A Preterist Responds to 'Four Views of Revelation'

I have just read Pat Zukeran's article "Four Views of Revelation." I believe he has done a rather good job in presenting the four different views as they are regarded by most scholars today. I do know that Probe is a general apologetics ministry and as such does not take an official stance on end time prophecy. However, as a former Probe intern and preterist who has done a great deal of research over the last several years on the first century fulfillment of end time prophecy, I am excited to share some of what I have learned by addressing some of these common objections to the preterist perspective raised by Pat in his article. It is my intention to use the objections raised in this article to illustrate just how formidable the preterist perspective perspective, when properly understood, can be in answering what is seen by C.S. Lewis and many other Christians as the greatest challenge to Christianity: the delay of the second coming of Christ.{1}

There are half a dozen verses in the Bible in which Jesus seems to explicitly promise to return within the lifetime of his generation. One such example is Matthew 24:34. In this chapter, Jesus promises that the temple will be destroyed, the abomination that causes desolation will be set up, and He will return on the clouds of heaven within that generation. The temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. at the same time that the abomination that causes desolation was set up on the wing of the temple. But did Jesus return as he had promised? There are four major interpretations for the Book of Revelation. This is because there really seem to be only four conceivable ways to interpret this text. If that is true and the Bible and the Book of Revelation are entirely correct, then some variation of one of these views must be true.

Most Christian preterists, like myself, started out as dispensationalists or futurists because this default perspective requires the least amount of background knowledge and as such is by far the most popular view. Most people are simply not sufficiently interested in end time prophecy to research alternative perspectives. There is an immense amount of research and historical knowledge necessary in order to understand the Book of Revelation from a preterist perspective, and I believe this fact alone accounts for its undeserved obscurity as well as the great deal of diversity of interpretations of various verses in the Book of Revelation. This diversity of interpretations should not be construed as evidence against preterism as Mounce and others suggest since similar divergence in opinions is found in all other views of this book. Because of the wealth of historical sources that must be perused, preterist apologists each seem to grasp different aspects of Revelation better than others and as such there are a number of differing opinions on different verses; thus, many false and tenuous views and interpretations have been put forth throughout the last two thousand years. I believe the more one learns about first century Roman history, the more difficult this perspective is to deny while remaining intellectually honest. I would like to try to illustrate this belief by addressing some of the common objections to preterism raised by this article. I will begin with Matthew 24:27:

> *"[A]s lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matt. 24:27).*

I would agree with Pat that tying this event to the advancement of Rome is a stretch and if true, a major weakness to the preterist view. In this verse, Jesus likens His return to a lightning bolt that is visible from great distances. Perhaps Jesus is describing a literal event linked with His return? After all, lightning often appears to originate from

dark storm clouds and Jesus did say he was to come on the clouds of heaven at His second coming. The fullness of the miracle that is the second coming of Christ can be found in the writings of three different first century historians: Tacitus, Suetonius and Josephus. When most people think of the second coming they get an image of Jesus riding on the clouds of heaven. A detailed description of the second coming can be found in Revelation 19. Here Jesus is seen in the sky riding a white horse at the head of the armies of heaven. This event is actually recorded in the writings of both Josephus and Tacitus. Here a specter is witnessed in the sky over Israel which marked the start of the Jewish revolt in AD 66. In his history of the Jewish War, Josephus writes:

> *On the one and twentieth day of the month Artemisius, [Jyar,] a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared: I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sun-setting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities.{2}*

In the above verse, an army is witnessed in the clouds over Israel. It is not a stretch to imagine Jesus at the head of this phantom army as God often appears to men in the presence of the heavenly host. According to the New Testament, Jesus was expected to return in the presence of the holy angels. This fact is made clear in Mark 8:38 though this is certainly not the only verse.{3} In Deuteronomy 33:2, Moses revealed to the people that when God descended on Mount Sinai and Mount Paran he came with a myriad of his holy ones. Christ's return is modeled after this prestige. Like his father before him when he had descended on Mount Sinai, Christ also came on a cloud in the company of the heavenly host.

I believe the second coming of Jesus is described in a couple

different verses in Revelation since the prophecies of Revelation frequently repeat themselves.{4} I believe the second coming is described again in Revelation 12:7. Here this angelic army is described fighting the armies of Satan. This war in heaven fits the chronology of the second coming nicely and is recorded in the writings of a first century secular historian, Tacitus:

In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armour. A sudden lightning flash from the clouds lit up the Temple. The doors of the holy place abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that gods were leaving it, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure.{5}

In this event one can see the literal fulfillment of Matthew 24:27: "For just as lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be." Possibly linked with the appearance of the heavenly host in the sky, Tacitus records a flash of lightening striking the temple followed by what may be the departure of the seven angels from the temple with the seven trumpets and bowls. The subsequent fulfillment of these plagues spans the next several years, culminating with the seventh plague resulting in the fall of Jerusalem, the whore of Babylon.

The next objection concerns the abomination that causes desolation initiated by Titus:

> *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.*

The abomination that causes desolation mentioned in Matthew 24:15 refers back to Daniel 9:27:

He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

Fitting the context of this chapter, the seven mentioned in the above verse refers to a seven year period. The Jewish War stretched across seven years and six months from the arrival of the Roman army in A.D. 66 to its conclusion at the fall of Masada. Between three and a half and four years after the start of the war, “in the middle of the seven,” Titus set up the abomination that causes desolation. This event is recorded in *The Wars of the Jews*:

Upon the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the building roundabout it, [the Roman army] brought their ensigns to the temple, and set them over against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them, and there did they make Titus imperator, with great acclamations of joy.{6}

The Roman ensigns were symbolic images of Caesar and Rome, the beast of Revelation. Upon these ensigns were often hung a cast image of the reigning Caesar.{7} Therefore it is likely that the ensigns worshipped on the eastern wing of the temple contained an image of Caesar Vespasian, the beast whose wound had been healed.{8} These ensigns were objects of the cult and were often worshipped by the Roman army. This is one such example. In an outward display of worship, the Roman army offered blasphemous sacrifices to these images of the beast on the wing of the temple, specifically its eastern gate. The fact that it was on the eastern gate is highly significant since the Messiah was to enter this gate in fulfillment of Ezekiel 44:2-3. As a side note, the entrance of a supernatural entity through this gate is recorded in Wars 6.5.3.293.{9} After this abominable act, the Romans destroyed the temple and went on a mass killing spree, hence Jesus’ warning to flee in the following verses.{10} With the temple destroyed, all

sacrifices and grain offerings had permanently come to an end in fulfillment of Daniel 9:27.

The third objection is about the identity of the 144,000:

> *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. 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.*

I agree that Hank Hanagraaf is putting a square peg in a round hole by equating the 144,000 with the innumerable multitude from every nation, tribe and language before the heavenly throne. The 144,000 are Jewish Christians. In my opinion, the 144,000 where the Jewish Christians referred to by Eusebius that fled to Pella before the war.{11} These Christians seem to fit the 144,000 well because they were preserved from the ravages of Israel's war with Rome. These saints then returned to Israel after the war with Rome.

The fourth criticism of preterism has to do with a perceived lack of victory of good over evil:

> *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.*

I absolutely agree with Mounce, the overthrow of Satan and the eternal reign of the Messiah is certainly presented in the seer's vision. However, this is primarily a heavenly event because God and his messiah rule earth **from** heaven since earth is merely God's footstool. Christ was not to reign eternally on earth, his throne, like that of his Father, is and was in heaven. Paul writes, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of **evil** in the **heavenly realms**."{12}The final casting out of Satan and his forces of evil from heaven is a consequence of the war in heaven mentioned in Revelation 12:7. Interestingly, this war was seen in the skies over Israel as mentioned by the Roman historian Tacitus, whom I have quoted above.{13} This war resulted in the destruction of heaven prophesied in the Bible. One clear example of the anticipated destruction of heaven is found in 2 Peter 3:12: "That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire…" The prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the aftermath of this destruction in Isaiah 65:17: "See I will create a new heaven and a new earth." The new Jerusalem mentioned in Revelation 21 and 22 is the new heaven and the new earth. The earthly Jerusalem had been destroyed after the war with Rome in the same way that the heavenly Jerusalem had been destroyed as a result of the war between Christ and His rival, Satan. The last two chapters of Revelation describe the rebuilding of the

Jerusalem on earth in such a way as to mirror the Jerusalem that is in heaven after it was destroyed with all its grandeur and glory. The destruction of both the Jerusalem on earth and the Jerusalem in heaven would seem to be concurrent events evidenced by the war seen in the skies over Israel at the start of Israel's war with Rome as well as the frequency in which these two events are linked in prophecy.

This great victory in heaven also has an earthly shadow. In the same way that the wicked angels were cast out of heaven at the return of Christ, the earthly victory attained at the end of the Jewish War resulted in the expulsion of the wicked out of Israel. Jerusalem with its temple on earth was to represent heaven symbolically and thus the inhabitants of this nation were expected to be righteous. In Deuteronomy 28, God promised to destroy and expel the inhabitants of Israel if they ever rejected him and his law. God made good on this promise a couple times throughout the Old Testament and the final culmination of this curse took place amidst the Jewish War with Rome and the subsequent Bar Kochba rebellion. Each and every curse mentioned in Deuteronomy 28, even as far as the return to slavery in Egypt, is recorded to have been fulfilled throughout the course of these two wars most of them several times over. The Bible is clear that the nation of Israel, especially its leadership, had become hopelessly corrupt. This is why Jesus was perpetually angry at the scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the Law.

One of many prominent examples of Jesus' feelings about the Jewish leadership can be found in Matthew 23. But it was not just the Jewish leadership that had fallen away, a great percentage of the common people had rejected God as well. In Luke 11:29 Jesus laments, "This generation is a wicked generation." Jesus was not the only Jew to note the wickedness of his first century contemporaries. The author of *The Wars of the Jews* which outlines the fulfillment of much of the events detailed in the Book of Revelation, was also a first century

Jew. The outstanding wickedness of first century Israelites is a recurrent theme throughout Josephus' account of the Jewish War. In this text, Josephus writes concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the perceived wickedness of its occupants, "Neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries, nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness that this was, from the beginning of the world."{14} Over the next 1000 years, until the first Crusade, Gentile Christians had migrated into Israel until Jerusalem had become 95% Christian. Christians were an overwhelming majority during this millennium—even after the Muslim conquest. During this 1000 year period, Israel had experienced unprecedented peace—much more so than any other time period in all of Israel's history. Few people know much about events in Israel during the first thousand years of the Common Era, and there is a good reason: virtually nothing bad ever happened.{15} The great victory achieved at the end of Revelation is the destruction and exile of the wicked people of Israel, the whore of Babylon, to make way for the new Jerusalem, a Jerusalem occupied by the faithful of God. This earthly victory of the saints is a shadow of the final victory illustrated at the end of Revelation which ultimately points to the aftermath of the destruction of heaven and the establishment of the New Jerusalem therein. There is a lot that can be said about this heavenly and earthly victory and everything else I have mentioned thus far. The rest of which is far beyond my original intentions in writing this essay.

The last argument against preterism has to do with the fact that the majority of scholars believe that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign. This of course presents a problem to this view as virtually all predictions detailed in Revelation are believed to have already occurred before Domitian had become emperor. A detailed and compelling rebuttal of this commonly held view can be found in *Before Jerusalem Fell* by Kenneth Gentry. In this book, Dr. Gentry presents the multifaceted internal and external evidence in

favor of an earlier date of composition: specifically during Nero's reign.

Reading through the works of Eusebius, Josephus, Tacitus, Cassius Dio and Suetonius one can find a multitude of recorded natural and supernatural events that fit the vast array of Biblical predictions concerning the end time like a glove. There are few instances in which the fulfillment of end time events is not recorded somewhere in the writings of the above mentioned historians and thus when properly informed there is really no need to "excessively allegorize."

My intention in commenting on the objections raised to the preterist perspective mentioned in this article was to illustrate the fact that there are compelling answers to perhaps any question that can be raised concerning the end of the age. I strongly believe the more one studies the Bible alongside first century Roman history, the more amazed one will be upon finding just how remarkably well the information found in these sources matches up with the detailed predictions concerning the end time. Because many of the predictions concerning the end of the age found in the Bible were written hundreds of years before their fulfillment, I see preterism as one of the greatest tools an informed Christian can use to defend the divine inspiration of the Bible. The delay of the second coming is seen by many as Christianity's Achilles heel. The fact that there are not just answers to this dilemma, but extremely compelling ones is a testimony to the infallibility of the word of God, and it is my hope that someday in my lifetime good answers from the preterist perspective will be in every great apologetic tool kit.

Notes

1. www.preteristarchive.com/StudyArchive/t/theory_parousia-delay.html

2. Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 6.5.3.

3. Luke 9:26; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; Jude 1:14; Revelation 19:11-14.

4. One example of this repetition is the seven trumpets and the seven plagues. When read side by side, these seven plagues and trumpets seem similar enough to suggest the possibility that they are actually describing the same tragedies. This view is solidified much further when examining their historical fulfillment over the latter half of the first century.

5. Tacitus, *The Histories* 5.13.

6. Wars 6.6.1.

7. Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* 3.48, 4.14; Tacitus, *The Histories* 4.62,1.41.

8. The beast of Revelation is a metaphor to describe an empire in the same way that the four beasts in Daniel 7 symbolized four great empires. The fourth beast was Rome. In Revelation 13, Rome is described in greater detail as a seven-headed dragon also known as a leviathan. The leviathan was a mythical seven-headed sea monster of ancient Canaanite lore. It is believed by some scholars that the myth of the leviathan may have given rise to the Greek myth of the hydra with its ability to grow back wounded heads. The seven heads of the leviathan represent seven Caesars. The sixth Caesar, Nero, killed himself in the middle of the Jewish War with Rome by stabbing himself in the neck; thus, Nero represents the wounded head of the beast in Revelation 13:3. At his death, Nero had not named his successor which left a power vacuum that pitted the Roman elite against each other in an epic succession struggle that seemed almost certain to topple the empire. During the year after Nero’s death, Rome was in the middle of two wars in addition to a three-way civil war which had left three dead Caesars in its wake. Ultimately control of

the empire rested on Caesar Vespasian, the lead general of the Roman army during the Jewish War. Shortly after Vespasian rose to power, Jerusalem fell and peace resumed throughout the empire. Rome miraculously had not fallen and was seemingly stronger than ever; therefore, Vespasian represents the healing of the sixth head of the beast.

9. The eastern gate of the temple was to remain shut at all times. The only time it was to be opened was when the prince would enter it to offer sacrifices in the temple. According to *Wars*, the gate of the temple was seen to have opened on its own accord during Passover. Josephus suggests that at the sixth hour of the night, the eastern gate of the temple opened on its own and at the ninth hour a light shone round the altar and the temple. So bright was this light that it appeared to be daytime in the city of Jerusalem. There are several interesting things to note about this miracle: First, Passover was the holiday in which Jesus was crucified. Furthermore, according to Matthew 27:45, during the crucifixion darkness was over the land from the sixth hour to the ninth hour of the day. Here thirty-three years later on the anniversary of Jesus' crucifixion, the opposite occurs: the eastern gate of the temple opened on the sixth hour of the night and at the ninth hour Jerusalem was bathed in a mysterious light so bright that it appeared to be daytime in the middle of the night. In this miracle, we find the literal fulfillment of Zechariah 14:7.

10. Matt 24:16-22.

11. Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 3.5.

12. Ephesians 6:12.

13 Tacitus, *The Histories* 5.13.

14. Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 5.10.5, 6.8.5.

15. Other than the Bar Kochba rebellion, a couple instances of

Roman persecution of Christians, and one or two brief skirmishes, Israel was peaceful and prosperous. Israel and especially Jerusalem was very wealthy and the standard of living was exceedingly good.

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Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles?

Former Probe intern Dr. Daniel Morais and Probe staffer Michael Gleghorn argue that Jesus' miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

What Do Modern Historians Think?

"I can believe Jesus was a great person, a great teacher. But I can't believe He performed miracles." Ever hear comments like this? Maybe you've wondered this yourself. Did Jesus really perform miracles?

Marcus Borg, a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar{1}, has stated, "Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist."{2} Commenting on Jesus' ability to heal the blind, deaf, and others, A. M. Hunter writes, "For these miracles the historical evidence is excellent."{3}

Critical historians once believed that the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible were purely the product of legendary embellishment. Such exaggerations about Jesus' life and deeds

developed from oral traditions which became more and more fantastic with time until they were finally recorded in the New Testament. We all know how tall tales develop. One person tells a story. Then another tells much the same story, but exaggerates it a bit. Over time the story becomes so fantastic that it barely resembles the original. This is what many scholars once believed happened to Jesus' life, as it's recorded in the Gospels. Is this true? And do most New Testament historians believe this today?

The answer is no. In light of the evidence for the historicity of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels, few scholars today would attempt to explain these events as purely the result of legend or myth. In fact, most New Testament scholars now believe that Jesus did in fact perform healings and exorcisms.{4} Even many liberal scholars would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal and "exorcise demons."{5} But because many of these liberal scholars don't believe in spiritual beings, they also don't believe that these healings should be attributed to the direct intervention of God in the world. Instead, they believe that Jesus' miracles and healings have a purely natural explanation. Many of them think that Jesus only healed psychosomatic maladies.{6} The term *psychosomatic* means mind-body, so psychosomatic maladies are mind-body problems. The mind can have a powerful impact on the health of the body. Under extreme distress people can become blind, deaf or even suffer paralysis. Since psychosomatic problems typically go away on their own, many liberal scholars think that faith in Jesus' ability to heal might help to heal some people suffering from these conditions. But is there good reason to believe that Jesus could cure real sicknesses?

Could These Miracles Be Legendary?

Often, historians who tried to explain away stories of Jesus' miracles as purely the result of legendary developments

believed that the “real” Jesus was little more than a good man and a wise teacher. The major problem with this theory is that legends take time to develop. Multiple generations would be needed for the true oral tradition regarding Jesus’ life to be replaced by an exaggerated, fictitious version. For example, many historians believe that Alexander the Great’s biography stayed fairly accurate for about five hundred years. Legendary details didn’t begin to develop until the following five hundred years.{7} A gross misrepresentation of Jesus’ life occurring one or two generations after his death is highly unlikely. Jesus was a very public figure. When He entered a town, He drew large crowds of people. Jesus is represented as a miracle worker at every level of the New Testament tradition. This includes not only the four Gospels, but also the hypothetical sayings source, called Q, which may have been written just a few years after Jesus’ death. Many eyewitnesses of Christ would still have been alive at the time these documents were composed. These eyewitnesses were the source of the oral tradition regarding Jesus’ life, and in light of his very public ministry, a strong oral tradition would be present in Israel for many years after his death.

If Jesus had never actually performed any miracles, then the Gospel writers would have faced a nearly impossible task in getting anyone to believe that He had. It would be like trying to change John F. Kennedy from a great president into an amazing miracle worker. Such a task would be virtually impossible since many of us have seen JFK on TV, read about him in the papers, or even seen him in person. Because he was a public figure, oral tradition about his life is very strong even today. Anyone trying to introduce this false idea would never be taken seriously.

During the second half of the first century, Christians faced intense persecution and even death. These people obviously took the disciples’ teaching about Jesus’ life seriously. They were willing to die for it. This only makes sense if the

disciples and the authors of the Gospels represented Jesus' life accurately. You can't easily pass off made-up stories about public figures when eyewitnesses are still alive who remember them. Oral tradition tends to remain fairly accurate for many generations after their deaths.{8}

In light of this, it's hard to deny that Jesus did in fact work wonders.

Conversion from Legend to Conversion Disorder

It might be surprising to hear that Jesus is believed by most New Testament historians to have been a successful healer and exorcist.{9} Since His miracles are the most conspicuous aspect of his ministry, the miracle tradition found in the Gospels could not be easily explained had their authors started with a Jesus who was simply a wise teacher. Prophets and teachers of the law were not traditionally made into miracle workers; there are almost no examples of this in the literature available to us.{10} It's especially unlikely that Jesus would be made into a miracle worker since many Jews didn't expect that the Messiah would perform miracles. The Gospel writers would not have felt the need to make this up were it not actually the case.{11}

Of course, most liberal scholars today don't believe Jesus could heal any real illnesses. But such conclusions are reached, not because of any evidence, but because of prior prejudices against the supernatural. Secular historians deny that Jesus cured any real, organic illnesses or performed any nature miracles such as walking on water.{12} They believe He could only heal *conversion disorders* or the symptoms associated with real illnesses.{13} Conversion disorder is a rare condition that afflicts approximately fourteen to twenty-two of every 100,000 people.{14} Conversion disorders are psychosomatic problems in which intense emotional trauma

results in blindness, paralysis, deafness, and other baffling impairments.

Many liberal scholars today would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal. But if Jesus could only cure conversion disorders, then it's unlikely He would have drawn such large crowds. As a practicing optometrist, I've seen thousands of patients with real vision loss due either to refractive problems or pathology. But only one of them could be diagnosed with blindness due to conversion disorder. Conversion disorders are rare. In order for Jesus to draw large crowds of people He would have had to be a successful healer. But if He could only heal conversion disorders, thousands of sick people would have had to be present for him to heal just one person. But how could He draw such large crowds if He could only heal one person in 10,000? Sick people would have often needed to travel many miles to see Jesus. Such limited ability to heal could hardly have motivated thousands of people to walk many miles to see Jesus, especially if they were sick and feeble. If Jesus was drawing large crowds, He must have been able to heal more than simply conversion disorders.

Did Jesus Raise the Dead?

"Did Jesus ever raise the dead? Is there any evidence to back this up?" Many secular historians, though agreeing that Jesus was a successful healer and exorcist, don't believe that He could perform nature miracles. Due to prior prejudices against the supernatural, these historians don't believe it's possible for anyone to raise the dead, walk on water, or heal true organic diseases. These historians believe Jesus' healings were primarily psychological in nature.{15} Is there any evidence that Jesus had the power to work actual miracles such as raising the dead?

Yes. It almost seems that the more fantastic the miracle, the

more evidence is available to support it. In fact, the most incredible miracle recorded in the Gospels is actually the one which has the greatest evidential support. This miracle is Jesus' resurrection.{16} Is there any reason to believe that Jesus may have raised others from the dead as well?

There is compelling evidence to believe that He did. In John 11 there's the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.{17} A careful reading of this text reveals many details that would be easy for anyone in the first century to confirm or deny. John records that Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha. He also says that this miracle took place in Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, and that Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. John's gospel is believed to have been written in AD 90, just sixty years after the events it records. It's possible that a few people who witnessed this event, or at least had heard of it, would still be alive to confirm it. If someone wanted to check this out, it would be easy to do. John says this took place in Bethany, and then He tells us the town's approximate location. All someone would have to do to check this out would be to go to Bethany and ask someone if Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had ever been raised from the dead. Villages were generally small in those days and people knew each other's business. Almost anyone in that town could easily confirm or deny whether they had ever heard of such an event. If John just made this story up, he probably wouldn't have included so much information that could be easily checked out by others to see if he was lying. Instead, he probably would have written a vague story about Jesus going to some unnamed town where He raised some unnamed person from the dead. This way no one could confirm or deny the event. John put these details in to show that he wasn't lying. He wanted people to investigate his story. He wanted people to go to Bethany, ask around, and see for themselves what really happened there.

What Did Jesus' Enemies Say?

"Sure, Jesus' followers believed He could work miracles. But what about his enemies, what did they say?" If Jesus never worked any miracles, we would expect ancient, hostile Jewish literature to state this fact. But does such literature deny Jesus' ability to work miracles? There are several unsympathetic references to Jesus in ancient Jewish and pagan literature as early as the second century AD. But none of the ancient Jewish sources deny Jesus' ability to perform miracles.{18} Instead, they try to explain these powers away by referring to him as a sorcerer.{19} If the historical Jesus were merely a wise teacher who only later, through legendary embellishments, came to be regarded as a miracle worker, there should have been a prominent Jewish oral tradition affirming this fact. This tradition would likely have survived among the Jews for hundreds of years in order to counter the claims of Christians who might use Jesus' miraculous powers as evidence of his divine status. But there's no evidence that any such Jewish tradition portrayed Jesus as merely a wise teacher. Many of these Jewish accounts are thought to have arisen from a separate oral tradition apart from that held by Christians, and yet both traditions agree on this point.{20} If it were known that Jesus had no special powers, these accounts would surely point that out rather than reluctantly affirm it. The Jews would likely have been uncomfortable with Jesus having miraculous powers since this could be used as evidence by his followers to support his self-proclaimed status as the unique Son of God (a position most Jews firmly denied). This is why Jesus' enemies tried to explain his powers away as sorcery.

Not only do these accounts affirm Jesus' supernatural abilities, they also seem to support the ability of his followers to heal in his name. In the Talmud, there's a story of a rabbi who is bitten by a venomous snake and calls on a Christian named Jacob to heal him. Unfortunately, before Jacob can get there, the rabbi dies.{21} Apparently, the rabbi

believed this Christian could heal him. Not only did Jews seem to recognize the ability of Christians to heal in Christ's name, but pagans did as well. The name of Christ has been found in many ancient pagan spells.{22} If even many non-Christians recognized that there was power to heal in Christ's name, there must have been some reason for it.

So, a powerful case can be made for the historicity of Jesus' miracles. Christians needn't view these miracles as merely symbolic stories intended to teach lessons. These miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

Notes

1. Gary R. Habermas, "Did Jesus Perform Miracles?," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus,* by eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 124.
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and The Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 61.
3. A.M. Hunter, *Jesus: Lord and Saviour* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 63.
4. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 124.
5. See Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision,* 60.
6. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 125.
7. Craig L. Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.
8. Grant R Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) 102, 103.
9. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 124, 125.
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21. Smith, *Jesus the Magician,* 63.
22. Ibid., 83.

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