



A Publication of CJF Ministries and Messianic Perspectives Radio Network

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Post Office Box 345, San Antonio, Texas 78292-0345

Adar-Nisan-Iyyar 5770 / March-April 2010

THE TOP 10 ATTACKS AGAINST THE BIBLE'S HISTORICAL RELIABILITY —AND HOW TO ANSWER THEM

by Tim M. Sigler, PhD

Many skeptics have challenged that the Scriptures merely provide modern readers with myths and literary fictions from the ancient world. Upon this basis, they deny the Bible's truth claims and reject the need for personal faith. These attacks against the Bible's historical reliability are often published just before major Jewish or Christian holidays. So much for multicultural sensitivity!

One front-page story in the *Los Angeles Times* was titled "Doubting the Story of Exodus." It featured the modern Conservative Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Westwood, California, as he shared his skepticism about the Bible's historical claims in his pre-Passover sermon. "The truth is that virtually every modern archaeologist who has investigated the story of the Exodus, with very few exceptions, agrees that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way it happened, if it happened at all."¹ What a strange way to say, "Happy Passover!"

Unsurprisingly, *Newsweek*, notorious for its hypercritical views of evangelical faith, greeted the season in 1996 with a less than faith-inspiring cover story. "Rethinking the Resurrection" favorably cited German New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann, who called the historical claims to Jesus' bodily resurrection "an empty formula" that must be rejected by anyone holding a 'scientific world view.'" The author of the article readily included the scholar's opinion that "Jesus' body 'rotted away' in the tomb."² Happy Resurrection Day!

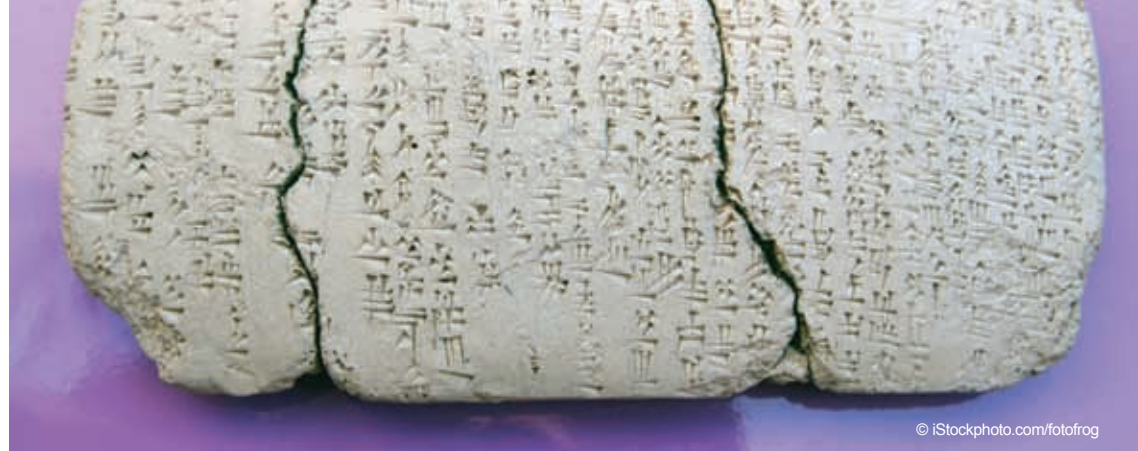
These attacks against the Bible's historical value are nothing new, and they won't be going away anytime soon. We can expect similar seasons' greetings from the History Channel, the Public Broadcasting System, and other "educational" outlets. But the real problem is that most of these *historical* claims are aimed at eliminating the more important *religious* truth claims made in the Scriptures. If the

Bible's historical claims are not true, it would be right to doubt its religious ones. Paul, the first-century rabbi and apostle, cautioned believers at Corinth, *"And if [Messiah] is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up [Messiah], whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise"* (1 Cor. 15:14-15).

One could similarly say that if the Exodus did not occur, our Passover-informed faith in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is in vain. Or, as George Ramsey similarly questioned regarding the biblical account of Joshua's conquest, "If Jericho be not razed, is our faith in vain?"³ Obviously, the implications for our faith are enormous if we concede to popular detractors from the Bible's historical reliability.

The following list provides us with the top ten most common objections to the Bible's historical reliability, popular in academic circles today.

1. Moses didn't really write the Torah (the "documentary hypothesis");
2. The Genesis account of Creation was plagiarized from earlier mythologies;
3. The Genesis account of the Flood was plagiarized from earlier mythologies;
4. The biblical stories about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are not historical;
5. Isaiah was mostly written by other people (and probably none of them was Isaiah);
6. Daniel is not prophecy; instead, it is history cleverly made to look like prophecy;
7. The Synoptic Problem (Matthew, Mark, and Luke disagree with each other, and with John);
8. The Gospel of John is anti-Semitic and different from the other Gospels;
9. The real, historical Jesus was different from the Jesus portrayed in the NT Gospels; and
10. Paul founded a new religion that largely abandoned the teachings of Jesus.



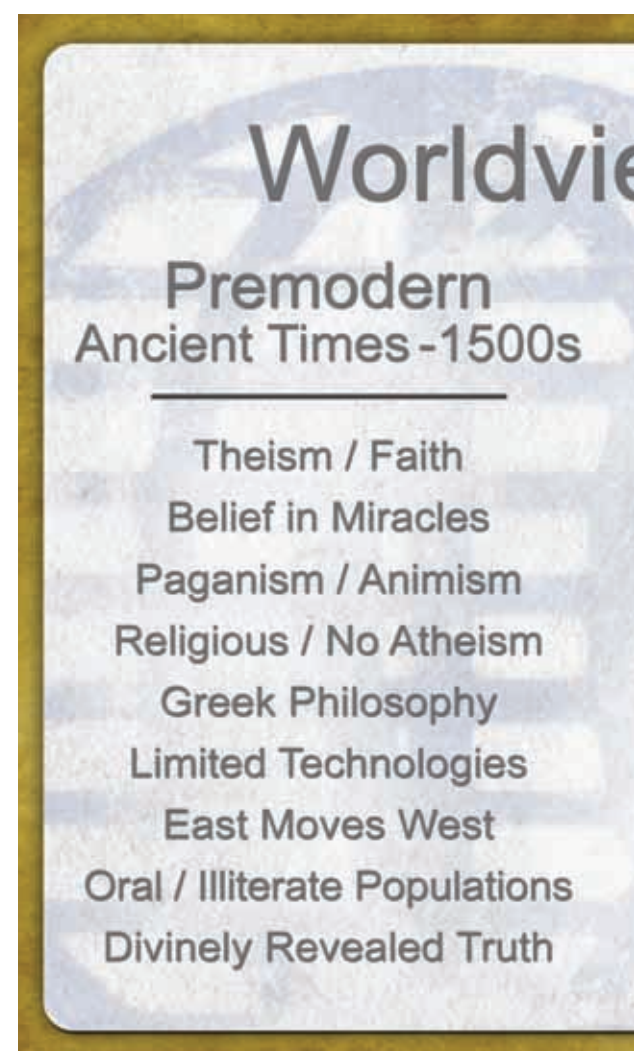
Is There an Answer for The Skeptics?

How can we give an answer for our faith in the Bible's trustworthiness? While careful responses to specific objections have been offered by believing scholars, the best way to evaluate these claims is to consider the worldview behind each detraction. What underlying presuppositions cause people to read the Bible with an unreceptive bent toward disbelief? When we understand the basic outlook on life, reality, truth, or believability that underlies these criticisms, it is easy to see how such conclusions about the Bible are reached—how A leads to B and therefore C.

What is at the heart of these attacks? Why do the critics want us to accept a historically remixed Jesus as opposed to the Jesus of the Bible? Is it simply an honest scholarly inquiry attempting to discover the true historical facts about Jesus and His teachings? Or, is something more sinister at work behind this quest for archaeological proof and historical accuracy? Could it be that the Bible's message of an all-powerful God who sits in judgment upon the affairs of men—and to Whom all will one day give an account—is simply no longer acceptable to contemporary sensibilities? Perhaps the exclusive claims of Jesus ("... *No one comes to the Father except through Me;*" John 14:6) are no longer welcome in the culturally and religiously diverse public arena of postmodernism. These attacks are not aimed at a better, more historically accurate, understanding of the Bible, but at dismantling the Bible's worldview.

This is why we cannot simply wait for the next critical pre-holiday "educational" special to level new attacks

against the historicity of the Bible and then mount our defense. We need to address the underlying systems that cause such attacks to be so readily received. We need to become more adept at engaging in worldview apologetics—defending biblical faith in a manner that cuts through the individual attacks and asks what causes them. What presuppositions are commonly held within our culture that allow such attacks to gain traction?



Messianic Perspectives®

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Messianic Perspectives is published bimonthly by **CJF Ministries**, P.O. Box 345, San Antonio, Texas 78292-0345, a 501(c)3 Texas nonprofit corporation: **Dr. Gary Hedrick, President; Brian Nowotny, Director of Communications; Rachel Zanardi, Editor; Erastos Leiloglou, Designer**. Subscription price: \$10 per year. The publication of articles by other authors does not necessarily imply full agreement with all the views expressed therein. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Visit us online at www.cjfm.org. Toll-free OrderLine: (800) 926-5397.
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What Is a Worldview— Why Is It Important?

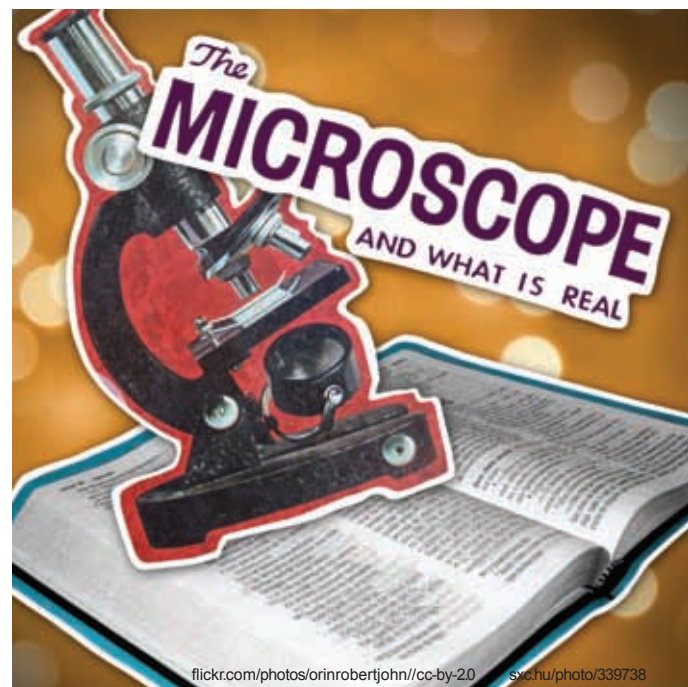
A worldview is an all-encompassing approach to answering the big questions of life: why are we here, where is the world going, what should we be doing (or not doing), what is true or false, and so on. Our worldview provides a framework or starting point from which we interpret all of life (e.g., history, culture, science, politics, religion, economics, ethics, and so on)—really, everything is interpreted through the lens of our worldview. And whether people are aware of it or not, we all have a worldview.

It is possible to divide up intellectual history into three basic eras: premodern, modern, and postmodern. A brief overview of these eras will allow us to make a few observations about the Bible and history.

centers such as Babylon, Egypt, Jerusalem, and Istanbul (Constantinople). Greek philosophy, which provided the guiding principles of Western thought, was steeped in polytheistic pagan mythology just as was the East. There were no atheists in ancient times—the concept of life apart from religious belief simply did not fit with their worldviews. Some developed superstitious practices around the belief that non-humans and natural objects have souls (a belief known as animism). Every society worshipped and believed in the divine. As gods of various virtues (e.g., the goddess of love) or forces (e.g., storm gods) were given names, the quantity of gods that people believed in had to be reduced to a manageable number.

Even with the spread of the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), many European

Crusaders, the selling of indulgences, and other problematic practices were forced upon a largely illiterate population who did not have the ability to read the Bible for themselves—and certainly not in their own languages. Such problems created a climate in which many were happy to consider the claims of the Protestant Reformers and learn to read the Bible in their mother tongues.



Views in Perspective

Modern 1500s-1900s

Enlightenment / Reason
No Miracles
Anti-supernaturalism
Questioning Religion
Rationalism / Pragmatism
Scientific Revolution
Spread of Western Culture
Historical Criticism
Scientific Truth

Postmodern Late 1900s-Present

Spirituality / Mysticism
No Answer for the Miraculous
Neo-paganism
Self-styled Religion
Extreme Skepticism
Cautious of Technologies
Globalism/Pluralism/Diversity
Deconstruction
Personal Truth or No Truth

Premodern Views Of Reality

European or Western civilization drew its intellectual history more from the East—the cradle of civilization—than most of us realize. Rather than starting in Athens and Rome, the West has deeper roots farther east in intellectual

communities retained local superstitions. As Roman Christianity grew in power, it often produced a mixture of biblical orthodoxy and paganism that kept European populations victims of deceit for centuries. Corruption in the papacy, the building of great cathedrals on the backs of heavily taxed citizens, forced conversions under the

Modernism's Enlightened Age of Reason

Rationalism lies at the foundation of our modern educational system. We are all affected by the scientific age of reason. After the Italian Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the spread of Enlightenment ideals throughout Europe, reason became the foundation of modern society. Educated people could no longer be kept in the dark by those who would manipulate them politically or religiously—they were “enlightened.” No longer would illiterate populations simply believe what they were told by their philosophers, governments, and religious leaders. Many who were victimized by abusive religious powers throughout Europe were prepared to adopt a new approach to truth. The empirical model suggested that knowledge is obtained through the senses. One can only believe the things he can touch, taste, see, hear, or smell—that is, whatever someone experiences through sensory perception.

Scientific skepticism provided security against intellectual scam artists who thrived on naive people. Rationalism's scientific revolution prevailed throughout the West (in Europe and America), and philosophers began to

question the notion of religious faith altogether. Perhaps there is no God. If there is no God, prophecies can't happen. If prophecies don't happen, then claims to prophecy must be false claims invented to look like prophecy. Of course, this leaves no room for the Bible's claim of divine inspiration.

For those who attempted to merge their religious commitments with post-Enlightenment rationalism, biblical archaeology—it was hoped—would settle the issue of the Bible's historical reliability. If archaeology can prove that events occurred as the Bible said they happened, then we can know the Bible is true. But archaeology is not an exact science. The finds must be interpreted.

Further, it does not provide a complete record. Many sites have never been excavated, and one cannot predict the next amazing discovery. Despite these scientific limitations of archaeological inquiry, modernism's historical-critical approach assumes that biblical texts are guilty until proven innocent. It is not that archaeology has disproved the Bible, but that historical texts like the Bible do not deserve our trust until they are deemed worthy by the hard evidence and higher authority of scientific rationalism. Archaeology can never meet the demands of rationalism, and skepticism can always produce more questions than the evidence can answer.

Postmodernism—the World in Which We Live

Postmodernism's social concern for the marginalized voices of the oppressed is a much-appreciated fact of our age. But beneath its gentle and caring exterior lies a fierce political agenda fueled by the theory of deconstruction: marginalized people (minority populations) need to replace societal power structures by questioning authorities and displacing those in positions of power and privilege.

Written texts have power, and they too must be deconstructed. If texts such as the Constitution, the writings of Mark Twain, or the Bible are used by the powerful to marginalize the oppressed, then these texts must be questioned



and reinterpreted to show their inner incompatibility. These once powerful, culture-creating texts are dismantled by political activists, writers, educators, religionists, lawmakers, media personalities, and others involved in social criticism who collaborate to move the agenda of deconstruction forward.

Postmodernism has no place for true truth. It is ethically neutral. No one is wrong, unless they claim that others are wrong. Postmodern bumper stickers sum up the prevailing mentality of our day: "I hate intolerant people," "My karma ran over your dogma," "Fairies are real," and "All generalizations are untrue, including this one."

Since the scientific methods of modernists could not answer the unsolvable mysteries of the supernatural world, postmodernism has opened the door to mysticism and neo-paganism: a belief in spiritual energies in nature, feng shui, self-actualizing meditation, time travel, horoscopes, fortune-telling spiritual guides, and the like. Postmodernism appreciates the spiritual and the supernatural, but it cannot appreciate anyone claiming to know the truth about such issues. God is in, but Jesus is clearly out! You can be spiritual, but don't bother people with the Bible and its claims to infallible truth. This extreme skepticism allows for personal truth, but not absolute truth: "It may be true for you, but it's not true for me."

So Which One Is Right?

This comparison of the eras of intellectual history is not intended to suggest that one of them provides the superior choice. Each has positive qualities, but none of them has everything right. Rather, they all fall short of providing a biblical worldview—a view that evaluates everything through the lens of what God has revealed in Scripture. A biblical worldview implies that God has spoken truthfully in Scripture. But the skepticism of modernism asks, "Who really wrote those biblical texts?" And the über-skepticism of postmodernism asks, "What propaganda were they trying to get people to believe?"

Lüdemann, the critical scholar cited earlier who claimed that Jesus' body simply "rotted away" and called the Resurrection "an empty formula" that must be rejected by anyone holding a 'scientific world view'⁴ was right about one thing: the issue of the Bible's possible historicity is determined in advance by a person's worldview.

If we conclude that modernism (with its denial of the supernatural and its demand that scientific proof must precede belief) provides the appropriate lens through which we interpret all of life, then of course the Bible's historical accounts cannot be true. The Bible's supernatural events must be reinterpreted to fit the presuppositions of scientific rationalism—which has no room for the divine or the miraculous. And if we take the extreme skepticism of postmodernism as our starting point, the Bible will fail our tests for ethical neutrality and be reduced to a useful human text that can be manipulated to suit our agendas when we deem it expedient to cite it in our attempts to liberate the oppressed.





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Should We Try to Prove The Bible's Historicity?

Historicity, as it is commonly understood (complete historical accuracy, chronological order, etc.), is a modern post-Enlightenment Western notion that should not be imposed on the Bible—which is an ancient Near Eastern text. Strictly speaking, historicity can only be evaluated when there are multiple attestations to the same event. Historicity is not exactly the same as historical reliability. If the Bible provides the only account of a historical

event, this biblical account must be understood in light of the overall framework of history provided by our worldview. The denial of the Bible's historicity due to its inclusion of the miraculous or of otherwise unattested accounts is based on one's predisposition against the Bible's truth claims—not evidence to the contrary. The Bible refers to real people and events in a manner that truthfully conveys the divine Author's message.

Our reading of the Bible's historical literature is based upon the presupposition that there is a God, and He has spoken truthfully in Scripture. Those with presuppositions to the contrary must acknowledge the oft-cited dictum: "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." In other words, it is unscientific and irrational to claim that the Bible is historically inaccurate if evidence cannot disprove the Bible's historical claims—and hard data disproving biblical history is simply not available. When a critic claims that the Bible is historically unreliable, he's basing that assertion largely on an anti-supernatural worldview—and he should have the intellectual integrity to acknowledge that bias.

Where both the Bible and extra-biblical sources provide attestations to the same event, the Bible's historicity is confirmed. However, we need not wait

for archaeologists to recover the next cache of texts that corroborate biblical history before we believe in the Bible's historical reliability. Where it can be tested, the Bible stands the test. But the larger issue of our willingness to believe that which we cannot prove is determined by our worldview. Evidence can encourage our faith, but it is no replacement for faith. We must admit that we cannot "prove" the historicity of the entire Bible, but we can defend the reasonableness of faith in the Bible as a historical document—especially when compared to other worldview options.

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¹Quoted in Teresa Watanabe, "Doubting the Story of Exodus," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2001.

²Kenneth L. Woodward, "Rethinking the Resurrection," *Newsweek*, April 8, 1996; Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 135.

³George W. Ramsey, *The Quest for the Historical Israel* (Atlanta: Knox, 1981), 107-124.

⁴Cited in Woodward above.

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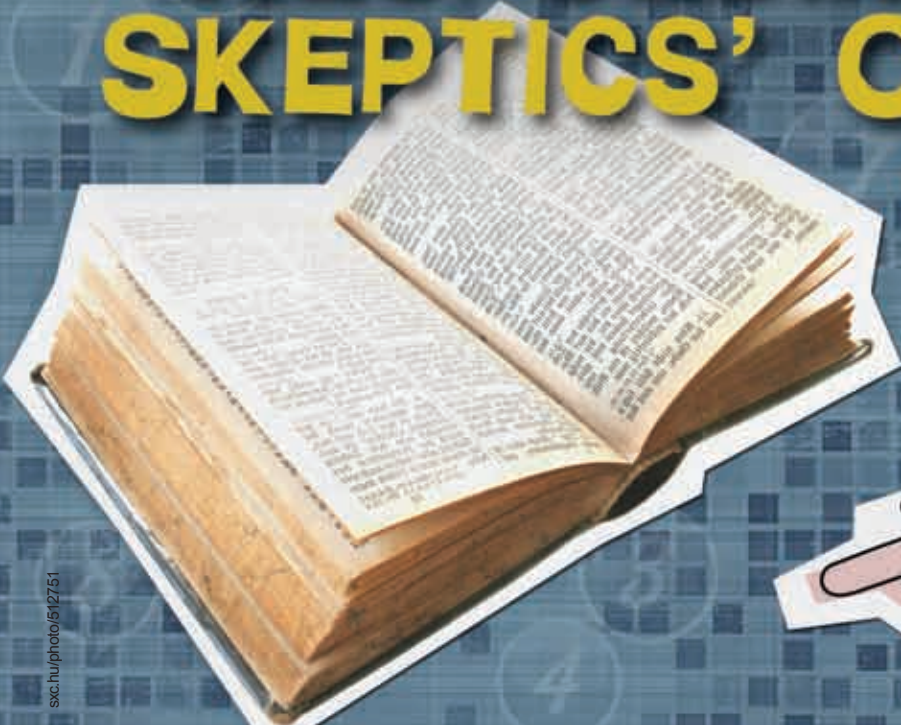
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RESPONDING TO THE SKEPTICS' OBJECTIONS



by Dr Gary Hedrick & Michael Hedrick

1. The documentary hypothesis proves that Moses didn't write the Torah.

The notion that Moses didn't write the Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Bible) can be traced as far back as the second century AD. Certain ancient sects held that it must have been composed after Moses's death. They were evidently troubled by passages that included bits of information that they felt Moses could not have known—like some anachronistic geographical references and the account of his own death at the end of Deuteronomy.¹ However, the Lord Jesus clearly endorsed Mosaic authorship (e.g., Matt. 8:4; 19:8; Luke 24:44; John 5:46; 7:19), so conservatives accept it.

Most conservative scholars have no difficulty with the possibility that the Torah may have undergone minor editorial updating after Moses died and prior to final canonization—all of it under the superintending influence of God's Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21). For example, Deuteronomy 34:10 says, *"But since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face."* This certainly sounds like it was written some time after Moses's death. Minor updating doesn't diminish Mosaic authorship because Moses still wrote 99 percent or more of the Torah—and we would respectfully submit that 100 percent of the final text was divinely inspired.

Nonetheless, several 19th-century, liberal-critical scholars took the ancient theory of non-Mosaic authorship to a whole new level. Wielding it like a weapon in their crusade to deconstruct and discredit the Torah entirely, they theorized that these five books (in their present form) are a patchwork of four much later sources (represented by the acrostic "JEDP," and categorized according to their use of God's Hebrew names and other stylistic criteria). The theory gained wide acceptance in mainstream academia for more than half a century, but began to lose traction in the mid- to late-20th century as several of its key underpinnings (including the notion that ancient writing didn't evolve until long after the time of Moses) were largely discredited by archaeological discoveries and advances in research.

Subsequent revisions of the hypothesis have resulted in a splintered consensus that is quite different from what

Julius Wellhausen—the best-known early proponent of the theory—taught in the 1800s. For a review of recent scholarly work that has called many aspects of the JEDP documentary hypothesis into question, see *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by T.D. Alexander.²

2. The Genesis creation account isn't original; it's plagiarized from ancient Near Eastern myths.³

No one disputes that there are superficial similarities between the Genesis account of Creation and other ancient Near Eastern creation myths. In the story of Enuma Elish, for instance, the god Marduk is said to form the heavens and the earth, and in the Epic of Atrahasis, humans are created from clay.⁴ It is important, however, to note the significant *differences* between these myths and the Genesis account.



In the story of Enuma Elish and the Epic of Atrakhasis, no single god is supreme or powerful enough to create independently; and when they do create, it is certainly not perfect.

By contrast, the God of the Bible is self-sufficient; He alone creates at His word; He is separate from His creation; He creates in an absolutely perfect way. The question then (with respect to the Genesis account versus other creation accounts) is: who borrowed from whom? It is plausible that extra-biblical creation myths, whether Babylonian, Ugaritic, Native American, or from some other tradition, are corrupted versions of the original creation account that is preserved accurately for us in the Book of Genesis. The fact that some of these other accounts are older than the Book of Genesis is not really germane since it's not a given that a record is more accurate simply because it's closer in time to the actual event. A more recent account could easily be more accurate, particularly if it's based on better information—or in this case, on divine revelation.⁵

3. Genesis also plagiarizes its Flood account from other ancient accounts.

The Flood account in Genesis does bear some similarities to other ancient Near Eastern flood stories; here again it is necessary to look not only at the similarities, but also the differences. Ancient Near Eastern flood accounts seem to have evolved over several centuries—beginning with a Sumerian version (*Eridu Genesis*), followed by an Akkadian account in which the Noah character is named Atrakhasis, and finally the account included in the well-known Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic.

These extra-biblical stories differ from the Genesis account in several important ways: (1) they include subplots of conflict among the gods; (2) they indicate a much shorter duration for the Flood (one week, for example, in the Babylonian story as opposed to a full year in the Genesis account); and (3) they lack the moral and spiritual dimension that is foundational to the Genesis account—namely, God's judgment precipitated by mankind's rebellion and spiritual corruption. These differences notwithstanding, such a variety of ancient sources referencing a cataclysmic flood event only serves to confirm the historicity of the biblical Deluge.

The fact that non-biblical sources are at a loss to explain why the Flood happened (other than the Babylonians'

dubious explanation that the gods became annoyed because humanity was too noisy and they couldn't sleep) demonstrates the superiority of a biblical worldview. The Bible informs us that God's righteousness will not allow Him to tolerate sin and open rebellion against Himself (Rom. 1:18).⁶



4. The patriarchal narratives are myths.

The promises God made to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) are central to the Bible's message of redemption and ultimate restoration (note the prominence of Abraham even in Paul's NT writings: Rom. 4:1-3, 9, 12-13, 16; 9:7; 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Gal. 3:6-9, 14, 16, 18, 29; 4:22). Little wonder, then, that theological deconstructionists like Thomas Thompson⁷ have focused their attacks on the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Book of Genesis.

The *Archaeology Study Bible*⁸ reviews the weaknesses of their key arguments in "The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives" (p.73). For instance, why should we expect to find extra-biblical references to Abraham, Isaac, and/or Jacob when they lived 4,000 years ago "as nomads on the fringes of populated areas . . . [wandering] between the great empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt"? There is no good reason why this small, nomadic clan would have gotten the attention of the secular analysts of that day. So, the patriarchs' absence from secular history is a patently unconvincing argument against their existence.

Like the time-worn adage says, absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence. Furthermore, there is abundant archaeological evidence (from discoveries like the Nuzi Tablets and the Mari Letters) that the social customs reflected in the Genesis narratives could easily date to 2000 BC and even earlier.⁹

5. Isaiah is not a literary unity and probably wasn't even written by Isaiah.

The Book of Isaiah, in its opening verse, says it's "the vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz" (1:1). Nonetheless, critical scholars have asserted that Isaiah is a literary collage that came together over two or more centuries combining the work of two or three authors. The traditional view holds that the Book of Isaiah is the work of a single author—the Prophet Isaiah. Whereas, modern critical scholars speculate that the appearance of unity comes from a process of careful editing by a "school" of writers who specialized in the life and work of the historical figure Isaiah. "Proto-Isaiah," the one they say wrote Chapters 1 to 39 in the eighth century BC, may or may not have been the Prophet himself. The other one or two proposed writers ("Deutero-Isaiah" and possibly "Trito-Isaiah") lived centuries later. In more recent times, however, ". . . The consensus among critical scholars has moved in the direction of acknowledging . . . the book as a whole shows a unity of themes and motifs."¹⁰

According to the critics, differences in theme, style, and vocabulary between the three main sections of Isaiah (Chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66) indicate different authors. However, there's clearly evidence of its unity because the sections also *share* many words and expressions (like the divine title "Holy One of Israel," for example). Perhaps the critics' tendency to concentrate only on facts that they feel support their conclusions is evidence of thesis pressure.

The *ESV Study Bible*¹¹ makes this observation on the unity of Isaiah: "The testimony of Jesus in John 12:41 is especially instructive: 'Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.' 'These things,' which is plural, refers to the two previous quotations in John 12:38 (using Isa. 53:1, from the so-called 'Second Isaiah') and John 12:40 (using Isa. 6:10, from so-called 'First Isaiah'), but Jesus refers to the one person, Isaiah, who both 'saw his glory' and 'spoke of him'" (p. 1234). In this way, then, the Lord attributed

the entire Book to Isaiah. In fact, the unanimous testimony of the NT is that Isaiah, and Isaiah alone, is the author (see Matt. 3:3; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:14-15; 15:7-9; Mark 7:6-7; Luke 3:4-6; 4:17-19; John 1:23; 12:37-41; Acts 8:27-35; 28:25-27; Rom. 9:27-29; 10:16, 20-21; and 15:12). God himself is its ultimate Source (“Hear the word of the LORD” [1:10])—and God’s message was faithfully delivered by the historical Prophet Isaiah.¹²



National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., USA

6. Daniel is not prophecy; it is history cleverly made to look like prophecy.

The prophecies in the Book of Daniel accurately outline the course of ancient world history over a period of nearly a thousand years. They span the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman empires—all of which were still in the future when Daniel lived.

Critics allege that the Book could not have been written before early second century BC because of Daniel’s detailed description of Maccabean period events in Chapter 11 that we (in retrospect) know took place during the reign of the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC). Backed into a corner by their anti-supernatural bias, these critical scholars make the incredible claim that: (1) Daniel’s prophecies are not prophetic (but were

written *ex eventu*, or after the fact), and (2) Daniel (contrary to what Jesus himself said in Matthew 24:15) didn’t write them. The skeptics’ desperation is reflected in the highly speculative and unpersuasive nature of their claims. For example, they have tried to prove (by pointing out the presence of certain Greek and Persian loanwords) that the text of Daniel dates to the second century BC rather than to the sixth century when Daniel lived.

More recent scholarship, however, including linguistic evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls, has shown that the language of Daniel comes from much earlier than the second century. Note that certain technical terms appearing in Chapter 3 were already obsolete by the time the Septuagint (LXX) was translated (c. 300 to 132 BC). We know this because the LXX translates them incorrectly.¹³ This means it’s improbable that the text of Daniel dates to roughly the same period as the LXX.

On the contrary, the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient witnesses indicate that the Book of Daniel already had a rich textual history by the second century. The original, then, must have appeared much earlier. We now know that the Qumran community (which split from Jerusalem-based Judaism between 171 and 167 BC) accepted the Book of Daniel as authoritative Scripture—something they would surely not have done if the Book had only recently appeared. Amazingly, a messianic prophecy in Chapter 9 predicts that the Messiah would be killed (“cut off”) during the very time when Yeshua of Nazareth lived and was executed in Jerusalem. The dating is so precise that virtually every method of calculation—much to the chagrin of the liberal critics—yields a date somewhere between AD 29 and 34 for the Crucifixion.¹⁴

7. The Synoptic Problem undermines the conservative view of the NT.

As Robert Stern correctly explains, “In reading the four Gospels it is apparent that three of them resemble one another and one does not. A brief time spent in any synopsis of the Gospels will indicate that Matthew, Mark, and Luke share a number of striking similarities. The ‘Synoptic Problem’ is the name that has been given to the problem of why the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke look so much alike. Why are they so similar in content, in wording and in the order of events found within them?”¹⁵

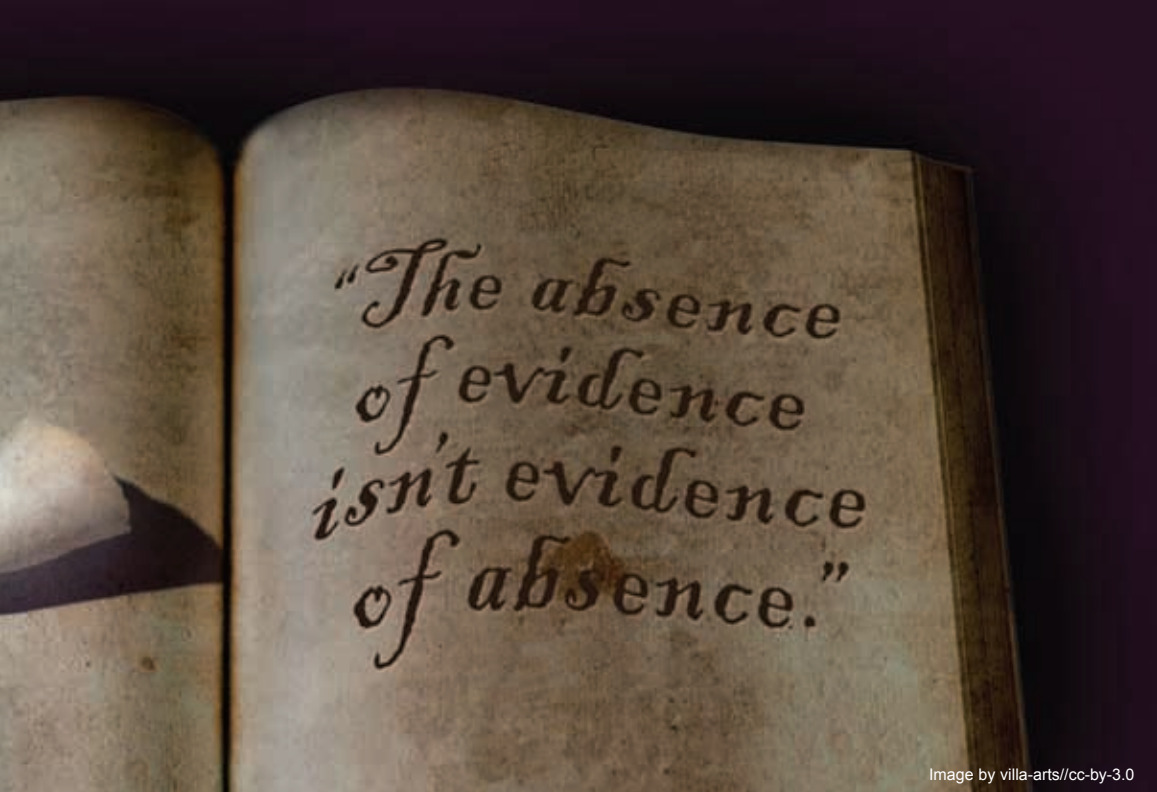


The Synoptic Problem—which stems, in part, from alleged contradictions between these three accounts of Jesus’ earthly life—is quite complex. “A mathematical comparison shows that 91 percent of Mark’s gospel is contained in Matthew, while 53 percent of Mark is found in Luke.”¹⁶ So, our treatment of it here will be, admittedly and out of necessity, superficial. Nonetheless, several observations will help put the perceived problem into perspective.

For one thing, modern readers often don’t realize that the Gospels are ancient narratives, not modern documentaries. Quotations, for example, are typically not meant to be word-for-word in a narrative format. Also, the Gospels tend to be more topical than chronological; so they’re not so much concerned about the sequence of events as they are in making sense out of those events. Another issue arises from the fact that the Lord Jesus spoke Aramaic (Mark 5:41)—which was then translated into Greek, and from there into English—making it a bit unrealistic to expect complete uniformity in the biographers’ direct quotations.

Dr Norman Geisler comments: “. . . Even if Jesus gave His discourses in Aramaic, historical reliability does not depend on having those exact words (*ipsissima verba*), as long as the Greek translation preserves the exact meaning (*ipsissima vox*).”¹⁷

Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black in *The New Testament: It’s Background and Message*, 2nd ed.¹⁸ offer several insights into the Gospels. First, it should be recognized that the Gospels are, like Jesus himself, unique; they describe a unique Person and unique events, and so comparisons to other literary units



"The absence
of evidence
isn't evidence
of absence."

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should be limited (p. 126). Second, it must be remembered that the Gospel material formed the Church, not the other way around; critical scholarship that sees the Church as the source of the Gospel material must be rejected.¹⁹ Lastly, it must be remembered that the Holy Spirit guided the formation of the Gospels; the fact that He used different authors and source materials does not in any way detract from the reliability and/or veracity of the Gospels.²⁰ When it comes to the origins and formation of the NT Gospels, there's a great deal about the *process* that we don't yet understand; however, the important thing is the *product*—an authoritative, error-free record.²¹

8. The Gospel of John is anti-Semitic and different from the Synoptic Gospels.

It's an understatement that the fourth Gospel differs from the other three; it differs *greatly*. In fact, 90 percent of John's material does not appear in the synoptics. John doesn't record any parables, for instance. Neither does he include the Olivet Discourse, which is so prominent in Matthew (24:1-51), Mark (13:1-37), and Luke (21:5-36). John devotes considerable space to his dramatic recounting of the death and resurrection of Jesus' dear friend, Lazarus (11:1-44), something that's not mentioned, for whatever reason, by Matthew, Mark, or Luke. These differences shouldn't bother us, particularly when we realize that each of the four Gospels was designed to portray the Messiah in a different light. If all four Gospels were identical, or even nearly identical, that would mean three of them were unnecessary.

And what about the charge that John was anti-Semitic? When John (who was Jewish) used the term "the Jews" in a negative or disparaging sense, it's perfectly reasonable to assume that he wasn't referring to Jewish people in general because he would have been condemning himself! On the other hand, though, it's not unheard of for a Jewish person to hold anti-Semitic views; so we can't reject the charge of anti-Semitism in the Gospel of John solely upon the basis that John was Jewish.

Another approach is to recognize what all scholars of the biblical languages already recognize: namely, that when a Hebrew or Greek word has more than one possible meaning, the translation is ultimately determined by the context. When the Greek phrase *hoi Ioudaioi* (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, "the Jews") appears in John's gospel, it is used in both positive (e.g., 2:20-23; 4:22; 11:45; 12:9-19) and negative (18:12; 19:7) ways. In negative contexts, it could very well refer to Judeans (that is, Jews who lived in and around Jerusalem and were associated with the religious leadership there), rather than to Jewish people generally. Historians tell us that many Jewish people fled from Jerusalem to Qumran during the Seleucid occupation of Judea—especially after Menelaus purchased the office of high priest in 171 BC. Those who fled to Qumran not only despised Antiochus, but were also disenchanted by the corruption of the Jewish religious establishment that had grown up around the Temple (see *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls* edited by James H. Charlesworth²²).

John's negative references to the Judean leadership ("the Jews"), then, are consistent with the historical situation during the late Second Temple

Period. John's stern words, it would appear, are more evidence of a family rebuke than they are of anti-Semitism. In any case, anti-Semites who use John's words to buttress their own twisted views are misguided and guilty of perverting the Scriptures.²³

9. The real, historical Jesus was different from the Jesus portrayed in the NT Gospels.

This theory believes an accurate portrait of Jesus of Nazareth must be reconstructed from historically reliable evidence—through archaeology, historical criticism, and a cautious use of New Testament texts. This comprehensively critical approach to the New Testament dismisses key Christological points such as His virgin birth, divine nature, and resurrection all at once.²⁴

Albert Schweitzer published his *Quest of the Historical Jesus* in 1906. Although it didn't contain any truly novel proposals (that is, nothing that hadn't been suggested decades earlier by biblical critics like Strauss and Renan), the book succeeded in popularizing a critical and humanistic approach to the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The timing (early 1900s) dovetailed nicely with the "freethinker" movement spearheaded by the flaming infidel Robert Ingersoll. Quest scholarship's guiding principle has been that the life of Jesus must be "demythologized" (i.e., stripped of its supernatural or exaggerated elements) to be truly meaningful.

The flaw in their reasoning, of course, is the assumption that the Bible is not factually true and that miracles do not happen. How can they possibly know these things with absolute certainty? Another problem is that Quest scholarship is in a constant state of flux due to shifts in consensus resulting from new thinking and research. The work of the notorious and controversial Jesus Seminar is recognized today by most mainstream scholars, and even many liberals, for what it really is—an academic hatchet job rather than honest, scholarly inquiry. The Seminar was followed by a Second (or New) Quest, and more recently by yet a Third Quest—this one monitored closely by some evangelical scholars, particularly in the UK, who want a level of involvement in order to keep their liberal counterparts honest. In *Jesus and the Gospels*,²⁵ Craig Blomberg includes a helpful analysis of the Quests in Chapter 10.²⁶

10. Paul is the founder of a Hellenized Christianity that changed Jesus' Jewish Gospel message.

Historically, it's true that much of organized Christendom—especially as it developed in the more dominant Western (Roman) and Eastern (Greek) traditions—turned away from its messianic (Jewish-Christian) roots in the centuries following the Apostles' death. By the time of Constantine (AD 300s), the institutional church was well on its way to becoming a distinctly Gentile entity—in contrast to the early church just a few centuries earlier, which had been distinctively Jewish. (Note the apostolic council convened in Acts 15:1-29, where the Jewish leadership laid down requirements for non-Jews who wanted to join the church.)

According to the late Professor David Flusser of Hebrew University, first-century “Jewish Christianity” ultimately became regarded (by the non-Jewish church) as “heretical.”²⁷ So yes, there was a certain process of hellenization that took place in those early,

formative centuries as the institutional church transitioned from being a Jewish entity to being a predominantly Gentile entity. However, this had little to do with the Apostle Paul.

Nowhere in Paul's writings does he endorse pagan ideas like those that later characterized so much of the institutional church—like the worship or veneration of Mary, the notion that salvation can be earned by good works, or even the use of icons and images in worship. These developments are a separate issue. They in no way demonstrate that Paul changed the teachings of Jesus and founded his own religion. Attempts to drive a wedge between Jesus and Paul, in fact, are misguided (and even a bit ironic) for a couple of reasons.

First, Paul is very clear that his Gospel was received through direct revelation from Jesus—including his miraculous conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19; Gal. 1:12). Second, Paul acknowledges that he benefited from secondhand information, or tradition (1 Cor. 15:3), ostensibly from Peter and James—both of whom

Paul spent time with in Jerusalem after coming to faith in Jesus, and both of whom saw the Lord after His resurrection (vv. 5, 7). Thus, Paul's Gospel message has its foundation in both Jesus himself, and in two apostles who were eyewitnesses of not only Jesus' ministry, but also His resurrection. The net effect is that Paul's theology—when properly understood—is solidly grounded upon, and thoroughly integrated with the teachings of the Lord Jesus and the Apostles.²⁸

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¹ *An Introduction to the Old Testament* by Edward J. Young [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], pp. 116-20

² (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 7-30. Also see *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), pp. 391-533. “A Critical Assessment of the Graf-Wellhausen Documentary Hypothesis” by Colin Smith (<http://vintage.aomin.org/JEDP.html>)

³ The claim that the Bible borrowed various stories from the ancient Near East is part of the larger “Bible versus Babel” debates that began in the early 1900s. Critics like J. Skinner referred to the Genesis creation and flood narratives as “Hebrew legends and their Babylonian originals.” John Skinner, *Genesis: Critical Exegetical Commentary* (ICC; 2d ed.; Edinburgh, 1930), xi.

⁴ *Old Babylonian Version*, 1.4

⁵ “Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories of Creation and the Flood” by David T. Tsumura (www.christiananswers.net/q-abr/abr-c001.html).

⁶ See point #2. Also, you can read a translation of the Sumerian creation/flood story here (maintained by the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford): <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.7.4#>.

⁷ *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* by Thomas L. Thompson (Harrisburg: Trinity Press)

⁸ Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005

⁹ See “The Patriarchal Age” in *The New Bible Dictionary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], pp. 939-41; also, “Greatest Archaeological Discoveries” by Merrill F. Unger and William White in *The Criswell Study Bible* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979], pp. 1525-28) and “The Patriarchs in Scripture and History” by John Goldingay (www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/eprn_1_goldingay.html).

¹⁰ Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], p. 309

¹¹ Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008

¹² “The Cyrus Notations of Deutero-Isaiah” http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/23-Isaiah/Text/Isa-Articles/Manahan-Cyrus-Isaiah-GTJ.pdf

¹³ “Daniel: Author, Date, and Authority,” *NIV Study Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], p. 1289

¹⁴ “Modern Rationalism and the Book of Daniel” by Gleason L. Archer, Jr. (*Bibliotheca Sacra* theological journal [Vol. 136, No. 542 (April-June 1979)] from www.dts.edu/media/publications/bibliothecasacra).

¹⁵ Robert H. Stein, “Synoptic Problem,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 784.

¹⁶ *The NIV Study Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], p. 1431

¹⁷ *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002], p. 489

¹⁸ Nashville: B&H Academic, 2003

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ “The Synoptic Problem” by Daniel B. Wallace (<http://bible.org/article/synoptic-problem>). Also, for those with academic proclivities, an information clearing house for synoptic scholars is located at www.mindspring.com/~scarlson/synopt.

²² [New York: Doubleday, 1992], pp. 238-39; also see *Temple and Community in Qumran and the New Testament* by Bertil E. Gärtner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965]

²³ “Was John Antisemitic?” (<http://www.christian-thinktank.com/ajews.html>); “Is John's Gospel Antisemitic?” by Glenn Balfour (http://www.tyndalehouse.com/TynBul/Library/TynBul_1997_48_2_11_Diss_Balfour_JohnAntiSemitic.pdf).

²⁴ See Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Morgan, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). This brief paperback is the most popular treatment available for addressing the many attacks leveled by the Jesus Seminar against the Bible's testimony to the person and work of Jesus. See also, Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MI: College Press, 1996).

²⁵ Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997

²⁶ “Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord” edited by Carl F.H. Henry (www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol05/henry_connell.pdf).

²⁷ *Jesus* by David Flusser [Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001], p. 20

²⁸ For more information on this topic, see *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* by F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). See also *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* by Paul Barnett (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999) and “Jesus and Paul” by F.F. Bruce (www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jesus-and-paul_bruce.pdf).



by Violette Berger

Fruit from the Harvest



Seeds Planted

Peter Parkas, CJFM missionary (New Jersey), regularly evangelizes on the streets of New York City, and meets one-on-one with unsaved Jewish people who are open to the Good News of their Messiah. He recently wrote about meeting an unsaved Jewish gentleman named “Michael,” and the questions he posed after Peter gave him a *CJFM Messianic Jewish Art Calendar*. Michael asked, “Why would a Christian (such as Peter) have calendars that highlight the Hebrew holidays with Jewish art?” Peter responded that although he is a Christian, he “actually believes that Yeshua (Jesus) is the promised Messiah.” Michael then asked, “Why were people waving palm branches at Yeshua’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Passover and not *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles)? On *Sukkot*, Jewish people traditionally wave palm branches and say, ‘O God, we beseech you. Do save us.’”

Peter commented, “The Jewish people, especially the rabbis, associate *Sukkot* with the coming Kingdom when the Messiah will sit on the throne of David and rule the nations with a rod of iron. This is also known as the Messianic Age.” Michael thought about it for a moment and stated that he believes “it was because the New Testament writers were not Jewish, and confused Passover with the Feast of Tabernacles.” Peter corrected him, “That was far from the case. The New Testament writers were Jewish—and religious at that!” Praise God for the opportunities He provides Peter to enlighten both Jew and Gentile to the Jewish roots of Christianity!

The Feasts of Life

In Phoenix, **Barry Berger, CJFM director of missions, emeritus**, leads a messianic fellowship, *Tikvah BaMidbar* (Hope in the Desert), that teaches the Word of God from a biblical Jewish perspective and observes the high holy days. A young Jewish man—a non-believer—and his Gentile wife—a believer—attended the *Rosh HaShanah* (Feast of Trumpets) service for the first time. Upon hearing how God’s entire plan of redemption will be fulfilled through Yeshua and the feasts of Israel, the young man prayed to receive Jesus as his Savior.

Another couple—a husband, who is a Jewish believer, and his Jewish wife, who is not a believer—have been attending *Tikvah BaMidbar* for almost a year. Members of the fellowship and its leaders joined the husband in praying, faithfully, for his wife’s salvation. God answered that prayer during Barry’s invitation following the *Sukkot* service. The wife shared how the Lord was working in her heart, especially after hearing Barry’s teaching

during the *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) service, that there can be no atonement without the shedding of blood, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11). God had prepared her heart and gave everyone a heart of thanksgiving as she prayed to receive her Jewish Messiah during *Sukkot*. Tears were shed by those who witnessed this woman at last entering the family of God as she and her husband took their turn entering the *sukkah* (booth) holding the citron and waving the *lulav* (branches) to thank the Lord.

God’s Perfect Timing

At a recent church meeting, **Michelle Beadle, CJFM missionary (New Orleans)**, shared the Spring Feasts of Israel during the morning service and the Fall Feasts during the evening service. This particular church also has a ministry called Fresh Start, which is a rehab program for men addicted to drugs and alcohol. The men who participate in this program attend church services every Sunday. Michelle ended the church service with an invitation to those who have never received Jesus into their heart as Lord and Savior.

She then asked those who prayed the sinner’s prayer for the first time to raise their hands. Michelle writes, “A family of three—a father, mother, and daughter—raised their hands and came to the front of the sanctuary to make their decision public. The pastor told me that the father was currently a resident of Fresh Start and was so grateful that they came to know the Lord as a family at this particular service.

Life on Campus

Richard Hill, CJFM missionary (Las Vegas), praises the Lord that in less than a month on the UNLV campus, he and his team of volunteers have shared the Gospel with over 50 people and distributed more than 3,000 tracts. Richard Cooper, a Jewish believer, who has been evangelizing with the team on campus for the last nine years, reported that he had never had a conversation such as the one with Jewish student, “Rachel.”

He said, “She was searching for God and had attended various church services. When I shared the Gospel—including the fact that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah—she proclaimed that she had never heard that before. Rachel hung on every word, and was obviously primed and ready to receive Jesus—which she did, joyfully, as she prayed with me. Even weeks later, Rachel has affirmed her newfound faith in Yeshua and told me, ‘a calm has come over my life.’ She undoubtedly knows that this peace and new life is from God. Her search is over.”

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Bible Questions AND Answers

by Dr GARY HEDRICK

QUESTION: *I don't believe the Lord will establish a literal Kingdom here on Earth when He returns for two reasons. First, the Bible says there will be only one resurrection for both the wicked and the righteous (Dan. 12:2-3). So why do you describe a series of resurrections: one during the Rapture, another after the Tribulation, and still another one after the Millennium? And second, the Bible tells us that the Kingdom of God is eternal and has no end (Isa. 9:7; Luke 1:33). So how can it last for only a thousand years?*

ANSWER: You are asking very good questions. First, the debate over one "general resurrection" for both the righteous and the wicked (as opposed to numerous resurrections at different times) has been going on for a long time. Old-timers like

A. A. Hodge (a Princeton professor in the late 1800s) and others taught that the righteous and wicked are all resurrected at the same time—and today, amillennialists and covenant theologians continue to carry that banner. And you're right—a thousand-year, earthly kingdom is problematic if there's only one resurrection for the whole human race.

Our view, however, is that the resurrection of the dead occurs in two phases: (1) the "first resurrection" (when the righteous are raised to receive blessings and rewards; Rev. 20:5-6), and (2) the second resurrection (when the wicked dead are judged by God and then cast into Hell; Rev. 20:11-15). The very fact that there is a "first" resurrection suggests that there are others, does it not?

It's important to remember that the Bible is a *progressive revelation*. As we move along the biblical timeline the teachings tend to go from simple to more complex—and those teachings are gradually brought more clearly into focus.

The *Theopedia* website (www.theopedia.com) says the first resurrection has three aspects: (1) the first fruits (Messiah himself; 1 Cor. 15:20-23), (2) the general harvest (the dead in Messiah and those who

are alive at His coming; 1 Thess. 4:16-17), and (3) the gleanings (OT saints and Tribulation martyrs; Dan. 12:1-2, 8-13).

Second, you also asked about God's kingdom. Yes, of course, it is eternal. The English word "kingdom" means, essentially, the "king's dominion"—and God's dominion will never end (Rev. 1:6). When the OT uses the term "eternal" for God's kingdom, it's emphasizing the fact that His kingdom will never be destroyed, unlike all previous human empires (Dan. 7:14). The Kingdom of God has both heavenly (i.e., spiritual; John 18:36) and earthly (physical; Matt. 6:10, Acts 1:6-8) aspects. That is, we can say that all believers today are citizens of the Kingdom, and our King is in Heaven (Phil. 3:20). However, the time is coming when these heavenly realities will also become earthly realities (Rev. 11:15).

That's why it can be misleading to talk about the "end" of the thousand-year Kingdom. It doesn't really end—at least, not in the sense of termination. Rather, the Son presents the Kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:24-28) and the thousand-year period transitions into something we call the Eternal State (Rev. 21:1—22:5). The King's dominion continues even after time itself has ceased to exist—making it eternal in the truest and fullest sense.