

Four Views of Revelation

Dr. Patrick Zukeran presents a summary of four of the major approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation and its meaning for the end times: the idealist, the preterist, the historicist, and the futurist views. For each, he presents the basic approach, strengths of the approach and weaknesses of the approach. Recognizing that God is the central mover in all of these, he encourages us to keep these questions from dividing Christians in our mission of sharing Christ with the world.

The Debate

One of the most intriguing books of the Bible is the book of Revelation. The imagery of the cosmic battle in heaven and on earth makes it a fascinating book to study. However, much debate surrounds the proper interpretation of this apocalyptic work. Is this book a prophecy of future events yet to take place, or have the prophecies of this book been fulfilled?



Two popular authors highlight the debate that continues in our present time. In his hit series *Left Behind*, Tim LaHaye writes a fictional account based on his theological position that the events of Revelation will occur in the future. Popular radio talk show host Hank Hanegraaff responded by attacking the theology of LaHaye. In his book *The Apocalypse Code*, Hanegraaff asserts that the events of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. He criticizes theologians like LaHaye for taking a hyper-literal approach to Revelation.^{1} The debate has raised some confusion among Christians as to why there is such a debate and how we should interpret the book of Revelation.

The issues at the core of the debate between Hanegraaff and

LaHaye are not new. Throughout church history, there have been four different views regarding the book of Revelation: idealist, preterist, historicist, and futurist. The idealist view teaches that Revelation describes in symbolic language the battle throughout the ages between God and Satan and good against evil. The preterist view teaches that the events recorded in the book of Revelation were largely fulfilled in AD 70 with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. The historicist view teaches that the book of Revelation is a symbolic presentation of church history beginning in the first century AD through the end of age. The prophecies of Revelation are fulfilled in various historic events such as the fall of the Roman Empire, the Protestant Reformation, and the French Revolution. The futurist view teaches that Revelation prophesies events that will take place in the future. These events include the rapture of the church, seven years of tribulation, and a millennial rule of Christ upon the earth.

Each view attempts to interpret Revelation according to the laws of hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation. This is central to the debate about how we should approach and interpret Revelation. The idealist approach believes that apocalyptic literature like Revelation should be interpreted allegorically. The preterist and historicist views are similar in some ways to the allegorical method, but it is more accurate to say preterists and historicists view Revelation as symbolic history. The preterist views Revelation as a symbolic presentation of events that occurred in AD 70, while the historicist school views the events as symbolic of all Western church history. The futurist school believes Revelation should be interpreted literally. In other words, the events of Revelation are to occur at a future time.

The goal of this work is to present a brief overview of the four views of Revelation and present the strengths of each view as well as its weaknesses. It is my hope that the reader will gain a basic understanding and be able to understand the

debate among theologians today.

The Idealist View

The first view of Revelation is the idealist view, or the spiritual view. This view uses the allegorical method to interpret the Book of Revelation. The allegorical approach to Revelation was introduced by ancient church father Origen (AD 185-254) and made prominent by Augustine (AD 354-420). According to this view, the events of Revelation are not tied to specific historical events. The imagery of the book symbolically presents the ongoing struggle throughout the ages of God against Satan and good against evil. In this struggle, the saints are persecuted and martyred by the forces of evil but will one day receive their vindication. In the end, God is victorious, and His sovereignty is displayed throughout ages. Robert Mounce summarizes the idealist view stating, "Revelation is a theological poem presenting the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It is a philosophy of history wherein Christian forces are continuously meeting and conquering the demonic forces of evil."[\[2\]](#)

In his commentary on Revelation, late nineteenth century scholar William Milligan stated, "While the Apocalypse thus embraces the whole period of the Christian dispensation, it sets before us within this period the action of great principles and not special incidents; we are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, both for the exhibition of the principles which govern the history of both the world and the Church."[\[3\]](#)

The symbols in Revelation are not tied to specific events but point to themes throughout church history. The battles in Revelation are viewed as spiritual warfare manifested in the persecution of Christians or wars in general that have occurred in history. The beast from the sea may be identified as the satanically-inspired political opposition to the church

in any age. The beast from the land represents pagan, or corrupt, religion to Christianity. The harlot represents the compromised church, or the seduction of the world in general. Each seal, trumpet, or bowl represents natural disasters, wars, famines, and the like which occur as God works out His plan in history. Catastrophes represent God's displeasure with sinful man; however, sinful mankind goes through these catastrophes while still refusing to turn and repent. God ultimately triumphs in the end.

The strength of this view is that it avoids the problem of harmonizing passages with events in history. It also makes the book of Revelation applicable and relevant for all periods of church history.[{4}](#)

However, there are several weaknesses of this view. First, this view denies the book of Revelation any specific historical fulfillment. The symbols portray the ever-present conflict but no necessary consummation of the historical process.[{5}](#) Rev.1:1 states that the events will come to pass shortly, giving the impression that John is prophesying future historical events.

Second, reading spiritual meanings into the text could lead to arbitrary interpretations. Followers of this approach have often allowed the cultural and socio-political factors of their time to influence their interpretation rather than seeking the author's intended meaning.[{6}](#) Merrill Tenney states,

The idealist view . . . assumes a "spiritual" interpretation, and allows no concrete significance whatever to figures that it employs. According to this viewpoint they are not merely symbolic of events and persons, as the historicist view contends; they are only abstract symbols of good and evil. They may be attached to any time or place, but like the characters of Pilgrim's Progress, represent qualities or trends. In interpretation, the Apocalypse may thus mean

anything or nothing according to the whim of the interpreter. {7}

Unless interpreters are grounded in the grammatical, historical, and contextual method of hermeneutics, they leave themselves open to alternate interpretations that may even contradict the author's intended meaning.

The Preterist View

The second view is called the [preterist](#) view. *Preter*, which means "past," is derived from the Latin. There are two major views among preterists: full preterism and partial preterism. Both views believe that the prophecies of the Olivet discourse of Matthew 24 and Revelation were fulfilled in the first century with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Chapters 1-3 describe the conditions in the seven churches of Asia Minor prior to the Jewish war (AD 66-70). The remaining chapters of Revelation and Jesus' Olivet Discourse describe the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans.

Full preterists believe that all the prophecies found in Revelation were fulfilled in AD 70 and that we are now living in the eternal state, or the new heavens and the new earth. Partial preterists believe that most of the prophecies of Revelation were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem but that chapters 20-22 point to future events such as a future resurrection of believers and return of Christ to the earth. Partial preterists view full preterism as heretical since it denies the second coming of Christ and teaches an unorthodox view of the resurrection.

Church historians trace the roots of preterism to Jesuit priest Luis de Alcazar (1554-1613). {8} Alcazar's interpretation is considered a response to the Protestant historicist interpretation of Revelation that identified the Pope as the Anti-Christ. However, some preterists contend that

preterist teachings are found in the writings of the early church as early as the fourth century AD.[{9}](#)

Crucial to the preterist view is the date of Revelation. Since it is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, preterists hold to a pre-AD 70 date of writing. According to this view, John was writing specifically to the church of his day and had only its situation in mind. This letter was written to encourage the saints to persevere under the persecution of the Roman Empire.

Preterists point to several reasons to support their view. First, Jesus stated at the end of the Olivet Discourse, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34). A generation usually refers to forty years. The fall of Jerusalem would then fit the time Jesus predicted. Second, Josephus' detailed record of the fall of Jerusalem appears in several ways to match the symbolism of Revelation. Finally, this view would be directly relevant to John's readers of his day.

There are several criticisms of this view. First, the events described in Jesus' Olivet Discourse and in Revelation 4-19 differ in several ways from the fall of Jerusalem.

One example is that Christ described his return to Jerusalem this way: "[A]s lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Mt. 24:27). Preterists believe this refers to the Roman army's advance on Jerusalem. However, the Roman army advanced on Jerusalem from west to east, and their assault was not as a quick lightning strike. The Jewish war lasted for several years before Jerusalem was besieged, and the city fell after a lengthy siege.[{10}](#) Second, General Titus did not set up an "abomination of desolation" (Mt. 24:15) in the Jerusalem Temple. Rather, he destroyed the Temple and burned it to the ground. Thus, it appears the preterist is required to allegorize or stretch the metaphors and symbols in order to

find fulfillment of the prophecies in the fall of Jerusalem.

Another example of allegorical interpretation by preterists is their interpretation of Revelation 7:4. John identifies a special group of prophets: the 144,000 from the “tribes of Israel.” Preterist Hanegraaff states that this group represents the true bride of Christ and is referred to in Rev. 7:9 as the “great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language.” In other words, the 144,000 in verse 4, and the great multitude in verse 9 are the same people.[{11}](#) This appears to go against the context of the chapter for several reasons. First, throughout the Bible the phrase “tribes of Israel” refers to literal Jews. Second, John says there are 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. This is a strange way to describe the multitude of believers from all nations. Finally, the context shows John is speaking of two different groups: one on the earth (the 144,000 referenced in 7:1-3), and the great multitude in heaven before the throne (7:9). Here Hanegraaff appears to be allegorizing the text.

Robert Mounce states,

The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign on God. If this is not to be, then either the Seer was essentially wrong in the major thrust of his message or his work was so helplessly ambiguous that its first recipients were all led astray.[{12}](#)

Mounce and other New Testament scholars believe the preterists' interpretations are not consistent and utilize allegorical interpretations to make passages fit their theological view.

Second, the preterist position rests on a pre-AD 70 date of writing. However, most New Testament scholars date the writing of the book to AD 95. If John had written Revelation after AD 70, the book could not have been a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem. This presents a significant argument against the preterist position.

Preterists point to several lines of evidence for a pre-AD 70 date of writing. First, John does not mention the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. If he had been writing two decades after the event, it seems strange that he never mentioned this catastrophic event. Second, John does not refer to either Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the Temple (Mt. 24, Mk. 13, Lk. 21) or the fulfillment of this prophecy. Third, in Revelation 11:1, John is told to "measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there." Preterists argue that this indicates that the Temple is still standing during the writing of Revelation.[\[13\]](#)

The preterist view, particularly the partial preterist view, is a prominent position held by such notable scholars as R. C. Sproul, Hank Hanegraaff, Kenneth Gentry, and the late David Chilton (who later converted to full preterism after the publishing of his books).

The Historicist View

The third view is called the historicist approach. This view teaches that Revelation is a symbolic representation that presents the course of history from the apostle's life through the end of the age. The symbols in the apocalypse correspond to events in the history of Western Europe, including various popes, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and rulers such as Charlemagne. Most interpreters place the events of their day in the later chapters of Revelation.

Many adherents of this position view chapters 1-3 as seven

periods in church history. The breaking of the seals in chapters 4-7 symbolizes the fall of the Roman Empire. The Trumpet judgments in chapters 8-10 represent the invasions of the Roman Empire by the Vandals, Huns, Saracens, and Turks. Among Protestant historicists of the Reformation, the antichrist in Revelation was believed to be the papacy. Chapters 11-13 in Revelation represent the true church in its struggle against Roman Catholicism. The bowl judgments of Revelation 14-16 represent God's judgment on the Catholic Church, culminating in the future overthrow of Catholicism depicted in chapters 17-19.[\[14\]](#)

There are several criticisms of this approach. First, this approach allows for a wide variety of interpretations. Adherents have a tendency to interpret the text through the context of their period. Thus, many saw the climax of the book happening in their generation. John Walvoord points out the lack of agreement among historicists. He states, "As many as fifty different interpretations of the book of Revelation therefore evolve, depending on the time and circumstances of the expositor."[\[15\]](#) Moses Stuart echoed the same concern in his writings over a century ago. He wrote, "Hitherto, scarcely any two original and independent expositors have agreed, in respect to some points very important in their bearing upon the interpretation of the book."[\[16\]](#)

Second, this view focuses mostly on the events of the church in Western Europe and says very little about the church in the East. Thus, its narrow scope fails to account for God's activity throughout Asia and the rest of the world. Finally, this view would have little significance for the church of the first century whom John was addressing. It is unlikely they would have been able to interpret Revelation as the historical approach suggests.

Prominent scholars who held this view include John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield,

Charles Finney, C. H. Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry. This view rose to popularity during the Protestant Reformation because of its identification of the pope and the papacy with the beasts of Revelation 13. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, it has declined in popularity and influence.

The Futurist View

The fourth view is the futurist view. This view teaches that the events of the Olivet Discourse and Revelation chapters 4-22 will occur in the future. Futurists divide the book of Revelation into three sections as indicated in 1:19: "what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." Chapter 1 describes the past ("what you have seen"), chapters 2-3 describe the present ("what is now"), and the rest of the book describes future events ("what will take place later").

Futurists apply a literal approach to interpreting Revelation. Chapters 4-19 refer to a period known as the seven-year tribulation (Dan. 9:27). During this time, God's judgments are actually poured out upon mankind as they are revealed in the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Chapter 13 describes a literal future world empire headed by a political and religious leader represented by the two beasts. Chapter 17 pictures a harlot who represents the church in apostasy. Chapter 19 refers to Christ's second coming and the battle of Armageddon followed by a literal thousand-year rule of Christ upon the earth in chapter 20. Chapters 21-22 are events that follow the millennium: the creation of a new heaven and a new earth and the arrival of the heavenly city upon the earth.

Futurists argue that a consistently literal or plain interpretation is to be applied in understanding the book of Revelation. Literal interpretation of the Bible means to explain the original sense, or meaning, of the Bible according to the normal customary usage of its language. This means

applying the rules of grammar, staying consistent with the historical framework, and the context of the writing. Literal interpretation does not discount figurative or symbolic language. Futurists teach that prophecies using symbolic language are also to be normally interpreted according to the laws of language. J. P. Lange stated,

The literalist (so called) is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted – that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.[{17}](#)

Charles Ryrie also states,

Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method, and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.[{18}](#)

Futurists acknowledge the use of figures and symbols. When figurative language is used, one must look at the context to find the meaning. However, figurative language does not justify allegorical interpretation.

Futurists contend that the literal interpretation of Revelation finds its roots in the ancient church fathers. Elements of this teaching, such as a future millennial kingdom, are found in the writings of Clement of Rome (AD 96), Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), Irenaeus (AD 115-202), Tertullian (AD 150-225) and others. Futurists hold that the church fathers taught a literal interpretation of Revelation until

Origen (AD 185-254) introduced allegorical interpretation. This then became the popular form of interpretation when taught by Augustine (AD 354-430).[\[19\]](#) Literal interpretation of Revelation remained throughout the history of the church and rose again to prominence in the modern era.

The futurist view is widely popular among evangelical Christians today. One of the most popular versions on futurist teaching is dispensational theology, promoted by schools such as Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute. Theologians such as Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and Dwight Pentecost are noted scholars of this position. Tim LaHaye made this theology popular in the culture with his end times series of novels.

Unfortunately, there have been and continue to be popular preachers who mistakenly apply the futurist approach to connect current events to the symbols in Revelation. Some have even been involved in setting dates of Christ's return. Although their writings have been popular, they do not represent a Biblical futurist view.

Critics of this view argue that the futurist view renders the book irrelevant to the original readers of the first century. Another criticism is that Revelation is apocalyptic literature and thus meant to be interpreted allegorically or symbolically rather than literally. Hank Hanegraaff states, "Thus, when a Biblical writer uses a symbol or an allegory, we do violence to his intentions if we interpret it in a strictly literal manner."[\[20\]](#)

One of the key elements in the debate, particularly between preterists and futurists, is the date of writing for Revelation. Preterists argue for a pre-AD 70 date while futurists hold to a date of AD 95. There are several reasons for the later date. First, Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, states that John wrote Revelation at the end of Emperor Domitian's reign, which ended in AD 96. Irenaeus was a

disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostle John. He thus had a connection with a contemporary of the Apostle John.

Second, the conditions of the seven churches in Revelation appear to describe a second-generation church setting rather than that of a first-generation. For example, the Church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7) is charged with abandoning their first love and warned of the Nicolaitan heresy. If John had written Revelation in AD 65, it would have overlapped with Paul's letter to the Ephesians and Timothy. However, Paul makes no mention of either the loss of first love or the threat of the Nicolaitans. Ephesus was Paul's headquarters for three years, and Apollos served there along with Aquila and Priscilla. The church of Smyrna did not exist during Paul's ministry (AD 60-64) as recorded by Polycarp, the first bishop of the city. Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22) is rebuked for being wealthy and lukewarm. However, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul commends the church three times (2:2, 4:13, 16). It would likely take more than three years for the church to decline to the point that chapter 3 would state there to be no commendable aspect about it. Also, an earthquake in AD 61 left the city in ruins for many years. Thus, it is unlikely that in a ruined condition John would describe them as rich.

Preterists who favor the AD 70 date pose the question, "Why doesn't John mention the fall of the Temple which occurred in AD 70?" Futurists respond that John wrote about future events, and the destruction of the temple was twenty-five years in the past. He also wrote to a Gentile audience in Asia Minor which was far removed from Jerusalem. Preterists also point to the fact that the Temple is mentioned in chapter eleven. Futurists respond that although John mentions a temple in Revelation 11:1-2, this does not mean it exists at the time of his writing. In Daniel 9:26-27 and Ezekiel 40-48, both prophets describe the temple, but it was not in existence when they described a future temple in their writings.

What did Jesus mean in Matthew 24:34 when He said, “[T]his generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened”? The common futurist response is that Jesus was stating that the future generation about which he was speaking would not pass away once “these things” had begun. In other words, the generation living amid the time of the events He predicted will not pass away until all is fulfilled.

Conclusion

The book of Revelation is a fascinating book, and the debate regarding its interpretation will continue. Despite our various views, there are some common threads upon which Christians agree.^{21} All views believe that God is sovereign and in charge of all that occurs in history and its ultimate conclusion. Except for full preterism and some forms of idealism, all believe in the physical second coming of Christ. All views believe in the resurrection from the dead. All believe there will be a future judgment. All believe in an eternal state in which believers will be with God, and unbelievers will be separated from Him. All agree upon the importance of the study of prophecy and its edification for the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, the debate among Christians has often been harsh and hostile. It is my hope that the debate would continue in a cordial, respectful manner which will challenge every believer to accurately study and interpret the Word. We all await the return of our Lord and together with the saints of all ages say, “Amen, come Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20)

Notes

1. Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 20.
2. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 43.

3. William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 153-4.
4. Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 20.
5. Robert Mounce, 43.
6. Robert Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 31-2.
7. Merrill Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 146.
8. Steven Gregg, 39.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, ed., *The End Times Controversy* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 377.
11. Hanegraaff, 125.
12. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 42.
13. Evidence for the AD 95 date of writing will be presented in the futurist section.
14. Steven Gregg, *Four Views of Revelation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 31, 217, 309, & 399).
15. John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 19.
16. Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart & Co., 1847), 35.
17. J. P. Lange, *Commentary of the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (New York: Scribner's, 1872), 98, quoted in Charles Ryrie,

Dispensationalism (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 91.

18. Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 91.

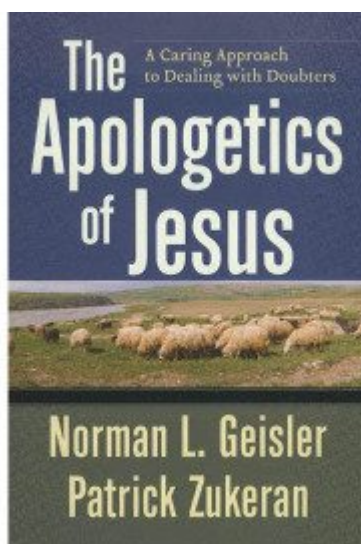
20. Hanegraaff, 14.

21. Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *Conviction Without Compromise* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 333.

© 2009 Probe Ministries

Apologetics of Jesus: Interview with Author Patrick Zukeran

Written by Probe Ministries Administrator



Question: This is a very interesting topic, *The Apologetics of Jesus*. What inspired this book?

Zukeran: While I was in a doctoral class with Dr. Norman Geisler, he stated one day in class, “You may be surprised to

discover, the greatest apologist is Jesus Himself. Someone needs to write a book on the apologetics of Jesus. In 2000 years of Christian history, no one has written on this subject." The idea of studying the apologetic methods of Jesus and knowing that no one had written on the subject really stirred my interest. It thus became my doctoral project.

Question: You said that after you finished, you realized this would be an extremely important book for the body of Christ. Why do you feel this is a critically significant work?

Zukeran: There is a lot of confusion regarding the role and the need for apologetics in ministry. Many Christians believe our faith in Christ involves a blind leap of faith. In other words, our faith calls for acceptance of Christ without any reason or evidence. Therefore, in evangelism Christians should simply preach the gospel and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. When Christians are challenged by other worldviews or ideas of the culture, we often fail to offer well-reasoned and substantial answers. Often I hear Christians say, "You just need to believe" or "You simply need to have faith." That is not a good answer to an unbelieving world or even to Christians who are questioning their faith because they have been confronted by a challenge to the credibility of Bible or the claims of Christ. Jesus commanded us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Answers like these simply do not exemplify what it means to love God with our minds. Apologetics is the defense of the Christian faith. Apologetics uses reason and presents compelling evidence to communicate the message of Christ, defend the message of Christ and challenge unbelief. Apologetics was an essential component in the ministry of Christ and if it was important in His ministry, it is crucial for Christians as we engage our world for Christ as He commanded and modeled.

Question: Many Christians do not realize Jesus was an apologist. Scores of books have been written on His teaching methods, leadership skills, prayer life, etc... Few realize

apologetics was an important part of His ministry. Why is that?

Zukeran: Apologists defend the message of Christ but when it comes to Jesus, He was the message. Perhaps that is why this aspect of His ministry is overlooked. When you study the life of Christ, He made some astounding claims and He did not expect or want people to take a blind leap of faith. He presented reasons and compelling evidence to support His claims.

Question: People may be asking, since Jesus was God incarnate, why did He need to give a defense of His claims?

Zukeran: As our creator, Jesus understood that we are created in the image of God. God is a rational and morally perfect being and we reflect His nature. Jesus understood that we use reason and evidence to make our daily decisions. For example, when you see two fruit stands how do you decide which one to go to? If one looks clean, has bright looking fruit, and the owner is neatly dressed while the other one looks dirty, the fruit does not look as fresh and you spot a few flies buzzing in the area, which stand will you choose? Here's another example. What if you enter a hotel lobby and see two elevator doors open. One elevator has lights, the music is playing and people flow in and out of it. Next to it the elevator has no lights on, there is no music playing and you do not see people entering it. Which elevator will you choose? We examine the evidence and use our reasoning ability to make daily decisions. We do the same when it comes to deciding what we will believe and who we will entrust our life and eternal destiny to. Jesus understood that when it comes to persuading people to believe in His message, He would need to provide good reasons and compelling evidence and He did.

Question: What are some of the apologetic methods of Jesus?

Zukeran: Jesus used several apologetic methods. He used reason

and presented logical arguments to defend His claims and expose error. He used the evidence from the Scriptures, prophecy, His miracles, the resurrection and more. When you study His apologetics, you really appreciate the brilliance of our Lord. He truly was the greatest thinker as well as a powerful communicator.

Question: There are some passages that appear to teach against the use of reason and evidence such as Matthew 12:38-39. When Jesus was asked to perform a sign by the He rebukes them saying, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (12:39). Jesus refused to show them evidence. Isn't this a passage that speaks against the use of apologetics?

Zukeran: One of the chapters in the book addresses several alleged anti-apologetic passages. There are no passages that speak against the use of reason and evidence. Jesus and the apostles did not ask people to make a commitment to Christ without good reasons. For example, to understand Jesus' response, you must understand the context. Christ had already performed numerous miracles (Matt. 4:23-25, 8:1-4, 5-13, 28-34, 9:1-7, 9:18-26, 11:20). In fact, this confrontation occurs closely after Jesus' healing of a man's withered hand (12:13), and the deliverance of a demon-possessed individual (12:22-23). Despite these miracles, the Pharisees demanded that Jesus perform another sign. Knowing they were not sincere in their demand, He refused to appease them. Misunderstanding passages like these confuse Christians and their understanding of apologetics.

Question: What was it like writing this work with Dr. Geisler?

Zukeran: I have read many of Dr. Geisler's works and he has had a great influence on my life. I consider him one of the premier defenders of the faith of our generation. It was a great privilege to work on this book with Him and Dr. Ron

Rhodes. They would not let me get away with weak arguments and often pointed out areas and questions I needed to address. It is too bad some of those issues are left out of the book, but they really challenged me to write and think at a higher level. Perhaps you could compare it to football player receiving a chance to play under the great Tom Landry or a basketball player learning under John Wooden, or an investor working with Warren Buffett. I learned a lot but also realized I still have a lot more to learn. It was valuable to see the precision in their arguments, and their foresight in anticipating how opponents may respond. These were valuable examples for me to learn from.

Question: How do you hope this book will impact the body of Christ?

Zukeran: One of the concerns of Christian apologists is that the body of Christ is neglecting the mind. Since the Great Awakening and the preaching of men like Charles Finney, there has been a shift in evangelical Christianity. We have moved to a more emotional faith based on a moving experience. But, an emotional faith can only take you so far. Sooner or later, you will need reasons upon which to base your faith when it is challenged whether through a tragedy or an intellectual challenge. The unbelieving world also needs to see that the Christian worldview offers the best answers to the issues we face in our culture. I hope when Christians read this book and see that Jesus modeled how to love God with our minds, they will be encouraged to engage their minds with their faith in Christ.

Question: Some may see this as an intellectual book. However, you state that there are a lot of practical lessons we can apply from the study of Jesus' apologetics. What are some examples of lessons we can learn and apply?

Zukeran: Since we use our reasoning capacity in daily life, apologetics is tremendously practical in our evangelism. If we

are going to have ministries that will engage a lost world that is in rebellion to God, we will need compelling reasons but we will also need to know how to present our case to various audiences, often a hostile one. Jesus was the master at this. This does not mean He was always successful, but He did show us how to communicate a powerful message. Each chapter ends with practical applications we can apply when engaging our culture for Christ. Hopefully, we will all be more effective witnesses for Christ as a result of studying the model of Christ.

© 2009 Probe Ministries

Cross Cultural Apologetics in Uganda

For any speaker, cross-cultural teaching is challenging. So when Pat Zukeran and I were asked to participate in two pastors' training conferences in Uganda, Africa, my prayer life took on a new urgency. Although the official language of Uganda is English, most of its citizens use one of twenty-nine other languages. Uganda is mostly an agricultural society and is somewhat isolated from the Western media. A majority of the pastors had received only a limited education, and would be fortunate to own a Bible much less have books for a theological library. Pat and I realized we would have to adjust the way we normally present our lessons to incorporate word pictures and stories to help the Ugandan translators effectively communicate our messages with this specialized audience.

However, a more central question was whether or not these pastors felt a need for the kind of apologetics information

that Probe usually provides. Did they care about arguments for the authority of Scripture or the deity of Christ? Was maintaining a Christian worldview something they would understand or even be interested in? Would defenses against religious pluralism, Mormonism, and Islam be wanted or deemed unnecessary? I fervently prayed for wisdom and discernment as we made our preparations. Thankfully when it came time to go, I experienced a peace as I stepped out in faith. The Lord was sending us and I was eager to see how He would accomplish His plan for the Ugandan pastors!

Our time in Uganda was split into two one-week conferences. The first conference was near the town of Jinja, not far from the country's eastern border with Kenya. This town is on the shores of Lake Victoria, near the headwaters of the Nile River. Our actual conference location was a 30 minute van ride to what we later discovered was the first church in Uganda, built in the 1880s by the Anglicans. Most of the attendees were lay pastors in area churches along with a few priests. We later discovered that the Anglican priests were responsible for as many as twenty churches and spent most of their time marrying, baptizing, and burying members. Much of the work of evangelizing and mentoring new believers fell upon the lay workers. As a result, this group of 125 workers was essential to energizing and equipping the Anglican movement in the region.

Pat opened the conference with a great session on the biblical mandate to be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have in Christ. Some of the pastors admitted that they had never really thought about having to defend what they believe. They would share with their neighbors that they believed about Jesus, but they didn't even think about defending the faith if questions or objections arose. We later discovered that Jinja was the center of Mormon activities in Uganda. The pastors were shocked to hear what Mormons believe concerning the nature of God and specifically the person of Christ. They also

responded positively to arguments against religious pluralism acknowledging that they were hearing them for the first time.

For the next leg of the trip, we headed out to Fort Portal to partner with ALARM Ministries on the western border of Uganda next to the Congo. We had received an e-mail from both the Ugandan government and our state department warning us about the ongoing conflict in the Congo. Fortunately, the fighting had not spilled over into Uganda. Other than refugees entering into the country we did not notice any problems.

It turns out that the group of pastors in Fort Portal was especially passionate about the apologetics material Pat and I covered during the six hours each day. They were experiencing a direct challenge



from Islam and had little information with which to respond. Many of them felt the burden to defend their faith from the rising influx of money and mosques from Libya. Libya's ruler Muammar Kaddafi has taken an interest in Uganda. In Fort Portal he has built a large, gold-domed mosque and a mansion for the local fifteen-year-old tribal king. Local Muslims have been targeting pastors and their sons by offering money and even cars to those who would convert to Islam. Sadly, some have done so.

In response, Pat and I decided to change our scheduled topics to make the last day entirely focused on Islam. I did a session on the history of the religion and its basic beliefs while Pat covered apologetic strategies to use when talking

with a Muslim. At the end, one pastor jumped to his feet and began shouting in the local dialect. We wondered what we might have said to upset him and looked to the translator. Translated he said,

“For years the Muslims have challenged us and we’ve never been able to answer their challenges. Today, our teachers have provided answers and addressed the issues they bring up. Now for the first time I feel we are equipped to answer them when they come for their crusades here in Fort Portal!”

Another pastor agreed with him and stood up to say,

“For too long we have given bad answers or just beat around the bush. Now we can provide solid answers!”

Then a third pastor exclaimed,

“After receiving my new Bible (given to them by the mission trip funds) and hearing the teaching today, I love God’s Word more than ever!”



With that, they began celebrating by raising their new Bibles above their heads, dancing and singing a song titled, “Heaven and earth will pass away but God’s Word will endure forever.” It was a very moving for us to see the joy in their hearts

because of our teaching.

Our other material also connected as well. I spoke about temptations all Christians experience when life becomes difficult. We in the U.S. tend to trust in our wealth, technology, and entertainment when we should be turning to God for strength and endurance. In Africa, the tendency is to revert to the traditional African religions that include local witch doctors and ancestor worship. We had a number of good discussions about trusting only in God and the truth revealed in Scripture rather than in other belief systems and unbiblical practices.

Our time in Uganda reconfirmed the need for apologetics regardless of location and culture. Although the challenges may be different, Christians everywhere need to have confidence in the gospel message if they are going to take it into the world. It is our prayer that we left our brothers and sisters in Uganda with tools that will equip them to be more effective ambassadors for Christ.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

Does It Matter What We Believe?

Does *what* we believe matter, or just *that* we believe? A study recently released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, suggests that most religious people in America think *what* they believe isn't so important.[{1}](#)

According to the report, eighty-three percent of people identifying themselves with mainline Protestant churches believe that many religions can lead to eternal life. That might not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with

the changes in mainline churches over the last century.

But what would you say if you knew that fifty-seven percent of people identifying themselves as evangelicals believe that many religions can lead to eternal life? Fifty-seven percent! That means the majority of evangelicals are what we call “religious pluralists.” Are you surprised? To add to our embarrassment, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses have stronger convictions about their beliefs being the true ones than do evangelicals.

Some findings in the survey were real head-shakers. For example, thirteen percent of evangelicals surveyed believe God is an impersonal force. It might be a little reassuring to learn that evangelicals don’t have a corner on the “confused beliefs” market. Six percent of atheists surveyed believe in a personal God, and twelve percent believe in heaven! What are we to make of this?

Whatever it might mean precisely, it at least means that specific beliefs are the property of the believer, not of the religion itself. Fidelity to the beliefs of particular religions (or irreligion, in the case of atheism) means much less today than in the past. I can associate myself with a given group, but I retain the right to decide for myself what I should believe.

It’s understandable, in a sense, why people think this way, including evangelicals. This pluralistic mentality infuses our social consciousness. We aren’t to exclude people of other races or the other gender from all the multitudinous areas of society. Businesses are forbidden to discriminate on the basis of “race, color, national origin, religion, or sex.”^{2} I’m not arguing against any of this. I’m simply pointing to our social mentality which requires (or aims at) the leveling out of differences. The refusal to extend special status is applied to religious beliefs as well. But this doesn’t mean we simply tolerate people of different beliefs; now we’re

supposed to affirm their beliefs!

In addition to this pluralist mentality there is the serious problem for evangelicals of the reduction of doctrinal teaching in churches. David Wells lamented this loss in his 1993 book, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* He was spurred on to write the book after having a student in his seminary class on theology ask him how he could justify spending so much money on a class that “was so irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church.”[\[3\]](#)

One problem some people have with a strong concern for doctrine is that it tends to divide Christians. In so far as we *do* segregate ourselves from other Christians over non-essential beliefs we are in error. Unity is very important. But nowhere in Scripture are we taught that unity is to be preserved regardless, at the expense of truth. After exhorting the Ephesians to be unified in the bond of peace, Paul lists what we are to be unified around: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (4:3-6). We aren't to be united around the conviction that when it comes to religion, to each his or her own.

Another reason for a reluctance to insist on doctrinal integrity is the postmodern mentality about truth. This issue is being played out now in discussions about what is called the “emerging church.” The desire to correct an overzealous modernism in its confident claims of truth is showing itself in *some* Christians who align themselves with this movement in a diminishing of the importance of doctrinal commitments. The attempt to avoid both absolutism and relativism has them walking a tightrope which too easily swings toward a pluralist mentality.

What does it mean to give up on the importance of specific doctrinal beliefs? First, and very obviously, we have abandoned biblical Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul

states specific beliefs that are essential: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (verses 3-5). Jesus made the bold and definitely non-politically correct claim that he was the *only* way to God (John 14:6). Paul says that salvation comes to those who confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9). Throughout both Old and New Testaments, we are presented with claim after claim presented as being true.

Second, we must hold fast to the historic teachings of biblical Christianity if we are to have anything to offer the world. One of the most significant results of liberal watering down of Christian distinctives is that, over time, attendance in mainline churches dwindled; they had nothing to offer that was different from what people could get outside the church.

Wells notes that "the great sin of Fundamentalism is to compromise; the great sin in evangelicalism is to be narrow." Whereas evangelicals once strongly opposed doctrinal decline in liberalism, now, Wells says, "evangelicals, no less than the Liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favor of 'life'." [\[4\]](#) We're doing well in the arena of social relief; we're doing very poorly in training our people in basic Christian beliefs *as beliefs that are true for all people for all time.*

Wells notes these consequences of the loss of doctrinal conviction. First is simply the loss of conviction. What do we stand for? You've heard it before: A person [or church] that stands for nothing will fall for anything. Second is the loss of what might be accomplished when spurred on by a theological vision. Is being nice and doing good the substance of our marching orders? Third is the loss of any really meaningful sense of what "evangelical" means. Fourth is the loss of unity with the spinning off of individual interests.

If Christianity doesn't have *the* truth about how one might obtain eternal life, it has nothing more to offer than religious experience (whatever that might be for a given individual). It has lost all its substance. Since it *claims* to be the only way to God, what has been aptly said many times bears repeating: either it is true *for* all, or it is not true *at* all.

Notes

1. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant, June 2008; religions.pewforum.org

2. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html.

3. David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 4.

4. *Ibid.*, 129, 131.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

Gabriel's Vision: An Angelic Threat to the Resurrection?

An article in *TIME* magazine titled "Was Jesus' Resurrection a Sequel?" opened with the statement, "A 3-ft.-high tablet romantically dubbed 'Gabriel's Vision' could challenge the uniqueness of the idea of the Christian Resurrection."^{1} What exactly is this tablet and does it have any significant impact on the teaching of the resurrection of Christ?

About a decade ago a stone tablet about three feet in height owned by a Swiss-Israeli antiques collector received the

attention of historians. This tablet contained eighty-seven lines in Hebrew text written, not engraved, on the stone. Experts date the tablet to the late first century B.C. or a little later. The origin of the tablet is unknown. Some surmise that it came from the Transjordan region and other scholars think this may have been a part of the Dead Sea Scrolls collection.

The tablet contains an apocalyptic prediction of the end of the world spoken by a person named Gabriel. Other scholars believe the name refers to the angel Gabriel. There are several parts of the message that are missing or difficult to decipher.

The connection to the resurrection of Christ is found in line 80. Jewish scholar Israel Kohl, an expert in Talmudic and biblical languages at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, believes that the line begins with the words "In three days" and includes some form of the verb "to live."[\[2\]](#) He believes that this text refers to a first century Jewish rebel named Simon who was killed by the Romans in 4 B.C. Kohl believes the translation reads, "In three days, you shall live. I Gabriel command you."[\[3\]](#)

Time magazine writer David Van Biema writes that if Kohl's translation is correct, it would somehow undermine the historicity of resurrection. He states,

This, in turn, undermines one of the strongest literary arguments employed by Christians over centuries to support the historicity of the Resurrection (in which they believe on faith): the specificity and novelty of the idea that the Messiah would die on a Friday and rise on a Sunday. Who could make such stuff up? But, as Knohl told TIME, maybe the Christians had a model to work from. The idea of a "dying and rising messiah appears in some Jewish texts, but until now, everyone thought that was the impact of Christianity on Judaism," he says. "But for the first time, we have proof

that it was the other way around. The concept was there before Jesus." If so, he goes on, "this should shake our basic view of Christianity. ... What happens in the New Testament [could have been] adopted by Jesus and his followers based on an earlier messiah story."[{4}](#)

Biema states that one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection was that it was a unique concept introduced by Christianity. The belief in the resurrection is based on "faith." The defense Christians gave for the resurrection is that it was not believed by the Jews and therefore could not have been made up by the Christians. This discovery would then undermine one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection of Christ.

What implications does this discovery have, and is it a devastating blow to the resurrection as Biema asserts? First, Kohl contends that the words of line 80 should be translated as, "In three days you shall live." But the exact words of that line are not known. Hebrew scholars remain uncertain regarding line 80 because in crucial places there are a lot of missing words. The Israeli scholar who first worked on the tablet is Ada Yardeni. Yardeni's translation of the text shows indeed there are key words missing. The English translation reads, "...from before You, the three si[gn]s(?), three ...[...](line 79). In three days ..., I, Gabri'el ...[?], (line 80).[{5}](#) Yardeni considers the words in line 80 to be indecipherable.[{6}](#)

Church history scholar Ben Witherington states that the verb Kohl translates as rise could also mean "there arose." So, instead of a resurrected messiah, the text refers to the appearing of a Messiah.[{7}](#) Since the words of line 80 are not clear, we cannot state conclusively the text is speaking of a messiah who dies and resurrects in three days.

Second, I do not find this discovery a threat to the

resurrection. Even if Kohl's translation is correct, it does not affect the evidence for and the teaching on the resurrection. If Kohl's translation is correct, it would highlight the debate in Jewish belief regarding the Messiah. The popular notion was teaching of a Davidic Messiah who would overthrow the nation's enemies and establish the Davidic Kingdom. However, some Jewish schools although a minority, held to a belief in a suffering Messiah. If Kohl's translation is correct, this tablet would show this suffering Messiah would rise from the dead in three days.

This would not pose a major threat to Christianity. Many Christians have taught that the idea of a resurrected Messiah was never taught in Judaism. However, Christians have long taught that the Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 53 teach of a dying and resurrected Messiah. In fact, a few people are recorded being raised from the dead in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17, 2 Kings 13). Therefore, it should not be so surprising if there was a pre-Christian Jewish belief in a resurrected Messiah held by a minority of Jews.

Finally, Biema states that the "novelty" of the resurrection is one of the strongest literary arguments for the historicity of the resurrection. He also states that Christians' belief in the resurrection is based on "faith." I would disagree with Biema's assertions. First, the historicity of the resurrection is not based on "faith" or belief without credible reasons. The belief in the resurrection is based on compelling historical evidence. Second, I do not believe the novelty of the resurrection is one of the strongest arguments for the resurrection. I rarely if ever have used it in an apologetic presentation. I believe the strongest arguments come from the historical evidence.

What are those evidences? First, the Gospels represent an accurate historical account of the life of Christ written in the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. The internal evidence, archaeology, manuscript evidence, quotes from the early Church

Fathers, and ancient non-Christian historical works affirm the first century date and historical accuracy of the gospels (See my article on [The Historical Reliability of the Gospels.](#))

In studying the resurrection, there are several facts agreed upon by historians of various persuasions. First, the tomb of Christ was known and was found empty. Second, there is the transformation of the Apostles from cowards to men who boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Christ in the face of their enemies. Third, the preaching of the Resurrection originates in Jerusalem, the most hostile place to preach such a message. Fourth, we have a massive Jewish societal transformation. Thousands of Jews abandon key tenets of Jewish faith and accept the teachings of Christ. Fifth, the origin of the church was built on the proclamation of the resurrection. Any explanation of the empty tomb must account for these facts, and the resurrection remains the most reasonable explanation. All other attempts have failed as alternative explanations (See my article [Resurrection: Fact or Fiction.](#))

These remain the strongest arguments for the resurrection, not the novelty of a resurrected Messiah. Even if Kohl's translation is proven to be correct, it does not affect any of these facts. There is still compelling evidence for the resurrection of Christ. Kohl's translation would highlight the controversy among pre-Christian Jews regarding the two concepts of the coming Messiah. His translation would simply add the idea that the minority view regarding the suffering Messiah included a belief by some Jews in a Messiah who would die and resurrect three days later.

Notes

1. David Van Biema, "Was Jesus' Resurrection a Sequel?" *TIME*, 7 July 2008, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1820685,00.html?xid=newsletter-weekly.
2. Ibid., 1.

3. Ibid., 1.

4. Ibid., 2.

5. Ada Yardeni's translation, www.bib-arch.org/news/dssinstone_english.pdf

6. Gary Habermas, "Gabriel's Vision' and the Resurrection of Jesus," July 2008, www.garyhabermas.com/articles/gabrielsvision1/gabrielsvision.htm.

7. Biema, 2.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

Exploring God's Relationship to Time

Written by David Pattillo and Michael Gleghorn

Introduction

Why does time flow the way it does? Can we alter time, or is it beyond our grasp? Is time travel possible? Is God inside or outside of time? Does everyone experience time the same way we do? When faced with the question, What is time? we encounter one of the most fundamental human inquiries, as well as one of the most difficult philosophical questions. Every person seems to experience the flow of time every single day, yet when asked to define it, we are often at a loss for words. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we shall define time as a relation of events involving earlier than and later than.

Two views of time

When it comes to the philosophy of the nature of time, there are essentially two views: the *dynamic, tensed*, or *A Theory*;

and the *static, tenseless, or B Theory*. It is traditionally said that on the *A Theory*, the present is ontologically privileged. That is to say, the present is the only thing that is really real; the past has happened and the future will happen. It is much easier to see what distinguishes the *A Theory* when it is compared with the *B Theory*, which holds that all moments are equally real. That is (according to the *B Theory*), from our perspective it is 2007, 1950 is in the past and 2050 is in the future. But for the people in 1950 (who also exist at *that* time), both 2007 and 2050 are in the future. Likewise, for the people in 2050 both 1950 and 2007 are in the past. The *B Theory* holds that it is ignorant to think of our moment of the world as the real moment, or the moment occupying some privileged position. According to the *B Theory*, any tensed idea, or sentence whose verb has tense (i.e., past/present/or future), would actually be more accurate if it were translated into a tenseless idea or sentence (i.e., one that has a tenseless verb and time stamp to say when something happened, rather than a tensed verb) since tensed ideas imply that the present moment of time is superior to, or more real than, all other moments. For instance, according to the *B Theory*, the tensed sentence, JFK was assassinated, would misconstrue reality as if the year 2007 (or any year after 1963) is more real or significant than the years 1907 or 1963, because it has a verb in the past tense. This theory holds that the sentence would be better put On November 22, 1963, at 12:30 P.M. CST JFK *is* assassinated.[\[2\]](#) This tenseless sentence is preferred on the *B Theory* because there is no moment that can claim to be the true present moment; rather, there are just equally real moments. Advocates of the *B Theory* say that reality is one long 4-dimensional block, and we are just experiencing one moment of that block, but all the moments are equally real or existent. The *A Theory*, on the other hand, would say that *tensed verbs* (verbs in the past/present/future tense) do reflect reality; there really is a past, present, and future, and they are always changing as time flows and the future

becomes present and then past.

Which one of these views is correct has vast implications for the way we interpret reality. For example, it will have an effect on the way we understand God and His relation to the world. One might think that this would be the proper time to turn to Scripture to see whether it supports an *A* or *B Theory*. However, its important to recognize the fact that Scripture is not entirely clear with respect to this issue. Therefore, we will postpone looking at the Bible until our discussion of Gods relation to time. For the present, we need to discuss which of the two theories is superior and why.

A vs. B

The most powerful argument for the *A Theory* is its intuitiveness. That is, we experience the flow of time in just as real a way as any other experience in our lives. We very directly experience the present. To say that event *e* is occurring now is no different than saying that event *e* is occurring.[{3}](#) When we look forward to the future or regret the past, we are experiencing the *A Theory* because, if you think about it, on the *B Theory* there is no difference between past, present, and future.[{4}](#) Lastly, when a kid says: I wish it were Christmas morning, or I wish I were already done with this test, he is expressing the *A Theory*. That is, he wishes that the present moment, say t_1 , were replaced by some other moment, say t_2 . This expresses the idea of *temporal becoming* (the idea that the present moment changes as we pass through time), which is an experience of the *A Theory*. As William Lane Craig puts it, We thereby presuppose the reality of temporal becoming, since our wish expresses our belief in a changing and objective present.[{5}](#) Thus the *A Theory* very comfortably coheres with what we experience in everyday life.

Now, the *B* theorist may ask, Why accept this experience as anything more than an illusion? To answer this we must briefly

digress with a discussion of Alvin Plantinga's *epistemology*, or theory of knowledge. When evaluating beliefs, many skeptics want to reject anything that is not certain. This was especially prominent in the philosophy of Ren Descartes, who rejected all his sense experience because it could have been wrong. After all, when you think about it, we could be in the *Matrix*.[\[6\]](#) It could be that everything you think is real is just electrical impulses interpreted by your brain. Or it could be that the world was created five minutes ago, and you were created with all the memories you currently have. Or maybe you are the only mind in the universe, and everyone else is just a robot, cleverly designed to give the appearance of having a human mind. And the list of possibilities goes on and on. None of these can be disproven, but should we conclude that we really don't know whether anyone else actually exists? Plantinga doesn't think so. He has developed a theory that labels these and other similar beliefs as *properly basic beliefs*.

Think about it this way. If you are reading this online, the belief that there is a computer in front of you is properly basic; that is, it is a foundational belief formed in correct circumstances. Therefore, you are warranted in believing it until presented with some *defeater* of your belief. In this case, a *defeater* would have to be some good reason to believe that your senses are deceiving you. In other words, according to Plantinga, common sense beliefs about sensory experience, memory, the existence of other minds or other similar beliefs should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty (i.e., judged reliable until proven otherwise). Likewise, our experience of real temporal passing and an objective past, present, and future warrants belief in the *A Theory* until a strong counterargument is offered strong enough to cause us to doubt this experience.

Another major argument for the *A Theory* is what is known as the *ineliminability of tense*.[\[7\]](#) Simply put, this is the idea

that tensed statements imply tensed facts which further imply a tensed reality. B theorists have made numerous attempts to show that tensed sentences can be translated into tenseless sentences that do not imply a tensed reality. However, all these attempts have failed. Craig illustrates:

This point is underlined by the ineptness of some of the supposed tenseless translations of tensed sentences. Take, for example, the tensed sentence It is now 4:30. We can imagine situations in which a persons life would depend on his holding such a belief. But the tenseless counterpart of this sentence is either It is 4:30 at 4:30, which is a mere tautology, or It is 4:30 simultaneous with this utterance, which is useless unless we also know that This utterance is occurring now, which is a tensed belief. In both cases the tenseless versions are insufficient to motivate timely action because they do not inform us whether or not it actually is 4:30. {8}

If tensed sentences lose some meaning when translated into tenseless sentences, then there is some important meaning in tense, namely, that reality is reflected by tense. Therefore, if tenseless sentences cannot capture the facts expressed by tensed sentences, then there must be tensed facts. And thus we have a strong argument for temporal reality.

Next we turn our attention to some problems with the *B Theory* of time. While there are numerous problems, we will discuss just two of them. {9} First, the *B Theory* of time greatly misconstrues some biblical ideas, one example being the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. For the B theorist, the universe beginning to exist simply means that it has a starting point, just like a yard stick has a first inch. {10} The problem is that on this view There is in the actual world no state of affairs of God existing alone without the space-time universe. God never really brings the universe into being; as a whole it co-exists timelessly with Him. {11}

So while the universe depends on God, the idea of *creation ex nihilo* is severely stripped of meaning since the universe always timelessly exists with God. That is, in some sense, God and space-time seem to be equally necessary in their existence.

The other major biblical problem is that evil is never really vanquished.[{12}](#) On the static theory of time [*B Theory*], evil is never really vanquished from the world: It exists just as sturdily as ever at its various locations in space-time, even if those locations are all earlier than some point in cosmic time (for example, Judgment Day).[{13}](#)

Furthermore, events like the crucifixion are never past or done away with. They simply remain timelessly forever, which seems hard to reconcile with Christ's victory over death.

A second argument against the *B Theory* has to do with the impossibility of the existence of *actual infinities*. It has now been almost universally agreed upon by mathematicians and philosophers that an actually infinite number of things cannot be actualized in the space-time universe. The idea of *actual infinities* creates many paradoxes. For instance, what is infinity minus infinity? Well mathematically one gets contradictory answers. For example, one could say that the answer is infinity. But the answer could also be 4, or 0, or any other number you want. This led the great mathematician David Hilbert to say, The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature, nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought...the role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea.[{14}](#)

Thus, what we have in the space-time universe are not *actual infinities*, but *potential infinities*. For example, you can start counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and continue this process for a potentially infinite time (i.e., you can keep going as long as you want). But you will never reach a moment when you can stand up and exclaim, I'm done! I've counted to infinity! In the

same way a line three inches in length can be divided in half, and then in half again, and then in half again, ad infinitum. But it can never actually be divided an infinite number of times. For this reason, in addition to compelling scientific and theological evidence, essentially all philosophers and scientists have now come to believe that time is finite in the past.

However, the future is different. We know that the future is not finite but infinite. We know this both philosophically and biblically by the promise of *everlasting* or *eternal* life. Therefore, most scholars have concluded that the future, like numbers, is potentially infinite. We can keep adding years forever, but we will never reach an end. But this is inconsistent with the *B Theory*. Since every moment of time in fact exists at once, and the future has no end, there is an actually infinite number of years in the future. But since we know that there are no actualized infinities in the real world, we can safely conclude that the *B Theory* is wrong in its description of the future.

So we have seen two strong arguments for the *A Theory*, from our experience of temporal reality and the ineliminability of tense in language, and two ways that the *B Theory* seems clearly implausible, from *creation ex nihilo* and the impossibility of *actual infinities*. Other attempts have been made to revive the *B Theory*, but suffice it to say that they have been answered thoroughly.[{15}](#)

Gods Relation to Time

We now turn to how an infinite God relates to our passage of time. There are some things of which we are certain. First, time began a finite time ago. We know this from the Bible,[{16}](#) philosophy,[{17}](#) and science.[{18}](#) Second, we know God neither began to exist, nor will He ever cease to exist.[{19}](#) We can further conclude that God existed before time.[{20}](#) This is best exemplified in Jude 25: ...To the only God our Savior,

through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, *before all time* and now and forever. Amen.{21}

Since we know that God existed before time,{22} we can conclude that without the universe, God existed timelessly.{23}

We then must ask ourselves, how does God relate to the universe since it began? Here again we find two common positions. One is that God is timeless. By this it is meant that God, while the creator and sustainer of the world, was not affected by the creation of the world and remains constant outside the universe, just as He was before the act of creation. The other common position is that God is *temporal*. That does not mean that God is limited by time, but rather that He is intimately related to temporal things. He thus has a past, present, and future, just like other temporal things. Since there is no beginning or end to His existence, this position is also sometimes called *omnitemporality*.

There are two main arguments in favor of Gods *omnitemporality*. First, there is the argument from Gods relation to the universe. When God brought the universe into being, He stood in new relationships that He did not have before. Once the universe exists, He now is the sustainer of and is co-existent with the universe.{24} He could have remained timeless, but since He created the universe He went through an *extrinsic change*.{25} If God undergoes this change, then surely He must be temporal. That is, we can speak of a past, present and future for God. In the past He had one relation and in the present He has another relation. This provides a way to associate God with time, and that is all the omnitemporal view of God requires.

The second major argument for Gods *omnitemporality* comes from His omniscience specifically, His knowledge of tensed facts.{26} That is, as the present is constantly changing, true sentences are constantly changing. For instance, there are tenseless truths that are always true such as: The World

Trade Centers *are* attacked on September 11, 2001. However, on September 10, 2001, the sentence The World Trade Centers will be attacked tomorrow was true, but this statement is not true on September 11th. What is true on September 11th is the statement, The World Trade Centers are being attacked today. Finally, any time since then, the true statement has been, The World Trade Centers were attacked on September 11th. All of these statements can be true or false depending on when they are made. That is because the verbs relate the sentence to the present. Thus, a God who knows only tenseless truths (as the *tenseless view* of God proposes) would seem to be very ignorant indeed, for there are seemingly limitless things He would not know. However, if God does possess knowledge of the truth of tensed sentences, this would seem to make Him temporal. As Dr. Craig puts it, any being which does know tensed facts cannot be timeless, for his knowledge must be in constant flux, as the tensed facts known by him change. [{27}](#) Thus we have a second powerful argument for God being temporal .

On the other hand, the major argument for Gods timelessness is what is known as the *incompleteness of temporal life*. [{28}](#) This is the idea that temporal life is so limited that a perfect God would not experience it. Certainly the fleetingness of our own lives has led to many existential questions of the meaning of life given that it will all end relatively shortly. Surely God would not be limited in this way. Well, this is a plausible argument and does carry some weight, but I am not sure how much. For one thing, because of Gods complete omniscience and ability to experience whatever He wants, the past is never really lost to God, which makes temporality far less of a limitation. Secondly, since He never ends, and we His children never cease to be in company with Him (assuming we have received His free gift of eternal life), there really is no need for Him to try to grasp onto fleeting moments as we so often do. So, while this argument seems plausible, it does not seem to me to be remotely powerful enough to call into

question the powerful arguments we have for the *omnitemporality* of God.

Thus, it seems we have good reason to think that God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation.^{29} But it is important to remember that He did not have to create. Rather, His free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on His part to exist temporally.^{30} Many would now ask how it makes sense for God to exist timelessly and then temporally. It seems plausible to say that time is a relation of events. That is, God's existence without creation was just simple, unchanging Trinitarian perfection, and it does not make sense to talk about before and after when there was no change. However, at the moment of the creation, we now have an event, and we can start relating events by temporal distance from the creation. Thus we conclude that God existed timelessly, and then created time and space, giving us the first mark of time, and time has been flowing ever since.

So then, we have seen that there is a real past, present, and future. God, though timeless, created, thus giving us temporal relations. We can speak of past, present, and future for God since He is intimately related to temporal things and has temporal knowledge. Since the first event, we now have a flow of time that will never end as we live on into eternity with or without God.

Notes

1. I owe a great credit to both Dr. William Lane Craig for most of the ideas of this paper, and to Michael Gleghorn for help in developing these ideas.
2. I have picked up Dr. William Lane Craig's use of italics to symbolize a tenseless verb.
3. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity, Exploring God's Relationship to Time*. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 133.
4. *Ibid.*, 136.

5. Ibid., 140.
6. Reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which a complex computer program used unconscious humans to power, and thus perpetuate itself. Human brains were meanwhile tied to an imaginary world, the matrix.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 118.
9. Ibid., 188-215 for a more comprehensive list of the problems.
10. Ibid., 210.
11. Ibid., 213.
12. Ibid., 214.
13. Ibid.
14. *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. with an Intro. by Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 151.
15. Ibid., 143-188.
16. Gen 1:1; Ps 90:2; Jn 1:1-3; I Cor 2:7; Jude 25.
17. This is supported by arguments and illustrations about the impossibility of the existence of actual infinities (e.g. Hilbert's hotel, etc.). Also, it has been noted that if time never began, we could never reach our current moment. You cannot count up to infinity by adding one number at a time. If the past was infinite, and we only complete one year at a time, we would never reach 2007.
18. This is supported by the second law of thermodynamics, as well as by arguments for the Big Bang (e.g., the red shift of light from distant galaxies and the cosmic microwave background radiation). For more information see *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* by William Lane Craig.
19. name="text19">That God is the beginningless cause of the universe is the conclusion of the Kalam Cosmological argument. Also see Gen 1:1, Ps 90:2, Is 41:4, Is 57:15, John 1:1-3, II Tim 1:9, Rev 4:8.
20. name="text20">I Cor 2:7, Jn 17:24, Jude 25. See also the conclusions from the Kalam Cosmological argument.
21. name="text21">The Bible, New American Standard Version (Zondervan, Grand Rapids) 2000, emphasis added.

22. name="text22">I say before here to mean God's existing without time, even though it is actually impossible to speak of before time since before is a temporal relation.

23. Some, like Newton, have proposed that God existed in His own infinite past separate from the creation of physical time. However, I feel that this fails to cohere with the biblical and philosophical evidence.

24. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity*, Exploring God's Relationship to Time. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 87.

25. Ibid., 87. When a being goes through an extrinsic change, the change does not effect the being's nature. The idea of an extrinsic change is the idea of a change apart from you. For instance, I can be behind you in line and then cut in front of you. You never changed, but you went through extrinsic relational changes in that you were related to me by the in front of relation and now you are related to me by the behind relation.

26. Ibid., 98.

27. Ibid., 99.

28. Ibid., 67.

29. Ibid., 241.

30. Ibid., 87.

©2008 Probe Ministries

Did Christianity Borrow From Pagan Religions? – Early Christianity and Other

Religions

The Da Vinci Code and related contemporary non-fiction books make the claim that Christianity was a hodge podge of beliefs taken from other pagan religious traditions. Dr. Daniel Morais and Dr. Michael Gleghorn take a long hard look at this claim and determine that it has very little basis in fact. They demonstrate that the theory that early Christianity was borrowed from other religions does not stand up to rigorous examination.

The Da Vinci Code Deception

In Dan Brown's bestselling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, Leigh Teabing, the fictional royal historian, makes the following claim: "Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian god Mithras—called the Son of God and the Light of the World—was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days." [\[1\]](#) Is there any truth to all this? [\[2\]](#)

The Da Vinci Code claims that Christianity is not rooted in a unique, historical Jesus who claimed to be the Son of God, was born of a virgin, died, and was resurrected in three days. Instead, it says that early Christians borrowed these ideas from pagan mystery cults like Mithraism, and attributed these characteristics to the historical Jesus who never really said or did any of these things. Did Christianity borrow its history and theology from Mithraism or any other mystery religion?

From about 1890-1940, critical Bible scholars suggested that early Christianity may have borrowed some of its ideas from pagan mystery religions. However, after a barrage of criticism this theory has been largely abandoned in the field of religious studies. Despite its current lack of acceptance by experts, however, this theory continues to be set forth in

popular books like *The Da Vinci Code* and other publications.[{3}](#)

What is Mithraism, and what are the mystery cults? The mystery religions were called such because of their use of secret ceremonies and beliefs that were thought to bring their participants salvation.[{4}](#) Ceremonies were usually held in secluded places, at night, away from the public eye.[{5}](#) Different parts of the Mediterranean spawned their own mystery religions. Greece had the cults of Dionysus and Demeter as well as the Orphic mystery cults. Out of Phrygia in Asia Minor came the Cybele and Attis cults. The cult of Isis and Osiris arose in Egypt. Syria and Palestine had the cult of Adonis, while Mithraism originated in Persia, or modern day Iran.[{6}](#)

Dr. Ronald Nash wrote, "One frequently encounters scholars who first use Christian terminology to describe pagan beliefs and practices and then marvel at the awesome parallels they think they have discovered."[{7}](#) However, the theory that Christianity borrowed its beliefs from paganism has now been discarded in large part because it seems likely that if any borrowing of beliefs occurred it would almost certainly have been the other way around. One could be a participant in the mystery cults of Isis or Mithras without giving up his or her previous beliefs, but not so with Christianity. With its roots in Judaism, Christianity, even in its earliest form, was an extremely exclusivist religion with deep disregard for all that was pagan.[{8}](#)

The Myth of Mithras

Mithraism was probably the most significant of the mystery religions. Mithras was the twin brother of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. Mithras was born when he emerged from a rock. He battled with the sun and then with the primeval bull. When Mithras slew the bull, this became the first act of creation as it created the ground of life for humanity. Like

Zoroastrianism, Mithraism believed that the world was a battleground between good and evil and mankind must pick sides. Mithras was the mediator who would assist humans in their struggles with darkness. If man passed his tests, he would eventually be reunited with the good god, but if he failed he would be thrown into a realm of eternal punishment. The Romans associated good and evil with light and darkness, and because of this fact, Mithras became known as the Sun God—not the Son of God.[{9}](#)

The Mithraic religion was constantly changing and adapting itself to the culture. This being the case, the most likely explanation for the myths about Mithras' miraculous birth and his becoming a "savior god" were in all likelihood borrowed from Christianity.[{10}](#) Though the cult started long before Christianity in Iran, there's no evidence of its presence in the Roman Empire during the first century when the original New Testament documents were being written. So this pagan cult could not have influenced the original New Testament manuscripts. But could later copies of the New Testament have been tainted with Mithraism?

Our oldest intact fragments of the New Testament are virtually identical with the Bible we have today and it seems clear that though we don't possess any of the original writings, what we do have are quite accurate representations of the originals. Sir Frederick Kenyon wrote, "The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written now has been removed."[{11}](#)

In conclusion, Mithras was the Sun God, not the Son of God, and given the exclusivist nature of Christianity and the fact that Mithraism and Christianity did not overlap during the first century, any similarities between the two religions were most likely due to a later Christian influence on Mithraism

and not the other way around.

***The Da Vinci Code* Dissected**

In the novel *The Da Vinci Code*, the Holy Grail expert, Leigh Teabing, claims that the pre-Christian god Mithras was also called the Son of God and the Light of the World. He then goes on to say that Mithras also died, was buried in a rock tomb, and rose again in three days. Brown also claims a parallel with Krishna mythology, according to which the newborn Krishna was, like Jesus, also given gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.[{12}](#) Is there any truth to these pagan/Christian parallels?

As noted earlier, the Romans came to understand the pagan god Mithras as the Sun God (not the Son of God).[{13}](#) If Mithras was understood to be the Sun God, it wouldn't be a wild idea to call him "The Light of the World." However, that specific title does not appear to have been given him in the ancient Roman world.[{14}](#) Also, experts in the Mithraic religion like Franz Cumont and Richard Gordon both assert that there was no death, burial, or resurrection of Mithras.[{15}](#) Dan Brown's source for this misinformation about Mithras being called the "Light of the World" and the "Son of God," as well as his alleged death and resurrection, has eluded many of his critics. It's not certain where he got this information, though it's possible that his source may have been a discredited nineteenth-century historian who also provided no documentation or support for these claims.[{16}](#)

It seems that Dan Brown may have also used this same historian for his allegation that at Krishna's birth, he was presented with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There is no story in Krishna mythology to support this claim.[{17}](#) The Bhagavad-Gita does not mention Krishna's childhood, and the other sources that do were written hundreds of years after the Christian Bible.

Even if all these Mithras/Christ similarities were true, since these two religions hadn't yet overlapped in Rome during the time when the New Testament was being written, Mithraism couldn't have influenced Christian theology. One Mithras expert asserts that "no Mithraic monument can be dated earlier than the end of the first century A.D., and even the more extensive investigation at Pompeii, buried beneath the ashes of Vesuvius in A.D. 79, have not so far produced a single image of the god."[{18}](#)

Most critical Bible scholars no longer believe that Christianity borrowed its core beliefs from the pagan mystery religions like Mithraism. Due to the lack of good evidence this theory has been largely abandoned.[{19}](#)

Sunday or Son Day

Early Christianity and the Bible have been relentlessly attacked on many different levels in the fast-paced thriller *The Da Vinci Code*. In the novel, Langdon claims that "Christianity's weekly holy day was stolen from the pagans. Christianity honored the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday, but Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan's veneration day of the sun."[{20}](#)

More than two hundred years before Constantine, some of the earliest Christian writings, which later became part of the New Testament, made it clear that there was a Sabbath on Saturday and a separate "Lord's Day" on Sunday. The reason Christians had a separate "Lord's Day" in addition to the Sabbath was because early Christians wanted to celebrate on Sunday, the day that Jesus had risen from the dead.[{21}](#)

There are many references in the New Testament, written hundreds of years before Constantine, that illustrate the difference between Sunday and the Sabbath day. Shortly after Christ's death, in Acts 20:7 Luke writes about "the first day

of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, . . .” This quote from Luke makes it clear that Christians during the first century were already worshiping together on the first day of the week which was Sunday. The apostle Paul refers to making a collection for an offering on Sunday in 1 Corinthians 16:2. And the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation, makes reference to Sunday being called the “Lord’s Day” in order to distinguish it from the Sabbath (Rev. 1:10).

There are also early Christian writings outside the New Testament that confirm that Christians celebrated the “Lord’s Day” on Sunday. The church father Justin Martyr wrote, “And on the day called Sunday there is a gathering together to one place of all those who live in cities or in the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.”[\[22\]](#) Justin Martyr lived during the second century, and had died long before Constantine was born.

The Sabbath has always been Saturday. That has never changed. But Christians usually attend church services on Sunday because that’s the day of Christ’s resurrection. In other words, Christians didn’t “move” the Sabbath to Sunday. They simply chose to gather for corporate worship on Sunday.

Finally, with regard to the claim that Sunday was tied to the worship of a pagan god, it’s important to note that *all* the days of the week—whether Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday—were tied to the worship of one pagan god or another.[\[23\]](#)

Christmithras

Previously we mentioned that the pagan god Mithras was not called the “Son of God” or the “Light of the World”. He also never died and rose again in three days. But was he born on December 25? According to the myth of Mithras, his birthday

was in fact celebrated on December 25. According to this myth, Mithras sprang up full-grown from a rock, carrying a knife and a torch. Shepherds watched his miraculous birth and greeted him with their first fruits, their flocks and their harvests. The cult of Mithras spread throughout the Roman Empire during the second century. In A.D. 274, the Roman emperor Aurelian declared December 25 the Birthday of Sol Invictus (the Unconquerable Sun).[{24}](#)

The Bible never indicates when Jesus was born, and no one today knows with certainty the day of his birth. Since the most likely time for taxation was in the fall or spring, some biblical scholars have suggested that he may have been born then rather than in the winter.[{25}](#) Prior to the fourth century, the Eastern Church celebrated Epiphany (which included the birth of Christ) in January. In the fourth century, the Church in Rome also began celebrating Christ's birth, and the practice quickly spread throughout Christendom. Eventually, December 25 "became the officially recognized date for Christmas."[{26}](#)

But why did the church choose to celebrate Christ's birth on the same day as the pagan Feast of the Unconquerable Sun? One scholar explains it this way: