

# Friendship with Jesus

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on a work by Dr. Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John,"[{1}](#) to explore the perspective of Jesus Christ as a Friend.*

## What a Friend We Have in Jesus[{2}](#)

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis offers four analogies of God's love for humanity.[{3}](#) These include the love of an artist for a great work of art, the love of a human being for an animal, the love of a father for his son, and the love of a man for a woman. Interestingly, he does not consider the analogy of friendship, or love between friends. In one sense it's surprising, for Lewis would later write quite perceptively about friendship in his book, *The Four Loves*.

Of course, at this time in his career, Lewis may not have even thought about the love of friendship in the context of discussing analogies of God's love for humanity. After all, on the surface, the Bible appears to say little about friendship between God and human beings. But saying little is not the same as saying nothing, and the Bible does speak about the possibility of enjoying friendship with God. In fact, the Gospel of John offers a great illustration of this in the life and teaching of Jesus, whom Christians regard as God the Son incarnate. John presents Jesus as a true friend, one who is willing to speak the truth to those He loves and to lay down His life for their benefit.

Consider Jesus' words to his disciples in John 15: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I

have made known to you" (vv. 12-15).

In this brief passage, Jesus surfaces several important elements of friendship which would have been readily recognized by people in the ancient world. We'll carefully consider each of these elements in this article. For now, however, the key point to notice is that Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as "friends." Moreover, He also holds out to them the possibility of deepening their friendship with both Him, and one another.

In what follows, we'll unpack many of these ideas further. First, however, we must get a better understanding of how friendship was viewed in the ancient world.

## Friendship in the Ancient World

Of course, John's discussion of friendship in his gospel does not occur in a cultural or historical vacuum. Indeed, he seems to have been aware of other such discussions and even enters into a dialogue (of sorts) with some of them. So how was friendship understood in the ancient world?

The most important discussion of friendship in antiquity is probably that found in Aristotle's *Ethics*. As one philosopher observes, "Aristotle's treatise on friendship is comprehensive and confident, as well as undeniably profound."[\[4\]](#) Aristotle views friendship as something like the glue of a community, binding people together in relations of benevolence and love. Such relations are indispensable for the community's health and well-being.[\[5\]](#)

Aristotle describes friendship as "*reciprocated* goodwill" and claims that the highest form of friendship occurs between "good people similar in virtue." The primary virtue of real friends is "loving" one another. And such love is expressed in practical actions, for the virtuous person "labours for his friends" and is even willing to "die for them" if necessary.

Finally, the ancients also viewed “frank speech” and “openness” as essential elements of friendship. According to Plutarch, “Frankness of speech . . . is the language of friendship . . . and . . . lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble.”[\[6\]](#) The language of friendship thus involves something like “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Friendship should allow, and even encourage, frank speech. And yet, such speech should always be characterized by love and a genuine desire for the friend’s best interest.

Putting this all together, we can see how Jesus’ remarks about friendship correlate with the ancient ideals expressed in the writings of men like Aristotle and Plutarch. Just as Aristotle viewed friendship as the glue of a community, so also Jesus seems to envision the formation of a community of friends, who are bound together in love by their shared allegiance to Him. As biblical scholar Dr. Gail O’Day observes, “The language of friendship provided language for talking about the construction of a community of like-minded people informed by a particular set of teachings.”[\[7\]](#)

Below, we’ll consider how Jesus both models and encourages the ancient ideals of friendship in His life and teaching.

## **The Language of Friendship**

One of the ways in which John shows Jesus demonstrating friendship is through his frank and honest speech. We’ve seen that in the ancient world, open and honest speech was regarded as one of the hallmarks of friendship. And there are several occasions in which such speech is attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John (e.g., 7:26; 10:24-30; 11:14; 16:25-33; 18:19-20).[\[8\]](#)

Of course, this doesn’t mean that everything Jesus had to say was easy to understand. It wasn’t, and even his disciples often misunderstood Him. Nor does it mean that Jesus never

taught truths about God by using parables or figurative language. Indeed, He often did. What it does mean, however, is that throughout his Gospel, John repeatedly portrays Jesus as speaking and teaching the truth about God openly and honestly to all who care to listen.

For example, Jesus is described as “speaking openly” while teaching the people in the temple at the Feast of Booths (John 7:14, 26). Moreover, after His arrest, when Jesus is being questioned by the High Priest, He frankly declares to those present, “I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret” (John 18:20). Dr. Gail O’Day observes that Jesus here claims that His entire public ministry has “been characterized by freedom of speech throughout its duration.” She writes, “Jesus has not held anything back in His self-revelation but has spoken with the freedom that marks a true friend.”[\[9\]](#)

Finally, we must not forget what Jesus says to His disciples in John 15: “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (v. 15). Here Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as “friends,” claiming that He has “made known” to them everything that He has heard from the Father. Not only does Jesus call His disciples “friends,” He also speaks to them in the language of friendship, openly and honestly revealing to them the heart and mind of the Father.

Judged by the criterion of “frank and honest speech,” Jesus thus reveals Himself to be a true friend to His disciples. And as we’ll see next, He is willing to do much more than this, for Jesus is willing to lay down His life for the benefit of others.

# The Ultimate Demonstration of Friendship

In John 15 Jesus declares, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). Earlier we saw that Aristotle, in his writings on friendship, maintained that the true friend, actuated by genuine goodness, would even be willing to "die" (if necessary) for the sake of a friend.<sup>{10}</sup> Of course, as any reader of the Gospels knows, Jesus soon does this very thing, thus demonstrating the greatest possible love according to the ancient ideals of friendship. As Dr. O'Day observes, "Jesus did what the philosophers only talked about—He lay down his life for His friends."<sup>{11}</sup>

This event is foreshadowed by Jesus in His claim to be the Good Shepherd in John 10. "I am the good shepherd," He says. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (v. 11). This claim is one of the seven "I Am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John, and it likely involves an implicit claim to deity, for as Edwin Blum has noted, "In the Old Testament, God is called the Shepherd of His people (Psalm 23:1; 80:1-2; Ecclesiastes 12:11; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10)."<sup>{12}</sup> One thinks of the way in which David begins Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (v. 1). The Lord Jesus, as the Good Shepherd of His people, is willing to lay down His life for their benefit (John 10:11).

But Jesus goes further than this, for as Paul tells us, Jesus not only gave His life for His "friends," but even for His "enemies." "For while we were still weak," writes Paul, "at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). "While we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8), and even "enemies," "we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). If dying for one's friends epitomizes the ancient ideal of friendship, dying for one's enemies far transcends this ideal. It demonstrates the sacrificial love of God for all humanity. While we were spiritually dead, mired in

sin and rebellion (Ephesians 2:1-3), God “sent his Son to be the savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

Aristotle referred to friendship as “reciprocated goodwill.” Jesus demonstrated the greatest possible love and “goodwill” of God by giving His life for the sins of the world (John 1:29). He commands His disciples to reciprocate His goodwill by loving “one another” as He has loved us (John 15:12, 14). By following His command, a community of friends is formed, bound together in love for one another and a shared commitment to Jesus.

## **A Community of Friends**

Jesus calls His disciples “friends” and commands them to “love one another” as He has loved them (John 15:12). Jesus wants His followers to regard themselves not only as *His* friends, but as friends of one another as well. He intends for them to be a community of friends, bound together in their love for one another because of their shared devotion to Him. The sort of love to which Jesus calls them is a costly love, for He desires that His people’s love for one another be an imitation of the love that He has already demonstrated toward them. And what sort of love is this? It’s the kind of love that is willing to give one’s life for the benefit of others, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13).

Now this, I think we can all agree, is a very high calling. Indeed, if we’re honest, I think that we must all admit that, humanly speaking, it is frankly impossible. If some degree of discomfort does not grip our hearts in considering this commandment, then we probably aren’t considering it in all due seriousness. Very few of us will probably ever reach the level of truly loving other believers just as Jesus has loved us, and if any of us do reach it, we probably won’t be able to consistently maintain such love in our daily practice. But Jesus commands us to do it, and we must at least begin trying

to do so. But how?

Dr. Gail O'Day, I think, strikes the right tone when she comments: "The disciples begin with the explicit appellation, 'friend,' and the challenge for them is to enact and embody friendship as Jesus has done. The disciples know how Jesus has been a friend, and they are called to see what kind of friends they can become. Jesus' friendship is the model of friendship for the disciples, and it makes any subsequent acts of friendship by them possible because the disciples themselves are already the recipients of Jesus' acts of friendship."[\[13\]](#)

We must remember that Jesus is our friend, that He loves us and provides all that we need to live a holy and God-honoring life. Indeed, He has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower His people for just this purpose. As we trust in Jesus, giving ourselves to Him (and one another) in genuine love and friendship, we will find that we are increasingly obeying His commands and bearing fruit that brings Him glory. So let's commit ourselves to friendship with Jesus, and to those who compose His body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:24).

## Notes

1. Much of the content of this article is indebted to the prior work of Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation*, 58(2):144-157.
2. The title for this day is indebted to the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The words to this song were originally penned by Joseph Scriven in the 19th century; they were set to music by Charles Converse in 1868. For a brief history of Scriven and the hymn, please see Terry, L. (2004, July-August). Joseph Scriven's: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus": What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! *Today's Christian*, 42(4), 16.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: Macmillan,

1962), 42-48.

4. Michael Pakaluk (Ed.), *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 28.

5. I am drawing from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett Publishing, 1985), 1155a23-27.

6. Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 61; cited in Gail O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation* 58(2):147.

7. O'Day, 147.

8. See the discussion in O'Day, 152-57.

9. O'Day, 156.

10. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett Publishing, 1985).

11. O'Day, 150.

12. Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1989), 310.

13. O'Day, 152.

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## Ransom and the Martial Spirit in Perelandra

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn explores the spiritual dimensions of Dr. Elwin Ransom in C.S. Lewis's space novel Perelandra.*

In C. S. Lewis's novel, *Perelandra*, the second book in what some have called the "Cosmic Trilogy," Dr. Elwin Ransom is sent by God to the planet Venus on a mission of great importance.[\[1\]](#) Although Ransom has learned that dark spiritual powers on earth are plotting "some sort of attack on Perelandra" (or Venus), he doesn't know precisely what he's to

do about it once he arrives, nor why he's been chosen for such a venture.[{2}](#) But God knows, and he's specially prepared Ransom for this mission (though this doesn't mean it will be easy).[{3}](#)

[In a prior article](#), I observed how God had providentially orchestrated Ransom's earlier adventures on the planet Mars in order to help him develop some of the "martial" virtues—traits like grit, courage, and perseverance.[{4}](#) As this second story on the planet Venus (or Perelandra) unfolds, the reader gradually comes to see how important this preparation was.[{5}](#) Indeed, before his mission can be completed, Ransom will need all these virtues (along with the grace and help of God) if he's to successfully realize the purpose for which he's been sent.



In the first two chapters of the novel, Lewis foreshadows key themes that will surface later in the story. These include demonic opposition to the plans and purposes of God, the importance of dying to one's self-will and yielding that will to God, and the possibility of Ransom's physical combat and injury.

The most important of these is probably that of dying to one's self-will by continually surrendering that will to God. As Lewis makes clear elsewhere, such surrender might be harder or easier depending on the spiritual condition of the one who needs to do the surrendering.[{6}](#) For an unfallen creature, such surrender could be experienced as a kind of pleasure. For a fallen and sinful creature, however, it involves a kind of death. This is foreshadowed in the novel by the fact that Ransom is transported to Perelandra in "a large coffin-shaped casket."[{7}](#) The very means by which he's taken to Perelandra symbolizes the fact that God is taking Ransom on a journey that will require him to die to his own will by surrendering to the Divine will.[{8}](#)

In the remainder of this article, we'll consider some of the

key issues that Lewis explores in this novel, particularly as these concern the martial spirit in Ransom, who functions as God's representative in Perelandra.

## Beauty and the Beast

In C. S. Lewis's "Cosmic Trilogy," each planet in our solar system is governed by a powerful spiritual intelligence that combines aspects of a Christian archangel with the characteristics of a Roman god or goddess.<sup>{9}</sup> Hence, in Lewis's first novel of the trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, we learn that the planet Mars is governed by a powerful angelic ruler with qualities like the Roman god Mars (though void of all the negative characteristics attributed to Mars in Greco-Roman mythology). In a similar way, in Lewis's second novel, *Perelandra*, we learn that Perelandra (or Venus) is governed by an angelic ruler with characteristics like those of the Roman goddess Venus, the goddess of love and beauty.<sup>{10}</sup>

After initially being deposited in the ocean of Perelandra, and then making his way to one of the many "floating islands" of that world, Ransom soon discovers that the planet is replete with beauty and pleasure. The colors, the fragrances, the taste of the fruits—everything about the planet exudes beauty, wonder, joy, and pleasure.<sup>{11}</sup>

Eventually, Ransom meets Tinidril, the unfallen first mother of Perelandra, also known as "the Green Lady" (due to the color of her skin).<sup>{12}</sup> She has been separated from Tor, the first father and king of Perelandra, in part because of the floating islands. At this stage in the history of Perelandra, Tor and Tinidril occupy a position much like that of Adam and Eve before the fall.

One day, while Ransom is conversing with the Green Lady, they see something "like a shooting star" race "across the sky" and

fall into the ocean.{13} They later discover that Weston, the physicist who originally kidnapped Ransom and took him to Mars, has come to Perelandra on a spaceship.

Given his history with Weston, Ransom is naturally worried about why he should have come to Perelandra. Talking with Weston only increases his concerns, for Weston's previously naturalistic philosophy now has a decidedly religious bent. He claims to have been "guided" to Perelandra by a spiritual force and the more Ransom hears, the more he thinks this force may well be diabolical. When Weston arrogantly calls "that Force" into himself, he is suddenly possessed by a demonic spirit.{14} He is the "bridge" by which this evil spirit has entered Perelandra.{15} Ransom now understands that he has been sent to Perelandra to protect the Green Lady from Weston.

## **Temptation**

Perelandra (or Venus) exists in a state much like that of Earth prior to the fall of Adam and Eve. It is an unfallen paradise.

But there's a problem. Weston, a proud and arrogant scientist, has come to Perelandra at the behest of an evil spirit. Shortly after landing on the planet, he is completely possessed by this spirit. Ransom, the hero of the story, now realizes that God has sent him to Perelandra in order to prevent the planet's first couple from falling into the same disobedience as our first parents.

Weston (now referred to as the "Un-man") soon begins tempting Tinidril (the Perelandrian "Eve") to disobey God, trying to get her to sleep on the fixed land. You see, Perelandra consists of both floating islands and fixed land, and God has forbidden the first couple to sleep on the fixed land, just as Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.{16}

Initially, Ransom tries to counter the Un-man's arguments to disobey God with arguments of his own. After many days, however, he realizes that he cannot allow this to continue. Tinidril has been faithfully resisting the Un-man's temptations, but she seems to be growing weaker and Ransom sees that something more definitive must be done.{17}

While thinking about this issue, Ransom realizes that God is calling him to confront and physically fight the Un-man.{18} This is where Ransom's prior experience on Mars and his development of the martial spirit become particularly important. God has prepared Ransom for this and now calls upon him to destroy the corrupt demonic evil that has invaded His good world.

Ransom initially resists this idea, fearing that he may well be killed in such a violent encounter. But God impresses upon Ransom that he's His *representative* in Perelandra—and if he fails, there will be very real consequences. Perelandra *really can* fall into the hands of the enemy, just as Earth did. Ransom is forced to confront the agonizing reality that his choices are significant and make a real difference. If he chooses to do nothing, then evil will win, and Perelandra will be ruined. He thus decides that he must yield his will to God's will, fight the Un-man, and attempt to rid this beautiful world of its evil invader.{19}

## Holy War

Above we saw how Dr. Ransom, the hero of the story, comes to realize that God is calling him to fight and destroy the Un-man. The Un-man is a demon-possessed physicist whose humanity has been obliterated by the demonic spirit inhabiting his body. He wants to persuade Tinidril (the Perelandrian "Eve") to disobey God, thus introducing sin and evil into this unfallen paradise.

Although some might find it startling that God would call Ransom to fight and destroy the Un-man, we must not forget that at this point the Un-man is mostly just a demon-possessed corpse, an enemy of both God and the innocent persons on Perelandra. Moreover, Lewis carefully contextualizes this battle within the larger mythological world of his story. As Ransom realizes while contemplating this issue, "Whatever happened here would be of such a nature that earth-men would call it mythological."[\[20\]](#)

The bottom line is that evil has invaded and is attempting to destroy God's good world of Perelandra—and God is utterly serious about eliminating it. As a just and holy being, God cannot allow evil to go unjudged and unpunished, for evil (by its very nature) *deserves* punishment. Moreover, since evil will always seek to corrupt and destroy all that is good, it must either be set right (through repentance and submission to God's will) or else be completely eliminated from God's good creation. There is no other alternative if God wants to restore His world to perfect goodness, peace, and rest.

The battle begins the next morning and Ransom gets an initial victory. The Un-Man flees, Ransom pursues, and they eventually end up in a large, dark, underground cavern. Although it's too dark to see, Ransom finally believes that he has killed the Un-Man and he sets off to find his way out of the darkness. Unfortunately, however, the demonic spirit reanimates Weston's corpse and pursues him. As the Un-Man comes up out of a tunnel, Ransom confronts him, crushes his head with a large stone, and pushes the corpse over a ledge into a "sea of fire" below.[\[21\]](#) Here Lewis probably intends an allusion to the biblical "lake of fire," into which the devil and his "offspring" are ultimately cast (Revelation 20:10-15). Ransom, imbued with the martial spirit, has been victorious, and the evil which had invaded Perelandra has been defeated.

## Ransom as a Christ-Figure

In the previous section we covered how Dr. Ransom, the hero of the novel, killed the demonically possessed “Un-man” by crushing his head with a large stone. After the battle, Ransom, completely exhausted, falls into a deep sleep (possibly symbolic of death). After waking, he eventually emerges (with the aid of Divine providence), from the deep, dark, tomb-like cavern (in which the final battle had taken place) into the light and air of Perelandra (which is possibly symbolic of resurrection).[{22}](#)

Given the extent of Ransom’s injuries, it takes some time for him to recover. During “this long Sabbath,” Ransom lay by a stream, eating, drinking, and sleeping.[{23}](#) Only when he is “nearly well” does he discover “his most serious injury.” “It was a wound in his heel,” inflicted by the Unman in one of their many violent encounters. The wound is still bleeding when Ransom first notices it, and “nothing he could do would stop it.”[{24}](#)

Here we see Ransom emerge from his martial victory over the Un-man as a type of Christ. Those familiar with the Bible will recall Genesis 3:15, in which the Lord tells the serpent, who led Adam and Eve into disobedience, that He will put “enmity” between the serpent and *his* offspring and the woman and *her* offspring. “He shall bruise your head,” God tells the serpent, “and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

Lewis is clearly portraying Ransom as a Christ-figure, who has acted as God’s representative in Perelandra. In a small and limited way, Ransom did something similar to what Jesus had already perfectly accomplished on earth. In the mythological world of the story, he crushed the head of the serpent’s offspring and, in turn, received a wound in his heel. This might remind us of the Apostle Paul’s concluding words to the church in Rome: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16:20). Insofar as we belong to Christ, we

act as His representatives in the world. What is true of Christ is also, in some sense, true of his people.

Having thus secured martial victory in Perelandra, Ransom returns to Earth with the wound in his heel as a continual reminder of his battle against the forces of evil. And it is in this condition that we will meet him for the last time in the concluding novel of this series, *That Hideous Strength*.

## Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965). "Cosmic Trilogy" is the terminology used by Michael Ward in "Voyage to Venus: Lewis's Imaginative Path to Perelandra," in *C. S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*. ed. Judith Wolfe and Brendan Wolfe (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2013), 28.

2. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 23.

3. The idea for investigating Ransom and the "martial spirit" in Perelandra is indebted to the work of Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2020), particularly pp. 70-76.

4. See Michael Gleghorn, "Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet," Probe Ministries, 29 October 2023 [probe.org/smuggling-theology-into-out-of-the-silent-planet/](https://probe.org/smuggling-theology-into-out-of-the-silent-planet/)).

5. See Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 76.

6. See C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: NY: Macmillan, 1962), 90-92.

7. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 21.

8. I borrow this insight from Tami Van Optal's insightful essay, "Perelandran Diction: A Study in Meaning," in *C. S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*, 112.

9. See Gleghorn, "Smuggling Theology."

10. See the brief discussion of these planets in *C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1964), 106-07.

11. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 37.
12. Ibid., 55.
13. Ibid., 76.
14. Ibid., 96.
15. Ibid., 111-12.
16. Ibid., 74.
17. Ibid., 131-34.
18. Ibid., 143-47.
19. Ibid., 146-50.
20. Ibid., 144.
21. Ibid., 182. Note: the content mentioned in this brief paragraph is covered in the novel on pp. 151-82.
22. Ibid., 182-85. See also the discussion in Bruce R. Johnson's essay, "Frightful Freedom: *Perelandra* as Imaginative Theodicy," in *C. S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*, 140.
23. Ibid., 185.
24. Ibid., 187.

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# The Self-Understanding of Jesus

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines some sayings and deeds of Jesus, accepted by many critical scholars as historically authentic, to see what they imply about Jesus' self-understanding.*

## Jesus and the Scholars

You might be surprised to learn that today many New Testament scholars don't believe that the historical Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God, the Lord, or even the Messiah.[\[1\]](#) But if

that's the case, how do they explain the presence of such claims in the Gospels? They believe the Gospel writers put them there! The actual Jesus of history never made such exalted claims for *himself*. It was the early church that started all that business.



Is this true? What are we to make of all this? Let's begin with a deceptively simple question: How did the early church come to believe in—and even worship—Jesus as both Lord and Messiah, if he never actually claimed such titles for himself? Just think for a moment about how strange this would be. Jesus' earliest followers were Jews. They firmly believed that there is only one God. And yet, shortly after his crucifixion, they began worshiping *Jesus* as God! As Dr. William Lane Craig asks, "How does one explain this worship by monotheistic Jews of one of their countrymen as God incarnate, apart from the claims of Jesus himself?"[\[2\]](#) In other words, if Jesus never made such exalted claims for *himself*, then why would his earliest followers do so? After all, on the surface such claims not only seem blasphemous, they also appear to contradict the deeply held Jewish conviction that there is only one God.

But there's another issue that needs to be considered. Although many critical scholars don't believe that Jesus ever made such radical personal claims, nevertheless, they *do* believe that he said and did things that seem to imply that he had a very high view of himself. In other words, while they might deny that Jesus ever *explicitly* claimed to be Israel's Messiah, or Lord, they acknowledge that he said and did things which, when you get right down to it, seem to imply that that's precisely who he *believed* himself to be! If this is correct, if Jesus really believed himself to be both Israel's Messiah and Lord, then notice that we are brought back once

again to that old dilemma of traditional apologetics.<sup>{3}</sup> Jesus was either deceived in this belief, suffering from something akin to delusions of grandeur. Or he was a fraud, willfully trying to deceive others. Or he really was who he believed himself to be—Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

In the remainder of this article, we'll examine some of the sayings and deeds of Jesus that even many critical scholars accept as historically authentic to see what they might tell us about Jesus' self-understanding.

## Jesus and the Twelve

Today, even most critical scholars agree that Jesus probably chose a core group of twelve disciples just as the Gospels say he did. In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman refers to this event as "one of the best-attested traditions of our surviving sources . . ."<sup>{4}</sup> Now you might be thinking that this sounds like a rather insignificant detail. What can this possibly tell us about the self-understanding of Jesus? Does his choice of twelve disciples give us any insight into what he believed about himself?

Let's begin with a little background information. E. P. Sanders, in his highly acclaimed book, *Jesus and Judaism*, observes that ". . . in the first century Jewish hopes for the future would have included the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel."<sup>{5}</sup> Now this hope was based on nothing less than God's prophetic revelation in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the primary agent effecting this restoration is said to be the Lord (e.g. Isa. 11:11-12; Mic. 2:12). At other times it's a Messianic figure who is clearly a human being (e.g. Isa. 49:5-6). Interestingly, however, still other passages describe this Messianic figure as having divine attributes, or as being closely associated with the Lord in some way (e.g. cp. Mic. 2:13 with 5:2-4). But why is this important? And what does it have to do with Jesus' choice of twelve disciples?

Many New Testament scholars view Jesus' choice of twelve disciples as symbolic of the promised restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. The restoration of Israel is thus seen to be one of the goals or objectives of Jesus' ministry. As Richard Horsley observes, "One of the principal indications that Jesus intended the restoration of Israel was his appointment of the Twelve."[\[6\]](#) But if one of Jesus' consciously chosen aims was the restoration of Israel, then what does this imply about who he believed himself to be? After all, the Old Testament prophets attribute this restoration either to the Lord or to a Messianic figure possessing both divine and human attributes.

Might Jesus have viewed himself in such exalted terms? Some scholars believe that he did. Dr. Ben Witherington poses an interesting question: "If the Twelve represent a renewed Israel, where does Jesus fit in?" He's *not* one of the Twelve. "He's not just part of Israel, not merely part of the redeemed group, he's forming the group—just as God in the Old Testament formed his people and set up the twelve tribes of Israel."[\[7\]](#) Witherington argues that this is an important clue in uncovering what Jesus thought of himself. If he's right, then Jesus may indeed have thought of himself as Israel's Messiah and Lord!

## Jesus and the Law

What was Jesus' attitude toward the Law of Moses? Some scholars say that Jesus was a law-abiding Jew who "broke neither with the written Law nor with the traditions of the Pharisees."[\[8\]](#) Others say the issue is more complex. Ben Witherington observes that Jesus related to the Law in a variety of ways.[\[9\]](#) Sometimes he affirmed the validity of particular Mosaic commandments (e.g. Matt. 19:18-19). At other times he went beyond Moses and intensified some of the commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount he declared, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I

tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). We shouldn't skip too lightly over a statement like this. The prohibition against adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. By wording the statement as he did, Jesus apparently "equated his own authority with that of the divinely given Torah."[\[10\]](#) Indeed, it's because of sayings like this that one Jewish writer complained: "Israel cannot accept . . . the utterances of a man who speaks in his own name—not 'thus saith the Lord,' but '*I* say unto you.' This '*I*' is . . . sufficient to drive Judaism away from the Gentiles forever."[\[11\]](#)

But Jesus went further than this! In Mark 7 he declared all foods "clean" (vv. 14-19). That is, he set aside the dietary laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. To really grasp the radical nature of Jesus' declaration one must only remember that these dietary laws had been given to Israel by God Himself! But what sort of person believes he has the authority to set aside the commandments of God? Ben Witherington notes, "Jesus seems to assume an authority over Torah that no Pharisee or Old Testament prophet assumed—the authority to set it aside."[\[12\]](#) And Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar, seems to agree: "Jews believe in the Torah of Moses . . . and that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teachings of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah."[\[13\]](#)

How does this relate to the self-understanding of Jesus? Think about it this way. What would Jesus have to believe about himself to seriously think he had the authority to set aside God's commandments? Although it may trouble some critical scholars, the evidence seems to favor the view that Jesus believed that in some sense he possessed the authority of God Himself!

## Jesus and the Demons

One of the amazing feats attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is the power of exorcism, the power to cast out demons from human beings. Although this may sound strange and unscientific to some modern readers, most critical scholars agree that both Jesus and his contemporaries at least *believed* that Jesus had such power. Of course, this doesn't mean that the majority of critical scholars believe that demons *actually* exist, or that Jesus *actually* cast such spirits out of people. Many of them do not. But they do think there is persuasive historical evidence for affirming that both Jesus and his contemporaries *believed* such things.<sup>{14}</sup> In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman notes that "Jesus' exorcisms are among the best-attested deeds of the Gospel traditions."<sup>{15}</sup> But why is this important? And what can it possibly tell us about Jesus' self-understanding?

Most scholars are convinced that the historical Jesus declared, "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). Prior to making this declaration, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out demons "by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons" (12:24). Jesus responded by pointing out how absurd it would be for Satan to fight against himself like that (v. 26). What's more, the charge was inconsistent. There were other Jewish exorcists in Jesus' day and it was widely believed that their power came from God. Wouldn't it be more reasonable, then, to conclude that Jesus' power also came from God?

If so, then notice the startling implications of Jesus' claim: "*If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*" At the very least, Jesus appears to be claiming that in himself the kingdom of God is in some sense a present reality. But his claim may actually be even more radical. Some scholars have observed that in ancient Jewish literature the phrase, 'kingdom of God,' is sometimes used as a roundabout way for speaking of God Himself. If Jesus

intended this meaning in the statement we are considering, then William Lane Craig's conclusion is fully warranted: "In claiming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as visibly demonstrated by his exorcisms, Jesus was, in effect, saying that in himself God had drawn near, thus putting himself in God's place." [\[16\]](#)

It increasingly appears that Jesus thought of himself as much more than just another teacher or prophet. Even when we limit ourselves to material accepted as authentic by the majority of critical scholars, Jesus still seems to unquestionably communicate his divinity!

## **Jesus and the Father**

In one of the most astonishing declarations of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel he states, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27). Many scholars believe that this verse forms a unit with the two preceding verses. It's clear from the context that the "Father" referred to by Jesus is God, for Jesus begins this section by saying, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (11:25). So in the verse we are considering, Jesus claims to be God's Son in an absolutely unique sense. He refers to God as "My Father," and declares that no one knows the Father, "except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus not only claims to be God's unique Son, he also claims to have special knowledge of the Father that no one else can mediate to others!

Because of the radical nature of these claims, it's hardly surprising to learn that some critical scholars have denied that Jesus ever really said this. Nevertheless, other scholars have offered some very good reasons for embracing the saying's authenticity. Dr. William Lane Craig notes that this saying

comes from the hypothetical *Q* source, a source that both Matthew and Luke may have used in writing their Gospels. If that's true, then the saying is quite early and thus has a greater likelihood of actually going back to Jesus. Additionally, "the idea of the mutual knowledge of Father and Son is a Jewish idea, indicating its origin in a Semitic-speaking milieu."[\[17\]](#) Finally, Dr. Ben Witherington notes that the eminent New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias showed "how this saying goes back to an Aramaic original" which "surely counts in favor of it going back to Jesus."[\[18\]](#) Aramaic was probably the language most often used by Jesus and his disciples. After discussing this saying in some detail, Witherington concludes, "In the end, all the traditional bases for judging this saying to be inauthentic no longer will bear close scrutiny."[\[19\]](#)

In this brief overview of the self-understanding of Jesus, I've attempted to show that even when we limit ourselves to Gospel traditions that are generally considered historically authentic by a majority of scholars, Jesus still makes impressive claims to deity. But as Dr. Craig observes, ". . . if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then he was either a charlatan or a madman, neither of which is plausible. Therefore, why not accept him as the divine Son of God, just as the earliest Christians did?"[\[20\]](#)

## Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 242-43.
2. Ibid., 243.
3. Ibid., 252.
4. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.
5. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 98.
6. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco:

Harper & Row, 1987), 199.

7. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 134.

8. Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus*, ed. Gerard Terpstra (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 109-10. This quotation does not represent Hagner's own position.

9. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 65.

10. Craig, 246.

11. Ahad ha' Am, "Judaism and the Gospels," in *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic*, ed. H. Khon (New York: Schocken, 1962), 298, cited in Hagner, 101-02.

12. Witherington, 65.

13. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Doubleday,

1993), xii, cited in Craig, 247.

14. Ehrman, 197.

15. Ibid.

16. Craig, 249.

17. Ibid., 246.

18. Witherington, 224.

19. Ibid., 225.

20. Craig, 252.

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## Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip?

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides good reasons to believe that the stories about Jesus were reliably preserved by his followers*

*before being recorded in the Gospels.*

## **Forgetting What Lies Behind?**

It was late at night and the university library was about to close. I was feverishly working to complete a project for one of my classes. A bell sounded, indicating it was time to shut down and leave the building. As I and a few other students began shutting down our computers to go home for the night, a security guard suddenly began yelling at us to leave the building immediately! Apparently we weren't moving quickly enough, and the guard, probably tired from a long day at work, was quite irritated. We told her we would leave as soon as we could, but it would take us a few minutes to pack up. Annoyed, she wrote down our names and threatened to report us to the administration. We, in turn, returned the favor, taking down her name and saying that we would report how rudely we were treated.

When I got back to my apartment, I immediately wrote down what had happened. I wanted to be sure that if I was contacted by the administration, I would have an accurate report of the evening's events. Knowing how fallible human memory can be, I wanted to write everything down while it was still fresh in my mind. Most people would say this was a wise thing to do.



But it raises an interesting question about the New Testament Gospels. Although liberal and conservative scholars differ a bit over when these documents were written, most would agree that the earliest Gospel (probably Mark) was written anywhere from twenty to forty years after Jesus' death. And the latest, the Gospel of John, probably dates to around sixty years after Jesus' death.

But why did they wait so long to write their accounts? Some scholars say this was plenty of time for Jesus' followers to

distort and embellish their Master's original words and deeds. Consequently, they insist, by the time the ministry of Jesus was recorded in the Gospels, it had already reached a form that was partly fictional. In short, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is alleged to have been corrupted before the Gospel writers ever "put pen to papyrus."[{1}](#) In the words of the Jesus Seminar:

The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth—traces that cry out for . . . liberation from . . . those whose faith overpowered their memories. The search for the authentic Jesus is a search for the forgotten Jesus.[{2}](#)

Is this true? Did the faith of Jesus' earliest followers really *overpower their memories* of what Jesus said and did? Is our faith in the Gospels well-placed—or misplaced? In the remainder of this article we'll see that there are good reasons to believe that the Gospel writers told us the "Gospel truth" about Jesus!

## Why the Wait?

Do the New Testament Gospels accurately preserve for us the things which Jesus said and did? Many liberal scholars don't think so. They maintain that the oral tradition upon which the Gospels are based became quickly corrupted by the early church. If they're right, then some of what we read about Jesus in the Gospels never really happened. As some of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar put it:

Scholars of the gospels are faced with a . . . problem: Much of the lore recorded in the gospels and elsewhere in the Bible is folklore, which means that it is wrapped in memories that have been edited, deleted, augmented, and combined many times over many years.[{3}](#)

This raises some important questions for us to consider. How carefully was the oral tradition about the words and deeds of Jesus transmitted in the early church? Does the evidence indicate whether or not it was corrupted before the Gospels were written? And why on earth did the Gospel writers wait so long to write their accounts?

Let's begin with that last question. Why did the Gospel writers wait so long to record the ministry of Jesus? Let me offer two responses to this question. First, compared with other ancient biographies that are generally considered reliable, the Gospels were written relatively soon after the events they narrate. The Gospels were written anywhere from twenty to sixty years after the death of Jesus. Although this may initially seem like a long time, it's still well within the lifetime of eyewitnesses who could either confirm or contradict these accounts of Jesus' public ministry. By contrast, "The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written . . . more than four hundred years after Alexander's death . . . yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy."[\[4\]](#) Comparatively speaking, then, the Gospel writers really didn't wait long at all to write their accounts.

Secondly, however, we may not even be looking at this issue correctly. As the authors of the recent book, *Reinventing Jesus*, point out:

It might be better to ask, Why were the Gospels written at all? If we think in categories of delay, then this presupposes that the writing of the Gospels was in the minds of these authors from the beginning. However, this is almost certainly not the case. What was paramount in the apostles' earliest motives was oral proclamation of the gospel.[\[5\]](#)

In the early years of the church the story of Jesus was being told and retold by eyewitnesses of these events. But still, some might ask, might these "events" have become gradually

embellished with the story's retelling, so that what's recorded in the Gospels is no longer trustworthy?

## To Tell the Old, Old Story

How accurately was the oral tradition about Jesus' life and ministry preserved *before* being written down? Was it corrupted by his earliest followers *prior* to being recorded in the Gospels? Many liberal scholars think so. But there are good reasons to think otherwise.

In the first place, we must remember that "the interval between Jesus and the written Gospels was not dormant."[\[6\]](#) In fact, this period was filled with a tremendous amount of activity. The earliest followers of Jesus told and retold his story wherever they went. This is important, for as a recent book on Jesus observes:

If the earliest proclamation about Jesus was altered in later years, then surely first-generation Christians would know about the changes and would object to them. It would not even take outsiders to object to the "new and improved Christianity," since those who were already believers would have serious problems with the differences in the content of their belief.[\[7\]](#)

Not only this, but New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg lists many other reasons for believing that this oral tradition was accurately transmitted by Jesus' earliest followers.[\[8\]](#) First, Jesus' followers believed that He "proclaimed God's Word in a way which demanded careful retelling." Second, over ninety percent of his teachings contained "poetic elements which would have made them easy to memorize." Third, "the almost universal method of education in antiquity, and especially in Israel, was rote memorization, which enabled people accurately to recount quantities of material far greater than all of the Gospels put together." And fourth, "written notes and a kind

of shorthand were often privately kept by rabbis and their disciples.” Although we can’t be sure that any of Jesus’ disciples kept written notes of *His* teachings, it’s at least possible that they did.

Finally, we must bear in mind that the Gospels are not the product of merely *one* person’s memories of the events of Jesus’ life. Instead, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is based on *numerous* eyewitness reports. This is extremely important, for as the authors of *Reinventing Jesus* remind us, the disciples’ “recollections were not individual memories but *collective* ones—confirmed by other eyewitnesses and burned into their minds by the constant retelling of the story. . . . *Memory in community* is a deathblow to the view that the disciples simply forgot the real Jesus.”[{9}](#)

## What About the Differences?

Thus, there are excellent reasons for believing that the first Christians accurately preserved and transmitted the stories about Jesus *before* they were recorded in the New Testament Gospels. But if this is so, then how do we explain the fact that the sayings of Jesus and his disciples are sometimes worded differently in different Gospels?

To cite just one example, consider the different ways in which the Gospel writers record the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples on the occasion of Peter’s famous confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus begins by asking his disciples a question, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke each word the question differently. Matthew records Jesus asking, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13).[{10}](#) But in Mark the question reads a bit differently, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27). And in Luke it’s a bit different still, “Who do the crowds say I am?” (Luke 9:18).

Not only is the precise wording of Jesus’ question different

in each of these Gospels, but the wording of Peter's response is as well. In Matthew, Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). But in Mark he simply says, "You are the Christ" (8:29), and in Luke, "The Christ of God" (9:20).

Now clearly these are not *major* differences. In each case the *gist* of what's said is the same. But we must also acknowledge that in each case the *details* are different. What's going on here? If the stories about Jesus were accurately preserved before being recorded in the Gospels, then why are there these subtle, yet real, differences in the words attributed to Jesus and Peter in each of these three accounts? Or to put this question in the words of Darrell Bock, how are we to understand such sayings in the Gospels—are they live, jive, or memorex?[{11}](#)

On the one hand, the view which says such sayings are merely unhistorical "jive" just doesn't do justice to the evidence we've already considered regarding how carefully the oral tradition about the life of Jesus was transmitted by his earliest followers. Nor does this view adequately account for both the internal and external evidence for the historical reliability of the Gospels.[{12}](#)

On the other hand, the "memorex" view, which holds that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' spoken words represent the exact words He spoke on the occasions reported, doesn't seem to square with the actual evidence of the Gospels themselves. The Gospel writers do, as we saw above, report the words of Jesus and his disciples differently, and this is so even in cases where we can be quite confident that the incident occurred only once.

This leaves us with only one more option to consider.

## A “Live” Option

Dr. Darrell Bock has persuasively argued for what he calls a “live” option in explaining the differences between the Gospel accounts.[{13}](#) He describes this option this way:

Each Evangelist retells the . . . words of Jesus in a fresh way . . . while . . . accurately presenting the “gist” of what Jesus said. . . . [T]his approach . . . recognizes the Jesus tradition as “live” in its dynamic and quality. We clearly hear Jesus . . . but . . . there is summary and emphasis in the complementary portraits that each Evangelist gives . . . .[{14}](#)

In other words, the Gospel writers are not always giving us Jesus’ *exact words*, but they are always giving us his genuine *voice*. This distinction is absolutely necessary. For one thing, it helps explain the observed differences among Jesus’ sayings in the Gospels. It also sits well with the fact that most of these sayings had already been translated by the time they were first recorded. You see, most of Jesus’ original teaching would have been done in Aramaic, the dominant language of first-century Palestine. The Gospels, however, were written in Greek. Since “most of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels is already a translation,” we’re not reading his *exact words* even when we’re reading the Gospels in Greek.[{15}](#) Finally, Jesus’ longest speeches can be read in a matter of minutes. Yet “we know that Jesus kept his audiences for hours at a time (e.g., Mark 6:34-36).” It seems evident, then, “that the writers gave us a . . . summarized presentation of what Jesus said and did.”[{16}](#)

But if the “live” option is correct, and the Gospels don’t always give us Jesus’ exact words, does this mean that their reports of Jesus’ teaching are untrustworthy? Not at all. The way in which the Gospel writers recorded the words and deeds of Jesus was totally consistent with the way in which responsible histories were written in the ancient world. As

Dr. Bock observes, “the Greek standard of reporting speeches required a concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not . . . recorded.”[\[17\]](#)

This is exactly what a careful study of the Gospels reveals about the way in which their authors reported the words of Jesus. Although these writers lived before the invention of audio recorders, they nonetheless strove to honestly and reliably record the gist of Jesus’ teachings. We can therefore read these documents with confidence that they are telling us the “Gospel truth” about Jesus in a fresh and dynamic way.

## Notes

1. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2006), 21.
2. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 4, cited in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 21.
3. Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 6, cited in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 29.
4. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.
5. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 26.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 30.
8. The following points are taken from Craig L. Blomberg, “Gospels (Historical Reliability),” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 294.

9. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 33-34.
10. All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).
11. Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus Under Fire*, eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 73-99.
12. See Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987).
13. The discussion which follows is largely dependent on the essay by Darrell Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels," 73-99.
14. Ibid., 77.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 77-78.
17. Ibid., 79.

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## Smuggling Theology Into "Out of the Silent Planet"

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides an overview of how C.S. Lewis wove theology into his 'Out of the Silent Planet,' the first book of his space trilogy,*

*Out of the Silent Planet*, C.S. Lewis' first foray into the science-fiction genre, was originally published in 1938.[\[1\]](#) Lewis, who appreciated the science-fiction stories of authors like H. G. Wells, was nonetheless troubled by elements in these stories that were morally and intellectually objectionable. According to Alister McGrath, Lewis realized "that the forms of science fiction . . . used to promote

various forms of atheism and materialism could . . . be used to *critique* these viewpoints and advocate an alternative.”[\[2\]](#) This is what Lewis *did* in *Out of the Silent Planet*—and what he *continued* to do in two follow-up books: *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. Together, these books are commonly known as “the Space Trilogy.”

*Out of the Silent Planet* tells the story of Dr. Elwin Ransom, who is drugged, kidnapped, and taken aboard a spaceship traveling to Mars. Weston and Devine, the two men who kidnap Ransom, have been to Mars before and believe that the planet’s inhabitants want them to bring back another human being (wrongly assuming that the person *may* be wanted as a sacrificial offering). Weston is a physicist, interested in finding potential planets for humanity to colonize once our own planet becomes uninhabitable. Devine is an investor, hoping to make some money from the enterprise.



On their way to Mars (known as Malacandra to its own inhabitants), Ransom learns that his life may be in danger once they reach the planet. Hence, shortly after their arrival, Ransom escapes his kidnappers and ends up meeting a creature called a Hross, one of the planet’s native inhabitants. He soon discovers that, much like himself, these are intelligent and moral beings. Indeed, in some ways they, along with the other intelligent species on the planet, are superior to human beings, for they have not been infected with the same moral illness that plagues our own species. Eventually, Ransom even meets the designated ruler of the planet, a spiritual intelligence referred to as an Oyarsa. He then learns why earth is known as “the silent planet.”[\[3\]](#)

After publishing the book, Lewis confided to one interested correspondent that most of the early reviews had completely missed of Christian theology that he had woven into his narrative. He humorously noted that, apparently, “any amount of theology can now be smuggled into” such a book without

anyone's even noticing.{4} So how much theology did Lewis "smuggle into" *Out of the Silent Planet*? That's what we'll discuss in the remainder of this article.

## The Heavens Declare the Glory

As Weston, Devine, and Ransom travel through space on their way to Mars, Ransom is surprised by just how *good* he is feeling: courageous, joyful, alert, and full of life. He reflects upon the fact that he had been educated to regard space as "the black, cold vacuity" separating the worlds. He comes to realize, however, that this was all wrong. The term "space," he muses, was utterly inadequate "for this . . . ocean of radiance in which they swam." He thus *rejects* the term, observing that "Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens—the heavens which declared the glory." {5}

Ransom is here reflecting upon the words of King David in Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." As one commentator remarks, "David was moved by observing that the heavens, under the dominating influence of the sun, declare the splendor of God's handiwork." {6} The reference to the sun here is apt, for it is largely through the influence of the solar rays that Ransom feels "his body and mind daily rubbed and scoured and filled with new vitality." {7}

Of course, we must remember that Lewis is here writing science *fiction*—and not science fact. While "the substitution of heaven for space" was Lewis's "favorite idea in the book," he also acknowledged "that the rays in interplanetary space, so far from being beneficial," would actually be harmful to us. {8} But Lewis was attempting to reintroduce a conception of wonder and beauty into the world. He wanted to move his readers' understanding of "space" from something merely cold, dark, and dead, to a conception of the "heavens" as something

radiant and alive with the goodness and bounty of their Creator. And this, in the fictional (and even mythological) world of the story, he has arguably achieved.

Indeed, it's one of the reasons that many dislike referring to these books as "the *space* trilogy." Such language misses the fact that Lewis was attempting to shift our attention from the darkness and deadness of "space" to the glory and splendor of the "heavens." It's just one of the ways in which Lewis was attempting to reclaim for God a genre of literature that was so often dominated by atheistic and materialistic forms of thinking.[\[9\]](#)

## War in Heaven

Before we go any further, we must address the meaning of Lewis's title, "*Out of the Silent Planet*." The novel concerns a voyage from Earth to Mars, and details the adventures of the main character, Dr. Elwin Ransom, after his arrival. In the novel, Earth is known as "the *silent* planet." But why?

The answer has partly to do with "smuggled theology" and partly with the mythological world of the story created by Lewis. In this mythological world, we are introduced to the idea that each planet in our solar system is ruled by a very great, though still created, spiritual being. These beings were created by God and are something like a cross between a Christian archangel and a Roman god or goddess. Hence, the spirit that governs Mars is something like a cross between the archangel Michael and the Roman god Mars (devoid, of course, of all the negative characteristics traditionally ascribed to Mars in Greco-Roman mythology). In fact, this being is a loyal servant of God and was created (at least in part) for the purpose of ruling the planet assigned to it. In the novel, such a ruling spiritual power is referred to an *Oyarsa*.

Eventually, Ransom meets this ruling power and learns why

Earth is known as “the silent planet.” He is told that the Oyarsa of *our* world was once very great, even greater than that of Mars.<sup>{1}</sup><sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, however, he became “bent” (or evil). This happened in the distant past, before there was any life on Earth. Because this “Bent One” desired to destroy “other worlds besides his own,” there was “great war” in the heavens. Eventually, he was “bound . . . in the air of his own world.” “There,” Ransom learns, “doubtless he lies to this hour.”<sup>{11}</sup> The other planets have no communication with Earth. It is “silent.”

Do you see what Lewis is doing? In the fictional world of the novel, he is telling us a story very similar to that of the fall of the devil. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul refers to Satan as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:1-2) and the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Lewis is doing something similar in his description of the “Bent One” who rules the Earth as a rebel against God. But Lewis goes much further than this.

## War on Earth

Above, we left Ransom, the hero of C. S. Lewis’s novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, deep in conversation with the divinely appointed spiritual ruler of Mars. After telling Ransom that Earth, alone among the planets in our solar system, is “silent,” being ruled by a “bent” (or evil) power, the Martian ruler then says something quite intriguing.

He tells Ransom that they do not think that “Maleldil” (more on this in a moment) would completely surrender Earth to the “Bent One.” Indeed, he says, “there are stories among us” that Maleldil has done some “strange” and wonderful things, even personally appearing on Earth and “wrestling with the Bent One” for the right to rule. “But of this,” he says, “we know less than you; it is a thing we desire to look into.”<sup>{12}</sup>

So who is Maleldil, and what exactly has he done? In the world of the novel, Maleldil is the name for God in the Old Solar language, which Ransom has gradually learned during his time on Mars.<sup>{13}</sup> Hence, the Martian ruler is essentially telling Ransom that they do not believe that God would completely surrender Earth to the devil. Indeed, they have even heard stories that God (or Maleldil) has visited “the silent planet” and done battle with the evil one. He admits that there is much they do not know about all this but says that he (and other loyal servants of God) long to look into these things.

Those familiar with the Bible will doubtless see what Lewis is doing here, for he concludes this passage with what is basically a biblical quotation. The Apostle Peter wrote of “the prophets who prophesied about the grace” that was to be ours in Christ. So great was the content of this revelation, notes Peter, that even “angels long to look” into such things (1 Peter 1:10-12). Thus, as Christiana Hale rightly notes, the “strange counsel” that Maleldil has taken, and the wonderful things he has done, “the things that all the angels desire to look into, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ: the Incarnation, birth, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.”<sup>{14}</sup>

Once again, therefore, we see Lewis “smuggling theology” into his interplanetary space adventure. In this case, though not stating it explicitly, he clearly alludes to the whole gospel message about Jesus. Next, we’ll consider one final example of “smuggled theology” in C. S. Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet*.

## **Divine Providence and the Martial Spirit**

Although God, who is known as Maleldil in the novel, is mentioned repeatedly, He is always mentioned in the third person. We hear about things that Maleldil *has done*, *is doing*, or may one day *do*, but we do not hear directly from God (or Maleldil) himself. Nevertheless, it is clear that He is ultimately in charge, and He is providentially at work in and

through His creatures.{15}

For example, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars, tells Ransom (the hero of the novel) that it was only by Maleldil that he had been able to save his own planet from the destructive rage of the “Bent One” (or devil). Indeed, it was only by Maleldil that the heavenly host were able to stop the “Bent One’s” ambitious cruelty and confine him to the Earth.{16} Moreover, we learn that Maleldil has done marvelous things and even personally visited Earth to do battle with the devil.{17}

Lewis thus portrays God (or Maleldil) not only as a king, but also as a warrior. He is characterized (in an appropriate way) by what might be called the “warrior” or “martial spirit.” Moreover, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars is also (like the god of Roman mythology) imbued with the martial spirit. He, too, is a warrior, loyally engaged in fighting in the service of God. In light of this, once we learn that Ransom has been called to Mars by its planetary ruler, we can rightly surmise that it was, in fact, *God’s will* for Ransom to make this journey. We might even guess that one of the purposes of this journey was to develop the “martial spirit” in Ransom himself.

As Christiana Hale observes, “Lewis does not randomly pick Mars as the location, as if any alien planet would do. No, he chooses Mars for a reason, and an enormous part of that reason is to mold Ransom into a Martial character.”{18} In other words, God (or Maleldil) wants to develop certain martial virtues in Ransom, things like courage, strength, determination, perseverance, and grit. Indeed, this is providentially necessary, for He is preparing Ransom for something far greater in the future. Hence, through the providence of God and the influence of Mars, we witness Ransom’s growth in the martial spirit, thus preparing him for [his next great adventure](#) on a different alien world, that of Perelandra.

## Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965).
2. Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
3. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
4. C. S. Lewis to Sister Penelope CSMV, August 9, 1939, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 262.
5. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 32.
6. Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*. ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1985), 807.
7. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 31-32.
8. C. S. Lewis to Mrs. Stuart Moore (Evelyn Underhill), October 29, 1938, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 233-34.
9. See Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
10. See Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
11. All quotations in the paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.
12. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.
13. Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2020), 155.
14. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 88.
15. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 67-8.
16. Ibid., 121.
17. Ibid.
18. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 70.

# Reasonable Faith – Why Biblical Christianity Rings True

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn briefly examines some of the reasons why noted Christian philosopher William Lane Craig believes that Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.*

## Reasonable Faith

One of the finest Christian philosophers of our day is William Lane Craig. Although he has become very well known for his debates with atheists and skeptics, he's also a prolific writer. To date, he has authored or edited over thirty books and more than a hundred scholarly articles.<sup>{1}</sup> His published work explores such fascinating topics as the evidence for the existence of God, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and God's relationship to time. In 2007 he started a web-based apologetics ministry called Reasonable Faith ([www.reasonablefaith.org](http://www.reasonablefaith.org)). The site features both scholarly and popular articles written by Craig, audio and video recordings of some of his debates, lectures, and interviews, answers to questions from his readers, and much more.

But before he launched the Reasonable Faith Web site, Craig had also authored a book by the same title. One of the best apologetics books on the market, a revised and updated third edition was recently released. His friend and colleague, the



philosopher J. P. Moreland, endorsed Craig's ministry with these words:

It is hard to overstate the impact that William Lane Craig has had for the cause of Christ. He is simply the finest Christian apologist of the last half century, and his academic work justifies ranking him among the top one percent of practicing philosophers in the Western world. Besides that, he is a winsome ambassador for Christ, an exceptional debater, and a man with the heart of an evangelist. . . . I do not know of a single thinker who has done more to raise the bar of Christian scholarship in our generation than Craig. He is one of a kind, and I thank God for his life and work.{2}

Although the book has been described as "an admirable defense of basic Christian faith,"{3} many readers will find the content quite advanced. According to Craig, "*Reasonable Faith* is intended primarily to serve as a textbook for seminary level courses on Christian apologetics."{4} For those without much prior training in philosophy, theology, and apologetics, this book will make for some very demanding reading in places. But for those who want to seriously grapple with an informed and compelling case for the truth of Christianity, this book will richly repay one's careful and patient study.

Although we cannot possibly do it justice, in the remainder of this article we will briefly consider at least some of the reasons why Craig believes that biblical Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

## **The Absurdity of Life Without God**

Imagine for a moment that there is no God. What implications would this have for human life? Science tells us that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. But if there is no God, then the universe must have come into

being, uncaused, out of nothing! What's more, the origin of life is nothing more than an unintended by-product of matter, plus time, plus chance.{5} No one planned or purposed for life to arise, for if there is no God, there was no one to plan or purpose it. And human beings? We are just the unpredictable result of a long evolutionary process that never had us in mind. In fact, if one were to rewind the history of life to its beginning, and allow the evolutionary process to start anew, it's virtually certain that none of us would be here to think about it! After all, without an intelligent Agent guiding this long and complicated process, the chances that our species would accidentally emerge a second time is practically zero.{6}

Depressing as it is, this little thought experiment provides the appropriate backdrop for Craig's discussion of the absurdity of life without God. In his view, if God does not exist, then human life is ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. After all, if human beings are merely the accidental by-products of the unintended forces of nature, then what possible meaning *could* human life have? If there is no God, then we were not created for a *purpose*; we were merely "coughed" into existence by mindless material processes.

Of course, some might wonder why we couldn't just create some meaning for our lives, or give the universe a meaning of our own. But as Craig observes, "the universe does not really acquire meaning just because *I* happen to give it one . . . . for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless, no matter how we regard it."{7}

Like it or not, if God does not exist, then the universe—and our very lives—are ultimately meaningless and absurd. The difficulty is, however, that no one can really live consistently and happily with such a view.{8} Although merely recognizing this fact does absolutely nothing to show that God

actually exists, it should at least motivate us to sincerely investigate the matter with an open heart and an open mind. So let's now briefly consider some of the *reasons* for believing that there really is a God.

## The Existence of God

In the latest edition of *Reasonable Faith*, Craig offers a number of persuasive arguments for believing that God does, in fact, exist. Unfortunately, we can only skim the surface of these arguments here. But if you want to go deeper, his book is a great place to start.

After a brief historical survey of some of the major kinds of arguments that scholars have offered for believing that God exists, Craig offers his own defense for each of them. He begins with a defense of what is often called the *cosmological* argument. This argument takes its name from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means "world." It essentially argues from the existence of the cosmos, or world, to the existence of a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the world's existence.[{9}](#) Next he defends a *teleological*, or design, argument. The name for this argument comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means "end." According to Craig, this argument attempts to infer "an intelligent designer of the universe, just as we infer an intelligent designer for any product in which we discern evidence of purposeful adaptation of means to some end (*telos*)."[{10}](#) After the design argument, he offers a defense of the *moral* argument. This argument "implies the existence of a Being that is the embodiment of the ultimate Good," as well as "the source of the objective moral values we experience in the world."[{11}](#) Finally, he defends what is known as the *ontological* argument. Ontology is the study of being, and this much-debated argument "attempts to prove from the very concept of God that God exists."[{12}](#)

Taken together, these arguments provide a powerful case for

the existence of God. As Craig presents them, the cosmological argument implies the existence of an eternal, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, personal Creator of the universe. The design argument reveals an intelligent designer of the cosmos. The moral argument reveals a Being who is the transcendent source and standard of moral goodness. And the ontological argument shows that if God's existence is even possible, then He must exist!

But suppose we grant that all of these arguments are sound. Why think that *Christianity* is true? Many *non-Christian* religions believe in God. Why think that Christianity is the one that got it right? In order to answer this question we must now confront the central figure of Christianity: Jesus of Nazareth.

## The Son of Man

When the previous edition of *Reasonable Faith* was published in 1994, most New Testament scholars thought that Jesus had never really claimed to be the Messiah, or Lord, or Son of God. But a lot has happened in the intervening fourteen years, and "the balance of scholarly opinion on Jesus' use of Christological titles may have actually tipped in the opposite direction."[{13}](#)

For example, we have excellent grounds for believing that Jesus often referred to himself as "the Son of Man."[{14}](#) Although some believe that in using this title Jesus was merely referring to himself as a human being, the evidence suggests that he actually meant much more than that. Note, for example, that "Jesus did not refer to himself as 'a son of man,' but as '*the* Son of Man.'"[{15}](#) His use of the definite article is a crucially important observation, especially in light of Daniel 7:13-14.

In this passage Daniel describes a vision in which "one like a

son of man" comes before God with the clouds of heaven. God gives this person an everlasting kingdom and we are told that "all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him" (Dan. 7:14). It's clear that Daniel's "son of man" is much more than a human being, for he's viewed as an appropriate object of worship. Since no one is worthy of worship but God alone (see Luke 4:8), the "son of man" must actually be divine, as well as human.

According to Mark, at Jesus' trial the high priest pointedly asked him if he was the Christ (or Messiah), "the Son of the Blessed One." Jesus' response is astonishing. "I am," he said, "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62). Here Jesus not only affirms that he is the Messiah and Son of God, he also explicitly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man prophesied by Daniel.[\[16\]](#) Since we have excellent reasons for believing that Jesus actually made this radical claim at his trial, we're once again confronted with that old trilemma: if Jesus really claimed to be divine, then he must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or the divine Son of Man!

Now most people would probably agree that Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, but they might still find it difficult to accept his claim to divinity. They might wonder if we have any good reasons, independent of Jesus' claims, for believing his claims to be true. As a matter of fact we do!

## **The Resurrection of Jesus**

Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood before a large crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem and made a truly astonishing claim: God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby vindicating his radical personal claims to be both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:32-36). The reason this claim was so incredible was that the "Jews had no

conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal." [\[17\]](#) Indeed, according to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (21:22-23). So how could a man who had been crucified as a criminal possibly be the promised Messiah? If we reject the explanation of the New Testament, that God raised Jesus from the dead, it's very difficult to see how early Christianity could have ever gotten started. So are there good reasons to believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead?

According to Craig, the case for Jesus' resurrection rests "upon the evidence for three great, independently established facts: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith." [\[18\]](#) He marshals an extensive array of arguments and evidence in support of each fact, as well as critiquing the various naturalistic theories which have been proposed to avoid the resurrection. He concludes by noting that since God exists, miracles are possible. And once one acknowledges this, "it's hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts." [\[19\]](#)

This brings us to the significance of this event. According to the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone . . . has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then . . . God . . . has committed himself to him. . . . The resurrection can only be understood as the divine vindication of the man whom the Jews had rejected as a blasphemer. [\[20\]](#)

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God has put His seal of approval (as it were) on Jesus' radical personal

claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the divine Son of Man! This forces each of us to answer the same haunting question Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

## Notes

1. See "About William Lane Craig" at [www.reasonablefaith.org/william-lane-craig/](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/william-lane-craig/), accessed 20 May 2018.
2. J. P. Moreland, cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 1.
3. C. Behan McCullagh, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1.
4. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 12.
5. Ibid., 76.
6. In the minds of some people, this is a rather controversial claim. But it's been convincingly defended by naturalist authors like Stephen J. Gould and Michael Shermer. For a brief defense by Shermer, please see the articles on "Glorious Contingency" at [www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27](http://www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27), accessed 4 September 2008.
7. Ibid., 79.
8. Ibid., 78.
9. Ibid., 98.
10. Ibid., 99-100.
11. Ibid., 104.
12. Ibid., 95.
13. Ibid., 301.
14. See Craig's discussion on pp. 315-318.
15. Ibid., 315.
16. Ibid., 317.
17. Ibid., 388.
18. Ibid., 360-61.
18. Ibid., 399.
20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte," in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser,

1975), 92-94; cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 399.

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# Christ and the Human Condition

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.*



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that “man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward” (5:7). Whether it’s the trouble that befalls us as we’re simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer’s and ALS. While natural evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what

(if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.[\[1\]](#)

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

## Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become

defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, "The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God."[\[2\]](#) Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God's wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for

us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as we are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

## Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus."[{3}](#)

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God."[{4}](#) Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is

indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.[{5}](#) And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there “will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

## Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an “enemy” (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there is an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.[{6}](#) Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an “enemy,” but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. “The last enemy that will be abolished,” he writes, “is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.{7}

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It's reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.{8} Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

## The Weight of Glory

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as “an incommensurable good.”{9} By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an “incommensurable” or “immeasurable” good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might “know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). He understood that “intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately good-for created persons.”{10}

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately

related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a "momentary, light affliction"? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. "He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God." [\[11\]](#)

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis wrote, "In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised." [\[12\]](#) Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

## Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis:

Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.

5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.

6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).

7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.

8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.

9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.

10. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.

11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.

12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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# Dealing with Doubt in Our Christian Faith

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn points out that it is not having doubts about our Christian faith that is an issue, but rather how we respond to that doubt. Attacking this issue from a biblical worldview perspective, Michael helps us understand our doubts and respond to them as an informed Christian.*

# Help! My Doubts Scare Me!



Have you ever doubted your faith? We all have doubts from time to time. We may doubt that our boss *really* hit a hole-in-one at the golf course last weekend, or that our best friend *really* caught a fish as big as the one he claimed to catch, or that the strange looking guy on that late night TV show was *really* abducted by alien beings from a distant galaxy! Sometimes the things we doubt aren't really that important, but other times they are. And the more important something is to us, the more personally invested we are in it, the scarier it can be to start having doubts about it. So when Christians begin to have doubts about something as significant as the truth of their Christian faith, it's quite understandable that this might worry or even frighten them.

Reflecting on this issue in *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel wrote:

For many Christians, merely having doubts of any kind can be scary. They wonder whether their questions disqualify them being a follower of Christ. They feel insecure because they're not sure whether it's permissible to express uncertainty about God, Jesus, or the Bible. So they keep their questions to themselves—and inside, unanswered, they grow and fester . . . until they eventually succeed in choking out their faith.[\[1\]](#)

So what can we do if we find ourselves struggling with doubts about the truth of Christianity? Why do such doubts arise? And how can we rid ourselves of these taunting Goliaths?

First, we must always remember that sooner or later we'll probably *all* have to wrestle with doubts about our faith. As Christian philosopher William Lane Craig observes, "Any Christian who is intellectually engaged and reflecting about

his faith will inevitably face the problem of doubt.”{2} Doubts can arise for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they’re largely intellectual. We might doubt that the Bible is *really* inspired by God or that Jesus was *really* born of a virgin. But doubts can take other forms as well. If a person has experienced great sorrow or disappointment, such as personal wounds from family or friends, the loss of a job, a painful divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of health, they may be seriously tempted to doubt the goodness, love, and care of their heavenly Father.{3}

Whenever they come and whatever form they take, we must each deal honestly with our doubts. To ignore them is to court spiritual disaster. But facing them can lead ultimately to a deeper faith. As Christian minister Lynn Anderson has said, “A faith that’s challenged by adversity or tough questions . . . is often a stronger faith in the end.”{4}

## **It’s Not All in Your Head!**

Sometimes people have sincere doubts about the truth of Christianity, intellectual obstacles that hinder them from placing their trust in Christ. In such cases, Christians have an obligation to respond to the person’s doubts and make a humble and thoughtful defense for the truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, as Craig observes, it’s important to realize that “doubt is never a purely intellectual problem.” Like it or not, there’s always a “spiritual dimension to the problem that must be recognized.”{5} Because of this, sometimes a person’s objections to Christianity are really just a smokescreen, an attempt to cover up the *real* reason for their rejection of Christ, which is often an underlying moral or spiritual issue.

I once heard a story about a Christian apologist who spoke at a university about the evidence for Christianity. Afterward, a student approached him and said, “I honestly didn’t expect

this to happen, but you satisfactorily answered all my objections to Christianity.” The apologist was a bit startled by such a frank admission, but he quickly recovered himself and said, “Well that’s great! Why not give your life to Christ right now, then?” But the student said, “No. I’m not willing to do that. I would have to change the way I’m living, and I’m just not ready to do that right now.”

In this case all the student’s reasons for doubting the Christian faith had, by his own admission, been satisfactorily answered. What was really holding him back were not his doubts about the truth of Christianity, but a desire to live life on his own terms. To put it bluntly, he didn’t want God meddling in his affairs. He didn’t want to be morally accountable to some ultimate authority. The truth is that a person’s intellectual objections to Christianity are *rarely* the whole story. As Christian scholar Ravi Zacharias observed, “A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of a moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God.”[{6}](#)

Unfortunately, Christians aren’t immune to doubting their faith for similar reasons. I know of a young man who had converted to Christianity, but who’s now raising various objections to it. But when one looks beneath the surface, one sees that he’s currently involved in an immoral lifestyle. In order to continue living as he wants, without being unduly plagued by a guilty conscience, he must call into question the truth of Christianity. For the Bible tells him plainly that he’s disobeying God. Of course, ultimately no one is immune to doubts about Christianity, so we’ll now consider some ways to guard our hearts and minds.

## **I Believe, Help My Unbelief!**

As He came down the mountain, Jesus was met by a large crowd

of people. A father had brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus' disciples, but they were not able to cast the demon out. In desperation the father appealed to Jesus, "If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" Jesus answered, "If You can! All things are possible to him who believes." The father responded, "I do believe; help my unbelief."[{7}](#)

Can you identify with the father in this story? I know I can. Oftentimes as Christians we find that our faith is in precisely the same state as this father's. We genuinely believe, but we need help with our unbelief. It's always been an encouragement to me that after the father's admission of a faith mixed with doubt, Jesus nonetheless cast out the demon and healed the man's son.[{8}](#) But of course no Christian should be content to remain in this state. If we want to grow in our faith and rid ourselves of doubts, what are some positive steps we can take to accomplish this?

Well, in the first place, it's helpful to be familiar with the "principle of displacement." As Sue "Archimedes" Bohlin, one of my colleagues, has written:

The Bible teaches the principle of "displacement." That is, rather than trying to make thoughts shoo away, we are told to replace them with what is good, true, and perfect (Phil. 4:8). As the truth comes in the lies are displaced—much like when we fill a bathtub too full of water, and when we get in, our bodies displace the water, which flows out over the top of the tub.[{9}](#)

Once we grasp this principle, a number of steps for dealing with doubt quickly become evident. For one thing, we can memorize and meditate upon Scripture. We can also listen attentively to good Christian music. Paul speaks to the importance of both of these in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

In addition, we can read good Christian books that provide intelligent answers to some of the questions we might be asking. Great Christian scholars have addressed almost every conceivable objection to the truth of Christianity. If you have nagging doubts about some aspect of your faith, there's almost certainly a work of Christian scholarship that speaks to it in detail. Finally, we must never forget that this is a spiritual battle. So let's remember to put on the full armor of God so we can stand firm in the midst of it![{10}](#)

## Faith and Reason

How can we [know if Christianity is really true?](#) Is it by reason, or evidence, or mystical experience? Dr. Craig has an answer to this question that you might find a bit surprising.[{11}](#) He distinguishes between *knowing* Christianity is true and *showing* that it's true. Ideally, one attempts to *show* that Christianity is true with good arguments and evidence. But Craig doesn't think that this is how we *know* our faith is true. Rather, he believes that we can *know* our faith is true because "God's Spirit makes it evident to us that our faith is true."[{12}](#)

Consider Paul's statement in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Since every believer is indwelt by God's Spirit, every believer also receives the Spirit's testimony that he is one of God's children. This is sometimes called the "assurance of salvation." Dr. Craig comments on the significance of this:

Salvation entails that God exists, that Christ atoned for our sins . . . and so forth, so that if you are assured of your salvation, then you must be assured of . . . these other truths as well. Hence, the witness of the Holy Spirit gives the believer an immediate assurance that his faith is true.[{13}](#)

Now this is remarkable. For it means we can *know* that Christianity is true, wholly apart from arguments, simply by attending to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And this is so not only for believers but for unbelievers, too. For the Spirit convicts the unbelieving world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, particularly the sin of unbelief.[{14}](#) So when we're confronted with objections to Christianity that we can't answer, we needn't worry. First, answers are usually available if one knows where to look. But second, the witness of the Spirit trumps any objections we might encounter.

Consider an illustration from the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Suppose I'm accused of stealing a document out of a colleague's office. Suppose I have a motive, an opportunity, and a history of doing such things. Suppose further that someone thought they saw me lurking around my colleague's office just before the document went missing. There's much evidence against me. But in fact, I didn't steal the document. I was on a walk at the time. Now should I doubt my innocence since the evidence is against me? Of course not! For I *know* I'm not guilty![{15}](#)

Similarly, writes Dr. Craig, "I needn't be shaken when objections come along that I can't answer."[{16}](#) For my faith isn't ultimately based on arguments, but on the witness of God's Spirit.

## Stepping into the Light

We've seen that both Christians and non-Christians can have doubts about the truth of Christianity. We've also seen that such doubts are never *just* an intellectual issue; there's *always* a spiritual dynamic that's involved as well. But since we'll probably never be able to fully resolve every single doubt we might experience, I would like to conclude by suggesting one final way to make our doubts flee before us, much as roaches flee to their hidden lairs when one turns on

the light!

In John 7:17 Jesus says, “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” Here, Jesus frankly encourages us to put His teachings to the test and see for ourselves whether He really speaks for God or not. As biblical scholar Merrill Tenney comments, “Spiritual understanding is not produced solely by learning facts or procedures, but rather it depends on obedience to known truth. Obedience to God’s known will develops discernment between falsehood and truth.”[{17}](#) Are we *really* serious about dealing with our lingering doubts? If so, Jesus says that if we resolutely choose to do God’s will, we can know if His teaching is really from God!

Sadly, however, many of us will *never* take Jesus up on His challenge. No matter how loudly we might *claim* to want to rid ourselves of doubt, the truth is that many of us just aren’t *willing* to do God’s will. But if you are, then Jesus says that “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”[{18}](#) In other words, we can know by *experience* that Jesus is from God, that His teachings are true, and that He really is who He claimed to be!

As Christian philosopher Dallas Willard observes, the issue ultimately comes down to what we *really* want:

The Bible says that if you seek God with all your heart, then you will surely find him. Surely find him. It’s the person who wants to know God that God reveals himself to. And if a person doesn’t want to know God—well, God has created the world and the human mind in such a way that he doesn’t have to.[{19}](#)

The psalmist encourages us to “taste and see that the Lord is good.”[{20}](#) If we do, we can know not only that God is good, but also that He exists. And even if we still have some lingering doubts and unanswered questions in the back of our

minds, as we surely will, they'll gradually fade into utter insignificance as we become more intimately acquainted with Him who loves us and who reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son![\[21\]](#)

## Notes

1. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 316.
2. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 31.
3. Lynn Anderson, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 322.
4. Ibid., 326.
5. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 33.
6. Ravi Zacharias, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 343. See also John 3:19-21.
7. Mark 9:14-24.
8. See Mark 9:25-29.
9. Sue Bohlin, "I'm Having a Terrible Battle in My Mind," Probe Ministries, [probe.org/im-having-a-terrible-battle-in-my-mind/](http://probe.org/im-having-a-terrible-battle-in-my-mind/).
10. See Ephesians 6:10-20.
11. This section is largely just a summary of the discussion of faith and reason in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 35-39.
12. Ibid., 35.
13. Ibid., 36.
14. See John 16:7-11.
15. Alvin Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 310; cited in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 38-39.
16. Ibid., 39.
17. Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebeline, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 84.
18. John 8:32.
19. Dallas Willard, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*,

352.

20. Psalm 34:8.

21. See 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

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# Body and Soul in the Old Testament

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn addresses how the Old Testament treats body and soul. What does it have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?*

## The Breath of Life

The worldview of Naturalism tells us that the natural world is all that exists. There is nothing “above” or “beyond” this. Space, time, matter, and energy, the sort of things studied in physics, are the only material entities. You are your body, and nothing more. You do not have an immaterial mind or soul that is (in some sense) distinct from your body. You *are* your body. And when your body dies, you will cease to exist.

But is this true? In this article we address body and soul in the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?



Let's begin with the creation of Adam. Consider the way in which the Bible describes this event: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). Note that Adam is created from two

distinct elements: the dust of the ground and the breath of life. His body is composed of “dust from the ground.” But he doesn’t become “a living creature” until God takes the second step of breathing “the breath of life” into his nostrils. Although this description may well be metaphorical in certain respects, it seems evident that God must add “the breath of life” for Adam to become a living human being.

Here’s another observation. Notice that Adam doesn’t suddenly spring to life once the dust of the earth has been ordered in a particular way. Apparently, human personality does not spontaneously emerge once God has formed the dust of the ground into a human body.[\[1\]](#) Merely ordering the physical elements into a human body is not enough (at least, at this initial stage of human development) to get a human person. That second step, in which God breathes the breath of life into the already formed body, is also necessary.

So what are we to make of this? Does Genesis give us a picture of a human being as a body-soul composite? At this point, such a conclusion would be premature. We have not yet considered what a soul is, nor whether “the breath of life” in some way corresponds to, or produces, it. One thing seems clear, however. The Bible seems to suggest that human beings are more than just physical bodies. There appears to be an additional component to our nature, and we need to spend some time gaining a better understanding of what that is.

## **Surviving the Death of the Body**

The book of Genesis briefly describes the death of Jacob’s wife, Rachel, as she gave birth to their son, Benjamin.[\[2\]](#) We read that “as her soul was departing (for she died),” she named her son (Genesis 35:18).

How are we to understand the phrase, “as her soul was departing”? In Hebrew, the word here translated “soul” is the

term *nephesh*. Part of the difficulty in understanding the phrase is that *nephesh* can be used in a variety of ways. According to the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, “The term *nephesh* . . . is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Genesis 1:20; 9:10; 24:30) and of God Himself (Judges 10:16; Isaiah 1:14).”[\[3\]](#)

Depending on the context, the term might refer to a part of the body, like the neck (Psalm 105:18) or throat (Isaiah 5:14). It can also be used of the principle of life, as in Leviticus 17:11: “the life [that is, *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood.” Strangely, however, it can also refer to a dead human body (Numbers 5:2; 6:11). Moreover, it can be used of various psychological aspects of human experience, like emotions or desires (Proverbs 21:10; Isaiah 26:9; Micah 7:1). Finally, there are also indications that the term can refer to what might be called the “soul”—the immaterial component of a human being in which one’s personal identity is located.[\[4\]](#)

So when we read that Rachel’s “soul was departing,” does this simply mean that she was dying, that the “principle of life” (which had sustained her to this point) was departing? Or could it mean that her “soul,” an immaterial component of her being encompassing her personal identity, was departing? In other words, is this verse merely telling us that Rachel’s body was dying, or is it also telling us that, as her body was dying, her soul was leaving her body (possibly to continue its existence elsewhere)?

If we examine other passages of Scripture, we see evidence that the human soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Consider Psalm 49:15: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” In Hebrew thought, Sheol was the place of the dead, somewhat like the Greek conception of Hades.[\[5\]](#) In this passage, the Psalmist expresses confidence that God will ransom his “soul” from the place of the dead and receive the Psalmist to himself. This

view of the soul becomes even clearer when we examine what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife.

## The Place of the Dead

In the Old Testament the place of the dead is called Sheol. Of course, in some places the term simply refers to the grave. Nevertheless, according to John Cooper, “There is virtual consensus that the Israelites did believe in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol.”<sup>{6}</sup> What sort of place was this?

Job describes it as a place of “ease,” where “the wicked cease from troubling” and “the weary are at rest” (3:13, 17-18). That sounds pretty good! However, it’s also described as a place of “darkness” and “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12), a place where not much is happening. As the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10). Hence, J. P. Moreland observes, “Life in Sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive.”<sup>{7}</sup>

But there are exceptions. Consider the case of Saul and the medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The prophet Samuel had died, and Saul is preparing to go to war against the Philistines (vv. 1-4). After seeing the Philistine army, however, Saul is afraid (v. 5). He inquires of the Lord, but the Lord does not answer him (v. 6). In desperation, Saul seeks out a medium at Endor, and asks her to call up Samuel from the dead (vv. 7-11). Incredibly, the plan works, and Samuel actually makes an appearance (vv. 12-14).

Saul inquires of Samuel, but Samuel essentially rebukes Saul (vv. 15-16), reminding Saul of his prior disobedience. He tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines and informs him that “Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (vv. 18-19). It’s a fascinating story, but we must not lose

sight of what (for us) is the main point.

Notice that Samuel, who had previously died, and whose body had been buried (v. 3), retains his personal identity in the shadowy underworld of Sheol. He still knows who he is, remembers Saul, and can function as the Lord's prophet. Although Samuel is pictured in the story as "an old man . . . wrapped in a robe" (v. 14), Moreland reminds us that the Bible often uses such imagery "in a nonliteral way to describe immaterial, invisible realities."[\[8\]](#) Regardless, the Old Testament teaches that human beings continue to exist after the death of the body. Moreover, the righteous express a hope that God will rescue their souls even from Sheol.

## Redemption from Sheol

The Old Testament pictures all those who die as going initially to Sheol, the place of the dead. However, it also intimates a hope for the righteous even "beyond the grave." As John Cooper notes, "Several Psalms read most naturally as confessing a steadfast if unspecified trust in God beyond death."[\[9\]](#)

Consider Psalm 49. The psalmist observes that all people die. Sooner or later each person's life ends in death (vv. 5-12).

But for the psalmist that is not the end of the story. Though he knows that this life will end with the death of his body, he nonetheless confidently proclaims: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me" (v. 15).

Or consider Psalm 73. The psalmist begins by confessing that he was "envious of the arrogant" and "wicked" (v. 3). However, as he contemplated that their end is "destruction," his hope in God was renewed (vv. 17-24).

Although the psalmist recognized that he, too, would die, he

declares his hope in God: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (v. 26). After surveying such material, one Old Testament scholar notes that before God “there is not only the alternative between this life and the shadow existence in the world of the dead; there is a third possibility—a permanent, living fellowship with him.”[{10}](#) This third possibility was the confident hope of the psalmists.

Of course, if we’re going to be fair, we must also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observes that throughout much of the Old Testament, belief in the afterlife held virtually no “religious importance” whatever.[{11}](#) What mattered to the ancient Israelite was life on this earth. It is here that we can enjoy fellowship with family, friends—and God.

So why did God reveal so little to the ancient Israelites about the nature of the afterlife? Lewis suggests that God may have wanted His people to come to love Him primarily as an end in itself—and not for any rewards he might bestow in the afterlife. If one becomes friends with God in this life, then one will naturally fear to lose this relationship in death. And at this point, God can step in with the “good news” that friendship with Him can continue beyond death.[{12}](#) Indeed, God even promised to raise the bodies of his people from the dead, to continue their friendship with him on a new earth!

## **The Resurrection of the Body**

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine that many believers rarely think about. Yet this doctrine is not only taught throughout the New Testament, it’s even found in the Old Testament.

Consider Daniel 12:2: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some

to shame and everlasting contempt.” This verse is not denying a disembodied afterlife between death and resurrection. Rather, it is affirming that the souls of the dead, whose bodies appear to be asleep in in the “dust of the earth,” shall be “awakened” and raised from the dead.

Notice that some are raised “to everlasting life,” but others to “everlasting contempt.” Cooper writes, “This verse . . . connects resurrection, judgment, and two eternal destinies.”[\[13\]](#) The Old Testament suggests that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with their bodies for all eternity. As Moreland observes, “Old Testament teaching implies that the soul or spirit is added to flesh and bones to form a living human person (Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37) and that the resurrection of the dead involves the re-embodiment of the same soul or spirit (Isaiah 26:14, 19).”[\[14\]](#)

How might we sum up Old Testament teaching about the nature and destiny of human beings? First, human beings appear to be composed of both body and soul. When God created Adam, he first formed his body from the dust of the earth, and then “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). This at least hints at the possibility that human beings are a body-soul composite. The evidence for this is strengthened, however, when we consider Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Throughout the Old Testament we see evidence for continued personal existence, after the death of the body, in a place called Sheol. An interesting example of this can be seen when Saul, with the help of a medium, calls up the prophet Samuel from the dead. We saw that Samuel continues to exist and retain his personal identity even after the death of his body (1 Samuel 28).

But this was not the end of the story. For the Old Testament also teaches that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies, either to enjoy eternal life

on a new earth, or to suffer eternal shame and contempt. This, in a nutshell, is what the Old Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of human beings.

## Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Loc. 727-39, Kindle.
2. See the story in Genesis 35:16-20.
3. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 45, Kindle.
4. The material in this paragraph is indebted to Moreland, *The Soul*, 45-46.
5. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 810.
6. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 783.
7. Moreland, *The Soul*, 51.
8. Moreland, *The Soul*, 52.
9. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 906. The preceding words, concerning hope "beyond the grave" are also taken from Cooper, Loc. 902.
10. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 109; cited in Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 912.
11. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 36.
12. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 36-43.
13. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 916.
14. Moreland, *The Soul*, 53.

# Tradition and Scripture

*While many evangelical Christians treat tradition with suspicion if not hostility, Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for the value of tradition in understanding and supporting our faith.*

## Understanding Tradition

In this article we'll be thinking about tradition and its relationship to Scripture. Now I realize that some of you may already be asking, "Tradition! Can anything good come from there?" The answer of course is "yes"—for if it were not, then I wouldn't bother writing about it. Indeed, it's actually an important topic to address, for in our day many evangelicals seem to harbor an attitude of suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward the very notion of tradition.[\[1\]](#) In support of this attitude, some might point to what Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" (Mark 7:9 NIV). And if this is what Jesus said, then aren't we better off to simply dismiss tradition and focus solely on the teaching of Scripture?



Before we jump to that conclusion, we must first determine what we mean when we use the word "tradition." After all, in other passages Scripture speaks very favorably of tradition. Paul told the Corinthians, "Now I praise you because you . . . hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2 NASB). Traditions, it seems, can sometimes be good—and sometimes bad. And this is true even of the *Christian* tradition. But in order to talk intelligently about our subject, we must first understand

precisely what we're talking about. What, then, is the meaning of "tradition"?

When theologians speak about the Christian tradition, they are typically referring to the ways in which the faith has been understood by previous generations of Christians. For example, what understanding did our Christian forbears have of worship and theology, and how did they express their understanding through creeds, confessions, sermons, and books? Stanley Grenz and John Franke describe the Christian tradition "as the history of the interpretation and application of canonical scripture by the Christian community, the church, as it listens to the voice of the Spirit speaking through the text."[\[2\]](#) And Richard Lints describes it as "the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us."[\[3\]](#)

Defined in this way, we must candidly admit that the Christian faith has been understood somewhat differently from one time and place to another. How are we to think about such differences? Should they always be viewed negatively, as a corruption of the original faith deposit? Or might they sometimes be seen as a positive and healthy development of this deposit?

## **Tradition: A Metaphor**

In a fascinating discussion of these issues, Colin Gunton asks us to think of tradition as an organism.[\[4\]](#) He notes that just as a child or plant may grow larger and stronger over time, so too the content of Christian doctrine can become more elaborate and enriched with the passage of time. He then observes, "If revelation is something given in the beginning—as undoubtedly one dimension of it is, the faith once for all delivered to the saints—then it may be argued that through tradition what began as a seed or a seedling is enabled to expand without falsifying its beginnings."[\[5\]](#) This

comment helps us see the interconnectedness of tradition and revelation—an issue which we will return to later.

For now, it's important to notice what this metaphor does for us. It enables us to see tradition, like the growth of a child or a plant, as something *natural* and *healthy*—indeed, something to be *hoped for*, *encouraged*, and *expected*. This is an important reminder for those of us who might be tempted to view tradition solely in negative terms.

At the same time, however, Gunton is aware that things can always go wrong. He writes, “The organism might become diseased, and require surgery; or it might simply grow too many branches, or branches in the wrong places, and require pruning.”[\[6\]](#) In this case, instead of the tradition developing in a natural and healthy way from the original revelation, it develops in an unnatural and unhealthy way. We might identify this latter situation with the unpleasant possibility of heresy—something which needs to be corrected or even surgically removed so that the organism doesn't die or mutate into a completely different, unrelated life-form. If that were to happen, then while we might still have tradition of a sort, it could no longer be properly thought of as *Christian* tradition.[\[7\]](#) It will be helpful for us to keep this metaphor in mind as we continue to reflect on the role of tradition and its relationship to Scripture, particularly because we must now deal with a problem that this discussion inevitably raises.

## Scripture and Tradition: A Problem

Stanley Grenz and John Franke view tradition as a “source or resource” of the Christian church, which can aid in the church's task of both theological construction and lived performance.[\[8\]](#) Some of the specific elements of the Christian tradition which they see as especially valuable in informing how we accomplish these tasks are the histories of worship,

liturgy, and theology, as well as the “classic” theological formulations of the church, such as creeds and confessions. Of course, they are careful to point out that while these resources are extremely valuable, they “must always and continually be tested by the norm of canonical scripture.”[\[9\]](#)

In a similar way, Richard Lints describes the “goal of theology” as bringing “the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life,” including tradition.[\[10\]](#) But this raises a bit of a problem, for in order to bring tradition under the authority of Scripture, Scripture must first be interpreted. And many scholars maintain that the Christian tradition primarily consists of the scriptural interpretation and application of faith communities from the past. Indeed, this is basically how Lints himself defines the term. “In the discussion that follows,” he says, “*tradition* will signify the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us.”[\[11\]](#)

Moreover, Lints rightly believes that we neglect this tradition at our peril. For in banishing past interpretations of Scripture from our present consideration in doing theology, we can easily become ensnared “in a web of subjectivism” regarding our own interpretation of the Bible.[\[12\]](#) And this would be an incalculable loss to the church in her ongoing task of preaching and teaching the Bible. The fact of the matter is that these past interpretations are a necessary aid, both in revealing our own biases and blind spots, and in helping us avoid “what C. S. Lewis aptly called ‘chronological snobbery’—the conceit that we are necessarily wiser than our forbears.”[\[13\]](#)

But this leads to the following problem: If Scripture is to be brought into a position of judgment over all of life (including the Christian tradition), it must first be properly interpreted. But it would be irresponsible to engage in this interpretative task without the aid of the very tradition of past interpretation over which Scripture is to sit in

judgment. How can this difficulty be resolved? Does Scripture occupy a place of authority over tradition, or does tradition rather occupy a place of authority over Scripture?

## **Scripture and Tradition: A Solution**

Before we attempt to respond to this question, we should first take time to remember just how it was that Scripture came into being in the first place. As Grenz and Franke remind us,

[T]he community precedes the production of the scriptural texts and is responsible for their content and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in an authoritative canon to which it has chosen to make itself accountable. Apart from the Christian community, the texts would not have taken their particular and distinctive shape. Apart from the authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts. In short, apart from the Christian community the Christian Bible would not exist.[\[14\]](#)

It might now be interesting to ask what the Christian community and the Christian Bible have in common. According to Grenz and Franke, it is the work of the Holy Spirit—a work that grants to each one its respective authority. They write,

In this conception, the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an authority derived from the work of the Spirit. Each is part of an organic unity, so that even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are fundamentally inseparable. . . . The authority of each—tradition as well as scripture—is contingent on the work of the Spirit, and both scripture and tradition are fundamental components within an interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith. To misconstrue the shape of this relationship by setting scripture over against tradition or by elevating tradition above scripture is to

fail to comprehend properly the work of the Spirit.{15}

Does this mean, then, that there is no sense in which all of life (including tradition) should be brought under the judgment of Scripture? This does not seem to be what Grenz and Franke are saying. Although they do contend that the triune God “is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through scripture, the church, and even the world,” they then qualify this by noting, “albeit always normatively through scripture.”{16} In their view, Scripture is still theology’s “norming norm,” but since Scripture must always be interpreted, it cannot be easily separated from tradition. Scripture still holds the place of prominence in doing theology, but in a carefully nuanced and qualified way that gives appropriate weight to God’s other mediums of revelation, such as tradition, creation, and the church.

## Tradition in Scripture and Theology

In one of his 1993 Warfield Lectures, the late Colin Gunton observed that two of the narrative sections in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians contain possibly the most easily recognizable accounts of “the working of tradition in the New Testament.”{17} In both 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses the Lord’s Supper, and 1 Corinthians 15, where he refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel, Paul specifically declares that he is delivering to the Corinthians certain traditions about Jesus which he himself had previously received. In other words, the biblical writings themselves are seen to be “part of a tradition of interpretation of that which is in certain respects prior to them.”{18}

The unique revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is *prior* to the traditions about Him which Paul had received. And the traditions which Paul had received, including the meaning given them by the early church and Paul himself, are also *prior* to his deliverance of them to the Corinthians (as well

as those of us who have subsequently read this letter). Tradition, it seems, cannot always be so easily separated from the Bible itself.

Of course, very few Christians would disagree that traditions like those passed on by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are “authoritative for the faith and life of the church.”[\[19\]](#) The problem rather arises with how the original revelation “is interpreted and handed on by those who follow the . . . apostles: the way in which revelation is mediated by tradition.”[\[20\]](#) How should we understand this relationship?

For one thing, we should probably grant a certain degree of freedom, in response to the Spirit’s guidance, to the way in which the tradition is articulated in different cultural and historical contexts. This allows the tradition to grow in a healthy way which, at the same time, is still amenable to correction when necessary. Granted, we are speaking of the development of tradition in something like an ideal setting, and the world in which we now live is certainly not ideal. But if tradition is one of the means which God has chosen for mediating revelation from one generation to another, then for better or worse, it will (and should) continue to play an important role in the life of the church. As Gunton wisely concludes, “although we may and must be critical of tradition, as the action of fallible and sinful human beings, we may not lay aside the means which God has himself chosen.”[\[21\]](#)

## Notes

1. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 109.
2. Ibid., 118.
3. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 84.
4. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh:

T & T Clark, 1995), 85-87.

5. Ibid., 85.

6. Ibid., 86.

7. Ibid., 87.

8. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 120-29.

9. Ibid., 124.

10. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 82.

11. Ibid., 84.

12. Ibid., 93.

13. Ibid., 96.

14. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.

15. Ibid., 117.

16. Ibid., 117-18.

17. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 93.

18. Ibid., 95.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 102-03.

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