters is historically accurate, as testified to by the radical differences from the mythological literature. I might not be able, using those materials alone, to reconstruct precisely what happened, since historical reconstruction is not the purpose for which they were written, but that in no way [negates] them as historical witnesses. Babinski's attempt to say that Genesis is formally identical with the

ANE origin accounts becomes ludicrous when the Bible is read alongside those accounts.
They are not the same thing.

Yours sincerely,

John N. Oswalt

[Private email 6/25/10]

Appendix VI: And your old men shall dream dreams

Steve Hays

According to Richard Carrier, “I bet you’d come up with several good rules of thumb about what kinds of stories to believe or doubt. You’ll say, for example, that these sorts of things don’t really happen because nothing like them happens today, certainly never when you’re around...So what is more likely? That miracles like these really happen, while you and everyone else you trust, including every scientist and investigator for the last few centuries, just happens to have missed them all?...Your doubts become stronger when you can’t question the witnesses...Apart from just ‘feeling’ that it’s true, or being told so in a dream, or seeing ghosts or hearing voices, and other equally dubious grounds for belief today (you wouldn’t believe such things from any other religion)...” (292-97).

What’s ironic about this breezy dismissal is that just a month before I read his essay, I had the following dream: I had a very tiring day, so I went to bed unusually early for me (9PM). I dreamt of two women walking their dogs (2 dogs) at night. Then I woke up. It was 11PM. (I know the time due to the illuminated digital readout on my clock.) I looked out my bedroom window (which faces the street) and saw a woman walking her two dogs in the moonlight.

On that face of it, that’s a precognitive dream. Yet Carrier assured us that such stories are incredible because nothing like that happens today—or to anyone in the last few centuries. And I don’t have to question the witness since I’m the witness.

Of course this could be pure coincidence. I’m quite open to that explanation. But is that the best explanation?

My experience combines a string of “coincidental” features. The gender of the person/s (female). The activity (walking one’s dog). The time of day (after dark). The number of dogs (2). The fact that I had this dream a moment before. The fact that she happened to be walking her dogs at the moment I peered out the window. The fact that she happened to be on the street just outside my window when I looked out my window. Also, 11PM is a rather odd time for a woman to be out at night walking her dogs.

Taken individually, we could explain them away as sheer coincidence. And perhaps that’s the case. Yet they do add up. But the point is not to prove that my dream was paranormal. The point, rather, is that Carrier isn’t open to that possibility. He’d always favor a string of increasingly improbable “coincidences” over the simpler explanation.

Let’s take another example—from Ruskin’s autobiography:

Before her illness took its fatal form—before, indeed, I believe it had at all declared itself—my aunt dreamed one of her foresight dreams, simple and plain

enough for anyone's interpretation; that she was approaching the ford of a dark river, alone, when little Jessie came running up behind her, and passed her, and went through first. Then she passed through herself, and looking back from the other side, saw her old Mause approaching from the distance to the bank of the stream. And so it was, that Jessie, immediately afterwards, sickened rapidly and died; and a few months, or it might be nearly a year afterwards, my aunt died of decline; and Mause, some two or three years later, having had no care after her mistress and Jessie were gone, but when she might to go them.¹⁹⁵

At the time Ruskin wrote his autobiography, he was an apostate, so he has no vested interest in fabricating miracles. Should we believe this or not?

Once again, my point is not to come down firmly on one side or the other. My point is that Carrier presumes to make sweeping claims about human experience, including claims on behalf of his readers, when—in fact—he is simply projecting his own experience on to others—without actually consulting them.

And, of course, his curt dismissal is viciously circular. He denies that things like this ever happen. And he justifies his denial by appeal to human experience. If, however, you cite testimonial evidence to the contrary, then he will discount that evidence out of hand...because things like that never happen!

Carrier doesn't judge reality as it comes to us. Rather, he comes to reality with his pre-conception of what the world must be like.

¹⁹⁵ J. Ruskin, *Praeterita* (Oxford 1978), 61.

Appendix VII: Hallucinations, Hostile Witnesses, and the Resurrection

Jason Engwer

Richard Carrier writes:

“He [the risen Christ] could visit me right now. Or you! And yet, instead, besides his already fanatical followers, just one odd fellow [Paul] ever saw him... If I were God, I would appear to everyone and prevent any meddling with my book, and since I can't be cleverer or more concerned for the salvation of the world than God, this must be what he would do, too.” (308-309)

Evidence for the resurrection isn't the only means by which God can lead a person to Himself. And if God knows that somebody would reject the truth if presented with it, why should we expect Him to be attempting to persuade that individual? God isn't a human who's trying to discern the best method of reaching as many people as possible, largely ignorant of their circumstances and the outcome of His efforts. He has more to work with (Acts 17:26-27).

We wouldn't have to see the risen Christ ourselves to have sufficient evidence for His resurrection. A preference for more evidence isn't equivalent to a need for more. The testimony of other people who saw the risen Christ, accompanied by corroboration like the empty tomb, could be enough without having seen Jesus risen from the dead myself. People accept many thousands of claims about historical events they didn't witness firsthand.

Carrier refers to most of those who claimed to see the risen Christ as “already fanatical followers”, and he suggests that such people could have hallucinated or experienced other delusions. They could have. But Carrier doesn't demonstrate that it's probable. Rather, he makes reference to such experiences among other people in other contexts, assumes that those other people experienced something naturalistic, then assumes, without demonstrating it to be probable, that the resurrection witnesses had similar naturalistic experiences.

In a debate with Michael Licona on February 11, 2010¹⁹⁶, Carrier argued for a prior probability that the resurrection witnesses had naturalistic experiences based on the fact that such experiences are more common than seeing a man who had risen from the dead. But to leave us with only such a vague prior probability to judge by, Carrier has to dismiss many other lines of evidence that could be cited in support of the Christian position. For example, the gospels and Acts give us a lot of information that would be inconsistent

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http://www.4truth.net/site/c.hiKXLbPNLrF/b.6076159/k.5D40/Debate_Video_Mike_Licona_vs_Richard_Carrier_2010.htm

with Carrier's theory if those accounts in the gospels and Acts were accepted as historical.

In his opening remarks in his debate with Licona, Carrier acknowledged that what Acts records about the resurrection witnesses' eating with Jesus (Acts 10:41), for example, is inconsistent with the notion that they were hallucinating. But such details that are problematic for a hallucination theory (group experiences, touching Jesus, Jesus' verifiable interaction with the physical atmosphere around Him, etc.) are found in many places in the gospels and Acts (Matthew 28:9, 28:17, Mark 16:4-7, Luke 24:43, John 20:17, 21:12-13, Acts 10:41, etc.). And since Carrier argues for multiple authors of John's gospel, including viewing chapter 21 as a later addition, he would have even more sources to explain than the four authors those five documents have traditionally been attributed to. If he believes in group authorship of one or more of the other documents as well, then the problem increases accordingly. In my response to chapter 11 of *The Christian Delusion*, I discussed some of the problems with Carrier's skeptical view of the gospels and Acts. But notice the radical nature of the skepticism required to dismiss not just some details contained in those documents, but even points that multiple documents or all of them agree upon.

For example, how does Carrier know that men like Peter and Thomas were "already fanatical followers" in any relevant sense? He doesn't. Despite their differences, the gospels agree that Jesus' followers were slow to believe in the resurrection. Why think that all of the sources are wrong on that issue? Arguing that Luke is wrong about the census under Quirinius or that Matthew contradicts John concerning what happened with the women at the tomb, for example, doesn't prove that all five of the documents in question are probably wrong about another issue they all agree upon and that no other source contradicts. Carrier has to dismiss a wide range of details in the gospels and Acts that are inconsistent with a hallucination theory, but the doubts he raises about those documents are far too limited to justify such a radical conclusion. It's not enough for Carrier to argue against something like an inerrantist view of the documents or a generally conservative view. It requires something much more radical to accomplish his objective.

Think about what all he has to dismiss. He can't just dismiss details found in only one source, like Matthew's account of the women touching Jesus' feet (Matthew 28:9). He also has to argue that we can't trust what multiple documents or all of them tell us concerning the women's initial unbelief, the disciples' initial unbelief, the witnesses' interest in physical evidence, the witnesses' desire to carry on lengthy interactions with Jesus rather than being satisfied with something like seeing Him pass by quickly a few hundred feet away, etc.

And it's not just that he has to dismiss such elements of the gospels and Acts. Common human experience (what Carrier selectively appeals to in order to justify his claims about prior probability) tells us that people like those mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 probably would have had similar interests. During the inquiry period of his debate with Licona (the section in which they asked each other questions), Carrier acknowledged that the common Jewish view of resurrection involved a physical body. It's not as though we'd

expect the early Christians to have waited until around the time when the gospels and Acts were written in order to become interested in physical evidence for the resurrection. The interest likely would have been there all along. The same can be said of interest in interacting with the resurrected Jesus rather than just seeing Him at a distance or not attempting to have any discussions with Him, for example. If Carrier wants us to believe that the 1 Corinthians 15 appearances involved hallucinations so vague that groups of people could mistakenly think they were sharing the same experience, for instance, then he has to address the unlikelihood that all of the hallucinations would be so vague and wouldn't be detected as hallucinations by the recipients. As Licona mentioned during the debate, most of those who hallucinate eventually realize what happened. Are we to believe, however, that the early Christian resurrection witnesses didn't realize they had hallucinated (or their recognition of what happened didn't leave traces in the historical record)?

Take the appearance to more than five hundred men at once as an example (1 Corinthians 15:6). Did they all hallucinate at the same time? On the same subject? Instead of some people seeing Jesus to the northeast, while others saw him to the south, did they all think they were seeing Him in the same direction? Or they didn't notice that they were seeing Him in different places? Did they all perceive Him as being at the same distance, such as thirty feet away from the group? Did they all think He remained silent or spoke? Did they all perceive Him as saying the same thing to them? Did nobody seek any physical evidence, such as touching Him, and thereby recognize that a hallucination had occurred? Etc. Think about how coordinated, in multiple contexts, a series of individual hallucinations would have to be in order to produce the group effect in question.

Hallucinations are individual experiences. They happen in the mind. And all of these events happened in a context in which there would have been a high level of concern about physicality (a resurrection in first-century Israel), as we see reflected in the gospels and Acts.

Even an individual hallucination, like Peter's, could easily have been falsified by Peter himself or others around him. Did he never attempt to touch Jesus, speak with Him, etc.?

These things supposedly happened multiple times (the appearances in 1 Corinthians 15 and whatever other ones occurred). When Carrier cites the occurrence of hallucinations (or events he assumes to be hallucinations) in other contexts, he's not addressing the many problems that arise when proposing a hallucination theory specifically in the early Christian context.

In his debate with Licona and in *The Christian Delusion*, Carrier frequently cites practices like speaking in tongues and receiving revelations from God in the early churches. He assumes that such experiences were naturalistic, then he assumes that such naturalistic experiences can be projected back into the timeframe of the resurrection appearances in order to explain what happened in that other context. In the closing remarks of his debate with Licona, Carrier claims that the resurrection witnesses had a history of experiencing hallucinations. Aside from his disputable assumption that the experiences of the later

churches were naturalistic, why should we project those experiences into the pre-resurrection lives of the witnesses? Do the gospels portray the resurrection witnesses as behaving during Jesus' earthly ministry in a manner similar to what we see in 1 Corinthians 12-14? No. Early Christianity believed in a new manifestation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and onward. There's no reason to think that people like Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas, Cleopas, and the more than five hundred in 1 Corinthians 15:6 were involved in hallucinations prior to the time of the resurrection, regularly living out a naturalistic variation of 1 Corinthians 12-14. Carrier's projection of later church life back into an earlier time, one that the early Christians themselves said was significantly different, needs to be argued, not just assumed. Early Christianity viewed later church life as a fruit of the resurrection, not its root. Why believe otherwise?

In the closing remarks of his debate with Licona, Carrier claims that it would be "natural" for the early Christians to hallucinate a resurrected Jesus in their historical context. They were surrounded with cultures that believed in dying and rising gods, they believed in supernatural visions, they may have thought the Old Testament predicted the Messiah's resurrection, etc. But as N.T. Wright explained, after studying religious movements in Israel around the time of Jesus' death:

"So far as we know, all the followers of these first-century messianic movements were fanatically committed to the cause. They, if anybody, might be expected to suffer from this blessed twentieth century disease called 'cognitive dissonance' when their expectations failed to materialize. But in no case, right across the century before Jesus and the century after him, do we hear of any Jewish group saying that their executed leader had been raised from the dead and he really was the Messiah after all."¹⁹⁷

Something else Carrier said in his debate with Licona ought to be addressed. I don't know what all Carrier has in mind when he refers to hallucinations or other naturalistic experiences in contexts outside of early Christianity. I've read some of the sources he cites, but there are many I haven't read. However, during the debate with Licona he cited the example of people who claim to have seen a UFO or to have been abducted by aliens. He contrasted their experiences with those of earlier generations, when people claimed to see fairies, for example. Supposedly, the changing nature of what people claimed to see in different generations (fairies at one point and aliens later) demonstrates that their experiences were naturalistic. But does it? A demon trying to deceive people would be interested in using the conventions of the day, regardless of their consistency with past generations. Something like demonic activity could be inconsistent in that manner, yet be supernatural. Whatever good reason Carrier has for concluding that some experiences are naturalistic, and I'm sure he often does have good reason, it seems that his conclusion is sometimes premature. And as I mentioned in my response to chapter 11 of *The Christian Delusion*, Carrier doesn't interact with some of the best modern cases of the paranormal, like the ones discussed by Stephen Braude.

¹⁹⁷ cited in Paul Copan and Ronald Tacelli, ed., *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact Or Figment?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 183

Carrier speculates that James may have been a “loyal believer” prior to Jesus’ death (307). Though James became a faithful follower of Christ later in life, he had been a skeptic earlier (Matthew 13:57, Mark 3:20-35, Luke 8:19-21, John 7:5), even after Jesus had performed many miracles, including with James present or nearby (John 2:1-12).¹⁹⁸ All we hear about concerning James in the gospels is from his time as a skeptic. Why, then, are we supposed to believe that he was “already a fanatical follower” when he thought he saw the risen Christ? Not only does he not appear as a fanatical follower at the time of the gospels, but he’s even a skeptic. If he became a believer sometime prior to the resurrection appearance, what reason do we have to think he was the sort of fanatical follower Carrier refers to, one who’s likely to have hallucinated or experienced other delusions? Does his skeptical background suggest that?

Though we don’t have much evidence regarding James’ status just before the resurrection appearance mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:7, the evidence we do have suggests that he wasn’t yet a believer, much less the sort of fanatical follower Carrier speculates about. James is prominent as a believer from the period just after the resurrection onward (Acts 1:14, 12:7, 1 Corinthians 9:5, his being included in the early creed of 1 Corinthians 15, Galatians 1:19, 2:9-10, James 1:1, Jude 1, etc.). Why does his prominence as a believer begin at that point? There are many places in the gospels where he could have been mentioned as a believer, even a fanatical follower. He could have been portrayed as interacting with Jesus in a way similar to how the Twelve did (asking Him questions, etc.). He could have been present in the events surrounding the Last Supper, Gethsemane, Jesus’ trial, the cross, the burial, etc. We see many other individuals in those contexts (Peter, John, Mary, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, etc.). Jesus’ decision to entrust Mary to John (John 19:26-27) suggests that James was considered unfit to care for her at the time. Given how significant it would be to entrust her to somebody other than one of her children, it seems unlikely that Jesus would have passed by James on that occasion if James was a believer at the time, even an immature one. Surely Jesus wouldn’t have passed by James if he was the sort of fanatical follower Carrier refers to. Furthermore, the fact that James is described as a skeptic even after Jesus had performed many miracles, including with James nearby, suggests that it would have taken something of more significance to convince him. It’s possible that something like the cumulative effect of pre-resurrection miracles would have convinced James, but 1 Corinthians 15:7 has more explanatory power. Again, we don’t have much evidence to go by here, but what little we have suggests that James continued to be a skeptic up to the time of the cross, with 1 Corinthians 15:7 serving as the best explanation we have for why he changed shortly afterward. There’s no reason to think he was the sort of fanatical follower Carrier describes prior to Jesus’ appearance to him.

In my review of chapter 11 of *The Christian Delusion*, I discussed some of the problems with Carrier’s attempt to dismiss Paul as an “odd fellow” who may have been struggling with guilt and may have found Christianity attractive prior to his conversion. Contrast Carrier’s speculations to what Acts tells us about the events leading up to Paul’s conversion and what Paul tells us about his previous mindset (Galatians 1:14, Philippians 3:5-6).

¹⁹⁸ For a fuller discussion of some of the relevant passages, see Eric Svendsen, *Who Is My Mother?* (Amityville, New York: Calvary Press, 2001).

Acts tells us that there were at least two men who traveled with Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:7). He was on a journey to persecute the church, so the men traveling with him wouldn't have been Christians. And they perceived the risen Christ (Acts 9:7, 22:9, 26:14), though not as clearly as Paul did.

Assume, for the sake of argument, that men like Andrew and John were fanatical followers likely to have hallucinated or experienced other such delusions. We would still have at least four people Jesus appeared to who can't reasonably be classified as such (James, Paul, and at least two travel companions of Paul).

But why assume that those were the only ones? (Even if they were the only ones, Carrier's claim that Paul was the lone exception would be wrong.) 1 Corinthians 9:1 refers to apostleship in the sense of one who had seen the risen Jesus. Verse 5 goes on to associate at least two brothers of Jesus (not just James) with "the rest of the apostles", including Paul and Peter. Those two men are known to be apostles in a high sense, not just a lower sense. It may be that 1 Corinthians 9:5 is putting the brothers of Jesus in the same category, meaning that at least one of the other brothers of Jesus, not just James, saw the risen Christ. That would help explain why multiple brothers of Jesus, not just James, were prominent in the early church. It would also help explain why the book of Jude was accepted as canonical (apostolic authorship). The evidence from the gospels I cited earlier, concerning James' initial skepticism, applies to the other brothers of Jesus as well. The more than five hundred mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6 are referred to as "brothers", but without Paul telling us whether they were believers at the time of the appearance or are referred to as brothers because of their status at the time Paul wrote. How does Carrier know that all, or even most or some or one of them, were fanatical followers ready to hallucinate (in coordination with each other)? He doesn't. How does Carrier know who "all the apostles" are in 1 Corinthians 15:7 and that they were similarly prone to the relevant delusions? He doesn't. And the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 is a selective summary. Carrier doesn't know who else Jesus appeared to.

Passages like Acts 10:41 and 13:31 could be cited as evidence that Jesus only appeared to people who were already His followers. But those passages don't tell us that every person involved was a fanatical follower, as Carrier puts it. And the passages are addressing the *presence* of a type of witness, not the *absence* of other types of witnesses. As Richard Bauckham has argued, there was a belief in the significance of witnesses who were present "from the beginning" (Luke 1:2, John 15:27, Acts 1:21-22) in ancient historiography.¹⁹⁹ The highlighting of such witnesses isn't equivalent to a denial that there were other witnesses. Acts 10 is set in a context in which Paul was already serving as a witness of the resurrected Christ without having been with Jesus in the contexts referred to in Acts 10:41 and 13:31. The passage in Acts 13 was spoken by Paul himself. And Acts is a sequel to Luke, which doesn't limit Jesus' appearances to those who meet the standards of Acts 10:41 and 13:31. The other gospels don't limit the appearances in that manner either.

¹⁹⁹ Jesus And The Eyewitnesses (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 114-154

It could be argued that if Jesus had appeared to more non-Christians than the ones I've discussed, then the early Christians surely would have left a record of that fact. But that objection would assume an early Christian interest not only in evidence, but even in hostile corroboration in particular. Critics of Christianity usually try to minimize the early Christians' interest in evidence. Besides, it was already known that two of the most prominent early church leaders (James and Paul) had been skeptics, and it was known that the emptiness of Jesus' tomb was accepted by Christianity's enemies. There was already significant evidence in place from hostile witnesses. More would be better, but not necessary. The gospels and other documents that were written after Jesus' appearances to non-Christians were widely known don't mention those appearances. For instance, the Johanne and Petrine documents say nothing of the conversions of James and Paul, even though the authors surely would have been aware of both. In a non-resurrection context, Luke is aware of the conversion of many within the Jewish religious hierarchy (Acts 6:7), yet he only mentions it once and briefly. Maybe James, Paul, and Paul's travel companions were the only non-Christians Jesus appeared to. But maybe not. The fact that others aren't mentioned in the extant documents doesn't carry much weight, and Carrier's assumption that Paul was the only one is dubious.

And it's not as though the evidence from sources who were believers prior to the resurrection would have been insignificant in the eyes of the early church. For example, even if you remove James and Paul from the appearances mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15, and assume that everybody else mentioned there was a believer prior to the appearances, a naturalistic explanation is still highly problematic. Modern skeptics haven't come up with a good explanation of the appearances to people who were already believers, much less the appearances to non-Christians. Demanding more evidence, when the attempt to dismiss the evidence we already have has been such a failure, is evasive.

What about the empty tomb? The early Jewish opponents of Christianity affirmed that the tomb was empty (Matthew 28:11-15; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 108; Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, 30). Matthew speaks as if the Jewish claim had been circulating from the start (Matthew 28:15). And contrary to what some people claim, Justin Martyr and Tertullian aren't just repeating what they read in Matthew's gospel. Both of them give details in their accounts that aren't mentioned by Matthew. And both Justin and Tertullian were interacting with the Jewish opponents of their day, so they would have been in a position to know what arguments the Jewish opposition was using.

In section 108 of his *Dialogue With Trypho*, Justin seems to cite a Jewish document or tradition, in which Jesus is referred to as a "deceiver" and reference is made to Jesus as Him "whom we crucified", apparently speaking from the perspective of non-Christian Jews ("we"). Justin is familiar with many Jewish responses to Christianity and "shows acquaintance with rabbinical discussions"²⁰⁰. This passage in Justin contains multiple details not found in Matthew's gospel. For example, Slusser's edition of Justin has him referring to how the Jews "chose certain men by vote and sent them throughout the whole

²⁰⁰ Michael Slusser, ed., *Dialogue With Trypho* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Of America Press, 2003), n. 9 on 33

civilized world”²⁰¹ in order to argue against Christianity, including by accusing the disciples of stealing the body. It’s not as though people would have been dependent solely on Matthew for information on such subjects. Justin had more than Matthew’s account to go by, as other early sources would have.

The idea that all three men - Matthew, Justin, and Tertullian - were mistaken is unreasonable. The early Jewish opponents of Christianity corroborated the empty tomb. And they weren’t fanatical followers likely to have hallucinated or to have suffered from other relevant delusions. They’re also unlikely to have been apathetic or accommodating in their response to Christianity, especially on a matter as significant as Jesus’ resurrection.

There is an element of truth to Carrier’s argument. The evidence for the resurrection is much less than it could have been. But the fact that Carrier’s argument has some truth to it can’t justify the many inaccuracies he adds to that truth, which make the overall balance of evidence seem significantly different than it actually is. The issue is whether we have sufficient evidence, not whether the evidence is exhaustive or even close to exhaustive. Whether the evidence is sufficient will depend on how sufficiency is being defined, which involves some issues Carrier doesn’t say much about. He was only writing one chapter for one book, so it’s understandable that he wouldn’t cover everything there. But he has made high claims for that chapter²⁰², claims that seem ridiculous when factors like the ones we’ve outlined in response to Carrier are taken into account.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 162

²⁰² See the last appendix in this ebook.

Appendix VIII: The Significance Of Suffering: Did the Resurrection Witnesses Lie to Achieve a Greater Good?

Jason Engwer

Richard Carrier argues that the resurrection witnesses may have been lying about the resurrection, yet have been willing to suffer and die for a faith that had the resurrection as one of its core beliefs (306-307). They may have agreed with some other portion of Christianity, such as its system of morality. By suffering and dying for the Christian faith, they could inspire others to adopt its moral system, even though the resurrection claim was false. In order to accomplish the greater good of furthering that moral system, lying about the resurrection would be justified.

Several problems with that argument come to mind. Some of these problems can be overcome, but even those problems add weight to the case against Carrier's theory and are worth considering:

- Carrier himself doesn't believe it. In a debate with Michael Licona on February 11, 2010 (near the end of the inquiry segment, in which they asked each other questions)²⁰³, Carrier said that he considers the theory unlikely. He didn't just say it's unlikely in the case of Paul. He used the plural.
- People usually tell the truth. Even a liar has to tell the truth most of the time in order to seem believable when he lies. We don't assume that somebody is lying as our default position. Those who want us to believe that the resurrection witnesses were lying carry the burden of proof.
- Think of how many historical conclusions could be challenged on such grounds. Just find some *other* belief associated with a core belief somebody seems to have suffered for, then speculate that he might have been suffering for the other belief while realizing that the core belief was false. Are critics of Christianity going to apply that sort of reasoning consistently?
- The more individuals the theory is applied to, the more problematic it becomes. People like the women who went to the tomb and supposedly saw the risen Jesus afterward and Paul's travel companions would have to be accounted for. Proposing an argument to cover the most prominent witnesses wouldn't be enough. Who all was involved in the lie?

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http://www.4truth.net/site/c.hiKXLbPNLrF/b.6076159/k.5D40/Debate_Video_Mike_Licona_vs_Richard_Carrier_2010.htm

- Are we to believe that even less educated (e.g., Peter) and less influential (e.g., Mary Magdalene) resurrection witnesses were thinking about how they could further something like a system of morality they admired by means of suffering for a lie about a resurrection? How often do people operate at that level?

- If the apostles and other resurrection witnesses believed in the greater good without believing in the lie, then why would they think that others needed to believe in the lie in order to believe in the greater good?

- Why not use something within Judaism or some other belief system to further the moral system in question? Judaism was already much more popular and established in social institutions and other contexts. If they wanted suffering to be involved, it wouldn't have been difficult to find a means to get the Romans or others to make people suffer within a strand of Judaism.

- Why would they choose the resurrection for their lie? It would be easier to lie about something like a vision of Jesus, which would have more precedent and wouldn't require explaining or getting rid of the corpse.

- Why would they make the lie central to the credibility of the larger belief system (1 Corinthians 15:14-19), given that they would know that there was a reasonable possibility that one of them would begin telling the truth or be caught in his lying?

- The theory doesn't explain all of the evidence for the resurrection. It doesn't explain Matthew 28:11-15.²⁰⁴ If the early Jewish enemies of Christianity acknowledged that Jesus' body left the tomb at a time when a guard was present, then that's significant evidence for the resurrection independent of the Christians' claim to have seen the risen Jesus. And it's not as though the witnesses' willingness to lie about the resurrection would explain Paul's acquisition of the ability to perform miracles after the point in time when he was supposed to have seen the risen Christ. His travel companion Luke describes some of the miracles in Acts, and Paul refers to them often in his letters, including in contexts in which his audience was critical of him on other points (Romans 15:19, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Corinthians 12:12, Galatians 3:5). What about Ananias' apparently supernatural experience that happened in coordination with Paul's seeing the risen Christ (Acts 9:10-18)?

During the same section of the Licona/Carrier debate referred to above, Carrier seemed to agree with Licona that there's good evidence for the martyrdom of James (apparently Jesus' brother, not another James), Peter, and Paul. I would add that we also have an early account of the martyrdom of James, son of Zebedee (Acts 12:2), and I see no good reason to doubt its historicity. And we have even more early evidence for the non-martyrdom suffering of the resurrection witnesses (imprisonment, beatings, etc.). I've written an article on the issue of suffering and dying for the resurrection that goes into more depth.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/guard.html>

²⁰⁵ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/08/early-christians-willingness-to-suffer.html>

While later sources do seem to be somewhat ignorant of what happened at the end of the lives of the resurrection witnesses, such a deterioration of historical knowledge over time is common. Earlier sources would have known more, as we see in Clement of Rome's comments on how the lives of Peter and Paul ended, for example (First Clement, 5).

One of the issues that often comes up in discussions about the suffering of the early Christians is whether they had an opportunity to recant and thereby avoid the suffering. For example, maybe somebody like Peter wanted to renounce the faith, or belief in the resurrection in particular, just before being executed if doing so would spare him, but he wasn't given that option.

It should be noted, first, that such an objection doesn't remove the full force of the Christian argument. Even if Peter and others weren't successful in avoiding death or some other form of suffering, the fact that they *tried* to avoid it could have been reported. Yet, as I explain in the article referenced in footnote 3, as well as in other material linked within that article, the early sources tell us that men like Peter and Paul were faithful to the end of their lives. Though the early Christians acknowledged various degrees of unfaithfulness among men like Judas, Demas, Mark, and Peter, they don't seem to be aware of any relevant expression of doubt about the resurrection among the resurrection witnesses.

And if they didn't want to suffer for the resurrection, why did they put themselves in such danger of suffering to begin with? If you don't want to be executed after being arrested for a faith with belief in the resurrection at its core, then don't get arrested in the first place. An easy way to avoid getting arrested is to not associate yourself with the faith. A low level of association could be considered a risk worth taking by people without much commitment to the faith, but a lot of resurrection witnesses were at a high level of association with Christianity (serving in the office of apostle, traveling as evangelists, etc.).

Given how much men like Paul suffered (2 Corinthians 11:23-33, Philippians 3:8), why think they would have stopped short of death?

Furthermore, it would have been in the interest of the early opponents of Christianity to allow somebody as prominent in the religion as Peter or James to gain his freedom by recanting.

In both early Christian and non-Christian sources, there are references to Christians' ability to avoid suffering in some way by remaining silent or recanting (Tacitus, Annals, 15:44; Pliny the Younger, Letters, 10:96-97; Justin Martyr, First Apology, 4; The Martyrdom Of Polycarp, 9; Origen, Against Celsus, 2:13, 2:17). Some of the passages are directly relevant to the earliest Christians. Others are about later Christians, including some significant martyrs, but are also relevant to earlier Christians indirectly inasmuch as they give us information about the general atmosphere and the legal precedents in place.

Appendix IX: The Future Present

Steve Hays

In chap. 12, Loftus tries to document false prophecies in Scripture. But one of the problems with his allegation is his failure to make allowance for the particular mode of prophetic revelation.

In Scripture, prophecy typically involves visionary revelation. There's a sense in which the prophet "sees" the future, or sees a representation of the future.

But this raises the question of what he actually perceives. What images of the future does God disclose? Does God reveal the future in future terms, or does he reveal the future in present terms?

If, for instance, God were to reveal to Isaiah some calamity to befall Manhattan in the 23C AD, would God do so by showing Isaiah a preview of Manhattan as it appears in the 23C AD? Or would he depict a scaled up version of an 8C BC metropolis?

To judge by various endtime prophecies in Scripture, what a prophet sees is the future in present-day terms. "Present" in relation to the time and place of the prophet.

And that's only logical. A depiction of the future which is too far removed from the experience of the prophet or his audience would be unintelligible. So it makes sense if God represents the future in terms familiar to the prophet and his audience.

If, however, that's the case, then it has some ramifications for the Biblical hermeneutics:

1. It makes it harder for us to anticipate the precise terms of the fulfillment in advance of the event. We don't know what exactly the fulfillment will look like. The fulfillment itself will select for the corresponding terms. So that's something which will be easier to discern after the fact.
2. It also means that we need to avoid glib accusations about a failed prophecy. For in considering the fulfillment of a prophecy, we must take into consideration the difference between the future event and the representation of a future event. Especially in the case of endtime prophecies.

Appendix X: What Richard Carrier Claimed About The Christian Delusion When It Came Out

Jason Engwer

In April of 2010, Richard Carrier made the following comments at his blog about The Christian Delusion²⁰⁶:

Two years in the making, controversial even before its launch, and perhaps the most definitive refutation of Christianity yet in print, *The Christian Delusion (Why Faith Fails)* is now available at Amazon and your local bookseller....

It's a fantastic book. I loved it as I was reading it even in earlier drafts, and I have been anticipating its publication for a long time. You'll all want a copy, trust me....

Why It's Awesome

Two of *The Christian Delusion's* fifteen chapters are mine. The first is Why the Resurrection Is Unbelievable, which is the most definitive refutation of warranted belief in the resurrection I have ever composed. It's a deliberate tour de force, such that I doubt I'll ever have to write another. It even takes down recent attempts to use Bayes' Theorem to argue for the resurrection, and it contextualizes everything so there just isn't any rational basis left for claiming the resurrection is historically proven....

I provided some editing assistance and peer review for *TCD*, so I can vouch for it all. John and I wanted this book to be conclusive, every chapter its own tour de force on each topic. And we achieved that goal. The book is superb. Every chapter is fantastic, some more than others, but all are great....

The Christian religion is so manifestly contrary to the facts, belief in it can only be held with the most delusional gerrymandering imaginable. That's a bold statement. I wouldn't have made it myself before reading this book, but now that I have seen it all in one place, I am forced to agree....

He [Hector Avalos] even, BTW, dismisses the Stalin and Mao examples in just two paragraphs that are a model of pwning the Christian with his own Bible; love it). [Carrier is referring, in part, to Avalos' claim that Acts 4-5 supports "the principle of killing those who did not conform to collectivization of property". See page 369 in *The Christian Delusion* and my response to it earlier in this review (page 192).]...

²⁰⁶ <http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2010/04/christian-delusion.html>

I deliberately aimed to make it a tour de force (and we aimed to get every other author's chapter as close to the same). I wanted it to be a compact and definitive last word on the subject. I'm confident I succeeded....

I'll be mean, but I won't tolerate saying anything I don't know to be true (and I'll correct myself whenever I find I'm wrong). That's been my ethic from the beginning, and that won't change.