Ransom and the Martial Spirit in “Perelandra”

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

In C. S. Lewis’s novel, *Perelandra*, the second book in what some have called the “Cosmic Trilogy,” Dr. Elwin Ransom is sent by God to the planet Venus on a mission of great importance.{1} Although Ransom has learned that dark spiritual powers on earth are plotting “some sort of attack on Perelandra” (or Venus), he doesn’t know precisely what he’s to do about it once he arrives, nor why he’s been chosen for such a venture.{2} But God knows, and he’s specially prepared Ransom for this mission (though this doesn’t mean it will be easy).{3}



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

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

The most important of these is probably that of dying to one’s

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

In the remainder of this article, we'll consider some of the key issues that Lewis explores in this novel, particularly as these concern the martial spirit in Ransom, who functions as God's representative in Perelandra.

Beauty and the Beast

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

After initially being deposited in the ocean of Perelandra, and then making his way to one of the many "floating islands" of that world, Ransom soon discovers that the planet is

replete with beauty and pleasure. The colors, the fragrances, the taste of the fruits—everything about the planet exudes beauty, wonder, joy, and pleasure.{11}

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

One day, while Ransom is conversing with the Green Lady, they see something "like a shooting star" race "across the sky" and fall into the ocean.{13} They later discover that Weston, the physicist who originally kidnapped Ransom and took him to Mars, has come to Perelandra on a spaceship.

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

Temptation

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

But there's a problem. Weston, a proud and arrogant scientist, has come to Perelandra at the behest of an evil spirit.

Shortly after landing on the planet, he is completely possessed by this spirit. Ransom, the hero of the story, now realizes that God has sent him to Perelandra in order to prevent the planet's first couple from falling into the same disobedience as our first parents.

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

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

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

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

God's will, fight the Un-man, and attempt to rid this beautiful world of its evil invader.{19}

Holy War

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

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

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

The battle begins the next morning and Ransom gets an initial victory. The Un-Man flees, Ransom pursues, and they eventually end up in a large, dark, underground cavern. Although it's too

dark to see, Ransom finally believes that he has killed the Un-Man and he sets off to find his way out of the darkness. Unfortunately, however, the demonic spirit reanimates Weston's corpse and pursues him. As the Un-Man comes up out of a tunnel, Ransom confronts him, crushes his head with a large stone, and pushes the corpse over a ledge into a "sea of fire" below.{21} Here Lewis probably intends an allusion to the biblical "lake of fire," into which the devil and his "offspring" are ultimately cast (Revelation 20:10-15). Ransom, imbued with the martial spirit, has been victorious, and the evil which had invaded Perelandra has been defeated.

Ransom as a Christ-Figure

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

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

Here we see Ransom emerge from his martial victory over the Un-man as a type of Christ. Those familiar with the Bible will recall Genesis 3:15, in which the Lord tells the serpent, who led Adam and Eve into disobedience, that He will put "enmity"

between the serpent and *his* offspring and the woman and *her* offspring. “He shall bruise your head,” God tells the serpent, “and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

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

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

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965). “Cosmic Trilogy” is the terminology used by Michael Ward in “Voyage to Venus: Lewis’s Imaginative Path to Perelandra,” in *C. S. Lewis’s Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*. ed. Judith Wolfe and Brendan Wolfe (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2013), 28.
2. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 23.
3. The idea for investigating Ransom and the “martial spirit” in Perelandra is indebted to the work of Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader’s Guide to C. S. Lewis’s Ransom Trilogy* (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2020), particularly pp. 70-76.
4. See Michael Gleghorn, “Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet,” Probe Ministries, 29 October 2023 probe.org/smuggling-theology-into-out-of-the-silent-

planet/).
5. See Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 76.
6. See C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: NY: Macmillan, 1962), 90-92.
7. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 21.
8. I borrow this insight from Tami Van Optal's insightful essay, "Perelandran Diction: A Study in Meaning," in *C. S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*, 112.
9. See Gleghorn, "Smuggling Theology."
10. See the brief discussion of these planets in *C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1964), 106-07.
11. Lewis, *Perelandra*, 37.
12. Ibid., 55.
13. Ibid., 76.
14. Ibid., 96.
15. Ibid., 111-12.
16. Ibid., 74.
17. Ibid., 131-34.
18. Ibid., 143-47.
19. Ibid., 146-50.
20. Ibid., 144.
21. Ibid., 182. Note: the content mentioned in this brief paragraph is covered in the novel on pp. 151-82.
22. Ibid., 182-85. See also the discussion in Bruce R. Johnson's essay, "Frightful Freedom: Perelandra as Imaginative Theodicy," in *C. S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*, 140.
23. Ibid., 185.
24. Ibid., 187.

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Smuggling Theology Into "Out of the Silent Planet"

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

Out of the Silent Planet, C.S. Lewis' first foray into the science-fiction genre, was originally published in 1938.{1} Lewis, who appreciated the science-fiction stories of authors like H. G. Wells, was nonetheless troubled by elements in these stories that were morally and intellectually objectionable. According to Alister McGrath, Lewis realized "that the forms of science fiction . . . used to promote various forms of atheism and materialism could . . . be used to *critique* these viewpoints and advocate an alternative."{2} This is what Lewis *did* in *Out of the Silent Planet*—and what he *continued* to do in two follow-up books: *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength.* Together, these books are commonly known as "the Space Trilogy."



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

On their way to Mars (known as Malacandra to its own inhabitants), Ransom learns that his life may be in danger once they reach the planet. Hence, shortly after their

arrival, Ransom escapes his kidnappers and ends up meeting a creature called a Hross, one of the planet's native inhabitants. He soon discovers that, much like himself, these are intelligent and moral beings. Indeed, in some ways they, along with the other intelligent species on the planet, are superior to human beings, for they have not been infected with the same moral illness that plagues our own species. Eventually, Ransom even meets the designated ruler of the planet, a spiritual intelligence referred to as an Oyarsa. He then learns why earth is known as "the silent planet."{3}

After publishing the book, Lewis confided to one interested correspondent that most of the early reviews had completely missed of Christian theology that he had woven into his narrative. He humorously noted that, apparently, "any amount of theology can now be smuggled into" such a book without anyone's even noticing.{4} So how much theology did Lewis "smuggle into" *Out of the Silent Planet*? That's what we'll discuss in the remainder of this article.

The Heavens Declare the Glory

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

Ransom is here reflecting upon the words of King David in Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." As one commentator remarks,

“David was moved by observing that the heavens, under the dominating influence of the sun, declare the splendor of God’s handiwork.”{6} The reference to the sun here is apt, for it is largely through the influence of the solar rays that Ransom feels “his body and mind daily rubbed and scoured and filled with new vitality.”{7}

Of course, we must remember that Lewis is here writing science *fiction*—and not science fact. While “the substitution of heaven for space” was Lewis’s “favorite idea in the book,” he also acknowledged “that the rays in interplanetary space, so far from being beneficial,” would actually be harmful to us.{8} But Lewis was attempting to reintroduce a conception of wonder and beauty into the world. He wanted to move his readers’ understanding of “space” from something merely cold, dark, and dead, to a conception of the “heavens” as something radiant and alive with the goodness and bounty of their Creator. And this, in the fictional (and even mythological) world of the story, he has arguably achieved.

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

War in Heaven

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

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

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

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

War on Earth

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

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

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

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

birth, death, and resurrection of the Son of God."{14}

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

Divine Providence and the Martial Spirit

Although God, who is known as Maleldil in the novel, is mentioned repeatedly, He is always mentioned in the third person. We hear about things that Maleldil *has done*, *is doing*, or may one day *do*, but we do not hear directly from God (or Maleldil) himself. Nevertheless, it is clear that He is ultimately in charge, and He is providentially at work in and through His creatures.{15}

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

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

for Ransom to make this journey. We might even guess that one of the purposes of this journey was to develop the "martial spirit" in Ransom himself.

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

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965).
2. Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
3. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
4. C. S. Lewis to Sister Penelope CSMV, August 9, 1939, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 262.
5. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 32.
6. Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*. ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1985), 807.
7. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 31-32.
8. C. S. Lewis to Mrs. Stuart Moore (Evelyn Underhill), October 29, 1938, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed.

Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 233-34.
9. See Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
10. See Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
11. All quotations in the paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.
12. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.
13. Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2020), 155.
14. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 88.
15. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 67-8.
16. Ibid., 121.
17. Ibid.
18. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 70.

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The All-Present God

"As Charles Haddon Spurgeon once observed, there are very few things as uplifting for the heart and the mind as a serious study of the being and attributes of God. Hopefully, this little article on God's omnipresence will encourage some others to take up such studies for themselves. They won't be disappointed." —Dr. Michael Gleghorn

Introduction



We can never get away from God. To some, this is quite threatening. To others, it is merely irritating or annoying. But for those who know and love God, it is deeply comforting and consoling, for it means that we are never alone.

In this article, I want to discuss an attribute of God that is often referred to as *omnipresence*. It's a big word, but all it means is that God is present everywhere. It was while meditating on this attribute that David was led to pen the oft-quoted verses of Psalm 139:

> Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (vv. 7-10).{1}

Clearly David took comfort in the fact that he could never get away from God, that there was nowhere he could go where God was not.

In a similar manner, King Solomon also spoke of God's omnipresence in his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. He said, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Here, Solomon recognizes that unlike human beings, God's presence cannot be localized to merely one place on the earth. Indeed, the universe itself is not sufficient to contain the being of its Creator!

So how is the doctrine that God is everywhere present to be understood? And what practical applications might this have

for our lives?

To begin, it is helpful to observe that just as the doctrine of God's eternity attempts to explain how God is related to time, the doctrine of omnipresence attempts to explain how He is related to space. Does God completely transcend space? That is, might He exist completely "outside" or "beyond" our spatial universe in some sense? Or is it better to think of Him as existing everywhere throughout all space? Then again, could it be the case that He somehow exists both within *and* beyond the created order? Obviously, these are deep and difficult questions. But since thinking through such things is part of what it means to love God with our minds, let us ponder these matters as carefully as we can (Mark 12:30).

God and Space

Other Scriptures certainly seem to affirm God's omnipresence. God asks the prophet Jeremiah, "Am I only a God nearby . . . and not a God far away? . . . . Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (23:23-24). Here the Lord affirms that He is present everywhere, that there is nowhere in heaven and earth where He is not. But how should we understand this?

Should we think of God as "spread out" through the universe like an invisible gas? Although this might be the mental image which most naturally suggests itself to our minds, we should carefully avoid embracing it. After all, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). And a spirit, unlike a gas, is a *non-physical* entity.{2} If we think of God as being spread throughout the universe like an invisible gas, then we might be tempted to think of God as only *partially present* at any one place. For instance, we might come to believe that there is a small amount of God in our bedroom, even more of Him throughout our house, and more still in the three-mile radius around our house. And this, I'm sure you would agree, is crazy!{3} We *don't* want to think of God's omnipresence in *these* terms.

Instead, if we want to think of God as existing everywhere in space (and many theologians would caution us against this), then we ought to think of Him as being *fully present* at every point of space *at the same time*. Now admittedly, this is a difficult concept to grasp. But an analogy may help to clarify the point.

A number of Christian theologians and philosophers have suggested that we should think of God's relationship to the world as similar to the soul's relationship to the body. On one construal of this view, the soul is held to be "spatially present in the body," but "not extended throughout it." Instead, it's thought to be "somehow wholly present at all points in its body." In a similar way, it is said, we can also think of God as being "spatially located in the universe" and yet "wholly present at every point in it."{4}

Of course, it must be emphasized that this is *only* an analogy. I'm certainly *not* suggesting that the world really *is* God's body!{5} The analogy is intended simply to help us understand *one way* in which God might be thought of as omnipresent. But it's not the only way.

God and Spacelessness{6}

Many Christian philosophers do not believe that we should think of God as *literally present in space*. Instead, they believe that God completely transcends space, existing "beyond" or "outside" the spatial universe which we inhabit. But if this is so, then how do they think the doctrine of God's omnipresence should be understood? Moreover, *why* do they believe that God is not present in space?

Let's take the second question first. Why think that God isn't present in space? Well, say these thinkers, consider the doctrine of creation. God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or "out of nothing." Literally nothing existed (except God) "before" He brought the universe into being.{7} In other

words, prior to creation, not even space existed. Rather, space is brought into being by God at the moment of creation.{8} But if God does not exist in space *prior* to creating the universe, then why should we think that He is located in space *after* bringing the universe into being? According to this view, there just isn't any good reason for thinking that He is.

But wait a minute! If God isn't located in space, then how can it still be said that He's present everywhere? Doesn't this amount to a denial of God's omnipresence? According to proponents of this view, we should understand God's omnipresence to mean that He both *knows* what is happening everywhere in space and that He is *active* at every point in space.{9} In other words, God not only knows what is happening everywhere on earth, He also knows what is happening elsewhere in our solar system and in every galaxy of the universe. Moreover, He is continually exercising His power to sustain the universe in being and He is able to act anywhere He desires throughout this vast cosmos which He has created. Hence, even if God is not *literally* present in space, advocates of this view still insist that He both knows what is happening and is able to exercise His power anywhere in the world at any time He chooses.

Having now considered the two major views regarding how we should understand the doctrine of God's omnipresence, we'll briefly look at some of the difficulties that are raised by this doctrine.

Difficulties with Omnipresence

Recall how David in Psalm 139 affirms that there is nowhere he can flee from God's presence, for God is present everywhere. But this raises a difficulty, for elsewhere in the Bible David says something which seems to directly contradict this sentiment.

Pursued by Saul in the Desert of Ziph, David, who had the opportunity to kill Saul but humbly refused, pleaded with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord" (1 Sam. 26:20). But wait a minute! If God is present everywhere, as David elsewhere affirms, then what sense does it make to speak of dying far from the presence of the Lord? How can one be far from the presence of the Lord if the Lord is present everywhere?

It seems to me that the best way of handling these difficulties is to make an important distinction regarding the *way* in which God is everywhere present. What I mean is this. Although God is present everywhere, He is *uniquely present* at certain times and places when He desires to reveal Himself in some special way.

The best example of this is the unique incarnation of God the Son in the man Christ Jesus. Jesus was one person with two natures, one divine and one human. According to His divine nature, He remained omnipresent even during His time on earth. Yet in his human nature, Jesus was limited (like all other men) to a particular time and place. And it was in this more limited sense that God specially chose to reveal Himself to us. Hence, in the Gospel of John we learn that God's grace and truth, His love and salvation, His blessing and glory, are all uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.{10}

In a similar way, concerning the example of David above, we can say that while God was certainly present in the Desert of Ziph, He had chosen to specially reveal Himself to the people of Israel. He was thus present to the people of Israel in a way that He was not present to the other nations. It is in this sense that David pleads with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord."

The Importance of Omnipresence

Let's think about this in terms of a "good news/bad news"

approach, beginning with the “bad news” first. Although God’s omnipresence, considered in itself, is really only good news, there is certainly a sense in which sinful men and women, much like you and me, might be tempted to regard this doctrine as bad news. Why is that?

Well, if God is always present, then like it or not, every evil thought, word, or deed that we think, say, or do is always done directly in His presence! That’s a sobering thought, isn’t it? There is literally *nothing* that we can ever do in a hidden or secret way. Whenever we lie or steal, commit adultery or take God’s name in vain, we do so in the presence of the God to whom we are all ultimately accountable. Indeed, Jesus warned that on the day of judgment we will even have to give an account for every “careless word” which we have spoken (Matt. 12:36)! This, at least for sinners like ourselves, is what we might call the bad news of God’s omnipresence.

But as I said previously, the reality is that God’s omnipresence is actually very good news. For it means that no matter what our circumstances, God is always present! When we’re anxious or scared, God is there. When we’re under pressure at work or having difficulties in a relationship, God is there. Yes; even if we’re sick or dying, God is present then, too. David wrote in the Psalms, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). For the one who’s been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the fact that God is always present is very “good news” indeed!

I hope you can see that the doctrine of God’s omnipresence is not just an interesting issue for philosophers and theologians to ponder (although it is certainly that). It’s also an extremely practical doctrine that is highly relevant to almost every aspect of our lives. For wherever we go, whatever joys we encounter or difficulties we face, God is there. And for the Christian, He is present as our Protector, Savior,

Counselor, and Friend!

Notes

1. All Scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.
2. See, for example, Jesus' remarks in Luke 24:39: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."
3. I got this insight from William Lane Craig, "Doctrine of God," Part 8 [Podcast] (accessed August 2010), available from http://bit.ly/9ruR74.
4. These quotations come from the discussion in J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 509-10.
5. Of course, some theologians (e.g., Process theologians) *do* believe that the universe is God's body. According to them, God is like the soul of the world (which is His body). This view is usually termed *panentheism*, which is not the same as pantheism.
6. This section is particularly indebted to the discussion of omnipresence in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 509-11.
7. I put "before" in quotation marks since, if God is timeless without creation, there really isn't literally any temporal moment "before" God brings the universe into being. The universe, along with time itself, simply has its beginning at the moment of creation. Nevertheless, for the purpose of communicating to our radio audience in the limited amount of time available, it is much easier to simply say "before" creation.
8. Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 510.
9. Ibid., 510-11.
10. In this regard, please see John 1:1, 14-18; 3:16-21.

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UFOs and Alien Beings – A Christian Worldview Response

Michael Gleghorn addresses issues related to reports of UFO and alien sightings. He considers the various possible causes before closing with a biblical, Christian perspective pointing out these reports are often presented like false gospels. At the end of the day, even an alien cannot take away from the importance of faith in Christ.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

A Tale of Two Hypotheses

It seems that almost everyone is interested in reports of UFOs and alien encounters. But how should these reports be understood? Where do these "unidentified flying objects" come from and what are they? Are intelligent beings visiting us from another planet or some other dimension? Or are UFO reports merely a collection of hoaxes, hallucinations, and misidentified phenomena? Can all UFO reports be adequately explained, or are there some that seem to defy all natural explanations? These are just a few of the questions we want to consider in this article.

First, however, it's essential to note that most UFOs (unidentified flying objects) become IFOs (identified flying objects). John Spencer, a British UFO researcher, estimates that as many as 95 percent of received UFO reports "are turned into IFOs and explained satisfactorily."{1} For example, the report might be found to have been a clever prank or to have some natural explanation. Planets, comets, military aircraft, and rockets (among many others) have all been mistaken for

UFOs. But even if 99 percent of UFO reports could be satisfactorily explained, there would still be thousands of cases that stubbornly resist all natural explanations. These are called *residual* UFO reports.

If residual UFOs are not hoaxes, hallucinations, or some natural or man-made phenomena, then what are they? Most UFO researchers hold either to the extraterrestrial hypothesis or the interdimensional hypothesis. The extraterrestrial hypothesis holds that technologically advanced, interplanetary space travelers are indeed visiting our planet from somewhere else in the cosmos. Stanton Friedman, a representative of this view, states clearly, "The evidence is overwhelming that some UFOs are alien spacecraft."{2}

The interdimensional hypothesis agrees "that some UFOs are real phenomena that may exhibit physical . . . effects."{3} However, unlike the extraterrestrial hypothesis, this view does not believe that UFOs and alien beings come from somewhere else in our physical universe. So where *do* they come from? Some suggest that they come from some other universe of space and time. But others believe that they come from some other dimension entirely, perhaps a spiritual realm.{4}

How might we tell which, if either, of these two hypotheses is correct? Astronomer and Christian apologist Dr. Hugh Ross suggests that we employ the scientific approach known as the "process of elimination." He writes, "Mechanics use it to find out why the car won't start. Doctors use it to find out why the stomach hurts. Detectives use it to find out who stole the cash. This process can also be used to discover what could, or could not, possibly give rise to UFO phenomena."{5}

So what happens if we apply this process to the extraterrestrial hypothesis? Although quite popular here in America, there are some serious scientific objections to this viewpoint.

The Extraterrestrial Hypothesis

In the first place, it is highly improbable that there is another planet in our cosmos capable of supporting physical life. Dr. Ross has calculated the probability of such a planet existing by natural processes alone as less than 1 in 10^{174}. You actually have "a much higher probability of being killed in the next second by a failure in the second law of thermodynamics (about one chance in 10^{80})."{6} Thus, apart from the supernatural creation of another suitable place for life, our planet is almost certainly unique in its capacity to support complex biological organisms. (See the Probe article "Are We Alone in the Universe?") This alone makes the extraterrestrial hypothesis extremely improbable. But it gets even worse!

Suppose (against all statistical probability) that there *is* a planet with intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. What is the likelihood that such creatures are visiting our planet? And what sort of difficulties would they face in doing so?

Probably the greatest challenge to interstellar space travel is simply the immense size of the universe. One group of scientists, assuming that any alien spacecraft would likely maintain communication with either the home planet or with other members of their traveling party, "scanned all 202 of the roughly solar-type stars within 155 light-years of Earth. Not one intelligible signal was detected anywhere within the vicinity of these stars."{7} This implies that, at a minimum, E.T. would have to travel 155 light-years just to reach earth. Unfortunately, numerous galactic hazards would prevent traveling here in a straight line. Avoiding these deadly hazards would increase the minimum travel distance to approximately 230 light-years.{8}

Dr. Ross estimates that "any reasonably-sized spacecraft transporting intelligent physical beings can travel at

velocities no greater than about 1 percent" of light-speed.{9} Although this is nearly 7 million miles per hour, it would still take about twenty-three thousand years to travel the 230 light-years to earth! Of course, a lot can go wrong in twenty-three thousand years. The aliens might run out of food or fuel. Their spacecraft might be damaged beyond repair by space debris. They might be destroyed by a contagious epidemic. The mind reels at the overwhelming improbability of successfully completing such a multi-generational mission.

In light of these facts, it doesn't appear that the extraterrestrial hypothesis can reasonably survive the process of elimination. Does the interdimensional hypothesis fare any better? A growing number of serious UFO researchers believe it can. Let's take a look.

The Interdimensional Hypothesis

The interdimensional hypothesis holds that residual UFOs "enter the physical dimensions of the universe from 'outside' the four familiar dimensions of length, height, width, and time."{10} Where do they come from? Some believe that they come from another physical universe of space and time. But this does not seem possible. General relativity forbids "the space-time dimensions of any other hypothetically existing universe" from overlapping with our own.{11} For this reason, many researchers believe that residual UFOs must come from some other dimension entirely, perhaps even a spiritual realm.

What evidence can be offered for such a bold hypothesis? Many point to the strange behavior of residual UFOs themselves. Hugh Ross contends that residual UFOs "must be nonphysical because they disobey firmly established physical laws."{12} Among the many examples that he offers in support of this statement, consider the following:{13}

1. Residual UFOs generate no sonic booms when they break the sound barrier, nor do they show any evidence of

meeting with air resistance.
2. They make impossibly sharp turns and sudden stops.
3. They send no detectable electromagnetic signals.

For example, “relative to the number of potential observers, ten times as many sightings occur at 3:00 A.M (a time when few people are out) as at either 6:00 A.M. or 8:00 P.M. (times when many people are outside in the dark).”{14} If residual UFOs were simply random events, then we would expect more sightings when there are more potential observers. The fact that these events are nonrandom may suggest some sort of intelligence behind them. This is further supported by the fact that some people are more likely to see a residual UFO than others. Numerous researchers have observed a correlation between an individual’s involvement with the occult and their likelihood of having a residual UFO encounter. This may also suggest some kind of intelligence behind these phenomena.

Finally, residual UFOs not only appear to be nonphysical and intelligent, they sometimes seem malevolent as well. Many of those claiming to have had a residual UFO encounter have suffered emotional, psychological, and/or physical injury. A few people have even died after such encounters. In light of these strange characteristics, many researchers have reached similar conclusions about the possible source of these phenomena.

The Occult Connection

Many serious UFO investigators have noticed a striking similarity between some of the aliens described in UFO reports and the demonic spirits described in the Bible. Although it may not be possible to know whether some aliens are actually demons (and I certainly do not claim to know this myself), the well-documented connection between UFO phenomena and the occult cannot be denied.

In 1969 Lynn Catoe served as the senior bibliographer of a

publication on UFOs researched by the Library of Congress for the U.S. Air Force Office of Scientific Research. After a two-year investigation, in which she surveyed thousands of documents, she drew explicit attention to the link between UFOs and the occult. She wrote, "A large part of the available UFO literature . . . deals with subjects like mental telepathy, automatic writing and invisible entities . . . poltergeist manifestations and 'possession.' Many . . . UFO reports . . . recount alleged incidents that are strikingly similar to demonic possession and psychic phenomena."{15} Veteran UFO researcher John Keel agrees. After surveying the literature on demonology he wrote, "The manifestations and occurrences described in this imposing literature are similar if not entirely identical to the UFO phenomenon itself."{16} The bizarre claim of alien abduction may lend some credibility to these remarks.

Many (though not all) of those who report an abduction experience describe the aliens as deceptive and hostile. Whitley Strieber, whose occult involvement preceded the writing of both *Communion* and *Transformation*, at times explicitly referred to his alien visitors as "demons." For example, in *Transformation* he described his emotional reaction to the aliens with these words: "I felt an absolutely indescribable sense of menace. It was hell on earth to be there, and yet I couldn't move, couldn't cry out, couldn't get away . . . Whatever was there seemed so monstrously ugly, so filthy and dark and sinister. Of course they were demons. They had to be. And they were here and I couldn't get away."{17}

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that abduction is often physically and emotionally painful, Mr. Strieber tends to believe that its purpose is ultimately benevolent. When integrated correctly, the abduction experience can provide a catalyst for spiritual growth and development. Still, he candidly admits that he is really not sure precisely *who* or *what* these beings actually are, and he continues to warn that

many of them are indeed hostile and malevolent.{18} In light of this, one can't help wondering about the experiences related in Mr. Strieber's books. If his encounters with aliens were not merely hallucinatory, or due to some mental disorder, isn't it at least possible that his sinister visitors really were demons? As noted above, many UFO investigators would indeed consider this (or something very much like it) a genuine possibility.

Another Gospel?

In his letter to the Galatians the Apostle Paul delivered a stirring indictment against every gospel but that of Christ. "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (1:8-9). Evidently, the purity of the gospel was deeply important to Paul.

In today's pluralistic society a variety of gospels are being preached. And among the great throng of voices clamoring for our attention are many UFO cults. Since the 1950s a number of these cults have arisen, often around a charismatic leader who claims to be in regular contact with otherworldly beings. Interestingly, unlike the abduction phenomenon, most contactees do not claim to have ever seen the aliens with whom they communicate. Rather, they claim that the aliens communicate with them psychically or telepathically. The contactee is simply a channel, or medium, through whom the aliens communicate their messages to humankind. This method of contact is rather intriguing for those who favor the interdimensional hypothesis. As John Saliba observes, "Many contactees . . . write about UFOs and space beings as if these were psychic phenomena, belonging to a different time/space dimension that lies beyond the scope . . . of modern science."{19}

So what sort of messages do the aliens allegedly communicate to contactees? Often they want to help guide us to the next stage of our spiritual evolution or give us advice that will help us avoid some global catastrophe. Strangely, however, many of them also want to deny or distort traditional doctrines of biblical Christianity. Oftentimes these denials and distortions concern the doctrine of Christ. For example, the Aetherius Society "views Jesus Christ as an advanced alien being . . . who communicates through a channel and travels to Earth in a flying saucer to protect Earth from evil forces."{20} As a general rule, "UFO religions . . . reject orthodox Christology (Jesus' identity as both God and man) and thus reject Jesus Christ as the . . . Creator and . . . Savior of humankind."{21}

A deficient Christology, combined with an acceptance of biblically forbidden occult practices like mediumistic channeling (see Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:10-12; etc.), make many UFO cults spiritually dangerous. By preaching a false gospel, they have (perhaps unwittingly) placed themselves under a divine curse. By embracing occult practices, they have opened the door to potential demonic attack and deception. Nevertheless, there is hope for those involved with these cults. There is even hope for those tormented by hostile beings claiming to be aliens. The Bible tells us that through His work on the cross, Jesus disarmed the demonic rulers and authorities (Col. 2:15). What's more, for those who flee to Him for refuge, He makes available the "full armor of God," that they might "stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Eph. 6:11). Regardless of *who* or *what* these alien beings might be, no one need live in fear of them. If Jesus has triumphed over the realm of evil demonic spirits, then certainly no alien can stand against Him. Let those who live in fear turn to Jesus, for He offers rest to all who are weary and heavy-laden (Matt. 11:28).

Notes

1. John Spencer, ed., *The UFO Encyclopedia* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), s.v. "identified flying objects (IFOs)," cited in Hugh Ross, Kenneth Samples, and Mark Clark, *Lights in the Sky & Little Green Men* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002), 25.
2. Jerome Clark, *The UFO Encyclopedia,* 2d ed., vol. 1 (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1998), s.v. "Friedman, Stanton Terry," cited in Ross, et al., *Lights in the Sky,* 31.
3. Ross, et al., 32.
4. Ibid., 109.
5. Ibid., 34.
6. Ibid., 39.
7. Ibid., 57.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 59.
10. Ibid., 109.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 69.
13. Ibid., 69-70.
14. Ibid., 116.
15. Lynn Catoe, *UFOs and Related Subjects: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. iv (prepared under Air Force Office of Scientific Research Project Order 67-0002 and 68-0003), cited in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on UFO's and Other Supernatural Phenomena* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1992), 17.
16. John A. Keel, *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (New York: Putnam's, 1970), p. 215; cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *The Facts on UFO's*, 18.
17. Whitley Strieber, *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Morrow, 1988), p. 181; cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *The Facts on UFO's,* 23.
18. For example, his recent online journal entry, "How We Can Protect Ourselves," (Aug. 28, 2003) at www.unknowncountry.com/journal/. 19. John A. Saliba, "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," in *The Gods Have*

Landed, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 25; cited in Ross, et al., *Lights in the Sky,* 145.
20. Ross, et al., *Lights in the Sky,* 150.
21. Ibid., 164.

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C. S. Lewis and the Oxford Socratic Club

Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains how C.S. Lewis's pivotal role in this debate club shaped his huge contribution to Christian thought.

The Origins of the Oxford Socratic Club



In our day C. S. Lewis is probably best known as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, as well as several important popular-level works of Christian apologetics. Yet he was also a formidable speaker and debater. He loved the dynamic "back-and-forth" of intellectual engagement with others over interesting and substantive issues. One of the most important outlets for this aspect of Lewis's personality was the Oxford Socratic Club. For about thirteen years, from 1942 to 1954, Lewis served as the first president of this club. The significance of Lewis's contribution to its success can scarcely be overestimated. According to Christopher Mitchell, "no other activity that Lewis engaged in has proven more beneficial and far-reaching in its influence on Christianity than his participation in the

Socratic Club."{1}

So what was the Oxford Socratic Club, why was it started, and what role did Lewis play in it? According to Walter Hooper, it was in late 1941 that a female undergraduate student at Somerville College in Oxford complained to Miss Stella Aldwinkle about the lack of any clubs for the serious discussion of "questions agnostics raised about God."{2} Now Miss Aldwinkle was a force to be reckoned with. Having recently joined the Oxford pastoral staff, she immediately posted a notice on the Somerville college notice-boards inviting "all atheists, agnostics, and those disillusioned about religion" to meet and discuss the issue.{3}

The meeting was well-attended, and many good questions were asked. It was soon decided "that what was needed was an open forum for the discussion of the intellectual difficulties connected with religion in general and with Christianity in particular."{4} The formation of an official university club, however, would require a president. After much consideration, Miss Aldwinkle wrote to C. S. Lewis about the issue. Lewis had already published several well-received books by this time and, according to Hooper, "was on the eve of becoming the most popular lay theologian in England."{5} Upon receiving her letter, Lewis immediately responded by return mail saying, "This club is long overdue! Come to coffee in my rooms on Tuesday, and we can talk it over."{6}

After meeting with Miss Aldwinkle, Lewis accepted the position as president and the Oxford Socratic Club was officially founded "shortly before Christmas of 1941."{7} In January 1942, the club held its first official meeting.

Lewis's Vision for the Oxford Socratic Club

Imagine for a moment a weekly meeting where "atheists,

agnostics, and those disillusioned about religion”{8} could come together with intelligent Christians to discuss and debate their concerns about the claims of Christianity. This, it turns out, is largely what the Oxford Socratic Club became, under the able leadership of C. S. Lewis and Stella Aldwinkle. From its beginning in 1942, Lewis was excited about the club, and in his Preface to the first edition of the *Socratic Digest* he set forth his vision for the club’s purpose and goals.

According to Lewis, “Socrates had exhorted men to ‘follow the argument wherever it led them’: the club came into existence to apply his principle to one particular subject-matter—the *pros* and *cons* of the Christian religion.”{9} Lewis noted the uniqueness of the club, observing that, so far as he knew, no other society “had ever before been formed for such a purpose.” He stressed the value of the club as a place where people could hear the very best arguments and evidence available, discussed in a civil manner by sincere advocates for the various positions.

Making use of gladiatorial imagery, Lewis went on to describe the club as an “arena” in which the contestants met to engage in intellectual battle. Indeed, he said, “It was the Christians who constructed the arena and issued the challenge.”{10} He admitted that those who founded the club were not “neutral” about the great issues which they regularly met to consider. But he claimed that argument itself is impartial: “It has a life of its own,” he noted. “No man can tell where it will go.” And all who entered that arena met to face one another in honest (and sometimes passionate) argument.

The club’s committee did their best to find intelligent atheists, agnostics, and others to come and address the club. According to Hooper, “it was the practice of the club to have two speakers at each meeting.” The first speaker would read a paper and the second would offer a reply. At that point, the meeting would be “thrown open to general discussion.” An

effort was also made to keep everything fair, so if the first speaker was a Christian, an atheist or agnostic would be asked to respond (and *vice-versa*).{11} As one might expect, this format regularly resulted in some "bang-up" discussions about some of the most important issues of the day that had bearing upon the Christian faith.

Lewis as Speaker at the Oxford Socratic Club

By all accounts C. S. Lewis was a very gifted speaker. He had a deep sonorous voice and an impressive ability to make even the most difficult topics readily accessible. He is said to have always had just the right word at his disposal, and his ability to illustrate his points with nearly perfectly chosen analogies and examples from everyday life and experience was remarkable.{12}

The Oxford Socratic Club was originally founded near the end of 1941 and began meeting early in 1942. Although Lewis had accepted the position as president of the club, and although he held this position for about thirteen years, Hooper notes that Lewis was the primary speaker "on only eleven occasions" during that time.{13}

But Lewis made much of those occasions, using his considerable speaking gifts as a Christian scholar to address a wide variety of issues during his tenure as president of the Socratic Club. For example, he spoke on "Christianity and Aesthetics," which probably dealt, in some form or fashion, with a Christian perspective on the nature of beauty, art and literature. He also spoke about issues surrounding ethics and Christian doctrine, science and miracles, the nature of argument, theology and poetry, the doctrine of the resurrection, the nature of reason, the importance of religious doctrine, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, and the nature of faith and evidence.{14}

To offer just one example, on February 8, 1943, Lewis read a paper with the title, "If We Have Christ's Ethics, Does the Rest of the Christian Faith Matter?"{15} Lewis began by observing the great commonality in the moral values and duties endorsed by virtually all civilizations and cultures throughout history. The upshot of this is that "Christian moral principles" are substantially the same as all other "moral principles." He then noted that in spite of such agreement about these principles, humanity is plagued by a universal inability to consistently put them into practice. He concluded by arguing that it is "the rest of the Christian faith" that tells us how we might practice, rather than simply discuss and debate, the moral duties we all recognize as objectively binding.

Clearly Lewis was a gifted speaker. But even when he was not the primary speaker for the evening, he was still an important participant at the Oxford Socratic Club.

Lewis as Participant at the Oxford Socratic Club

If you like a good debate, you would have loved the Oxford Socratic Club. C. S. Lewis served as its first president from 1942 to 1954. Wanting to make room for others, he was the primary speaker only eleven times during those years.{16} But even when he was not the primary speaker, Lewis often played an important role at the meetings. Indeed, as president, he was often asked to offer the first response to whoever had addressed the assembly that evening.

Lewis relished the opportunity to engage with others over the intellectual challenges to Christianity. According to Christopher Mitchell, visiting speakers "typically viewed Lewis as a fearless and formidable opponent, yet equally 'generous' in argument. He was admired for the intellectual rigor he brought to each topic . . . and was known both for

his ‘courage’ and ‘open-mindedness.’”{17}

By far the most famous encounter between Lewis and a visiting speaker occurred in 1948, when Lewis squared off against the young Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. Anscombe read a paper criticizing Lewis’s argument against Naturalism, which had been published the previous year in his book, *Miracles.* Lewis had argued that Naturalism could not possibly be true because it claimed that human reason had arisen through a purposeless and unguided series of “irrational” physical causes. But if this were so, claimed Lewis, if reason was really a product of “irrational causes,” then we could have no good reason for believing its conclusions to be true—and hence, no good reason for believing its conclusions about Naturalism to be true.{18}

In response, Anscombe claimed that an important distinction must be observed between the “grounds” or “reasons” for a person’s belief, and the physical “causes” leading up to that belief. She said that “if a man has reasons, and they are good reasons, and they are genuinely his reasons, for thinking something—then his thought is rational, whatever causal statements we make about him.”{19} Although some took Lewis’s side in the debate that evening, and others sided with Anscombe, a story arose that Lewis was subsequently discouraged by this encounter.

Whatever the truth might be, Lewis later revised the chapter in *Miracles* that Anscombe had criticized. And though she still had criticisms of the chapter, she also thought it superior to the original version and appreciated Lewis’s “honesty and seriousness” in so revising it.{20}

The Importance of the Oxford Socratic Club

Would you value a club whose purpose was to carefully consider

some of the most important issues of the day, and their bearing upon the Christian faith? Under the leadership of C. S. Lewis, this is what the Oxford Socratic Club purposed to do. Although there were clubs "catering to practically every conceivable interest," there was nothing quite like the Socratic Club.{21}

From its inception the club was intended to be a place where students could gather to hear scholars from various disciplines debate a wide range of issues bearing (in one way or another) upon the Christian faith. This was followed by an opportunity for the students to raise questions and participate in robust discussion about these issues with all who were present. Given Lewis's formidable skills as a speaker and debater, he was (from the first) a major attraction for the students. As Christopher Mitchell observes, "At a time when many had begun to believe Christianity was dying, if not already dead, as a plausible system of belief, the Socratic Club reasserted the intellectual vitality and integrity of the Christian faith."{22} As one can well imagine, this was a key benefit for university students who were daily exposed to new ideas about the world, the nature of humanity, and our place in the universe.

Mitchell notes that after weekly meetings, some students would gather together and "sit up, often until 2 in the morning, going through all the discussions" from the evening.{23} The students were often particularly interested in what Lewis had said. "By retracing the points of Lewis's argument, they began to detect the fallacies of current objections" to the Christian faith.{24} This was another key benefit that students received through regular participation in the club. They learned to think carefully, honestly, and methodically about the latest objections to Christianity.

By learning to reason their way through some of the most common objections to the faith for themselves (in light of Lewis's helpful example, of course), students were helped to

see Christianity as a reasonable worldview that could offer good answers to the hard questions put to it by skeptics. “By breaking down the intellectual prejudices to Christianity, Lewis freed many to reaffirm a faith they had lost confidence in, and for some he made faith in Christianity plausible for the first time.”{25} This, undoubtedly, was the most important legacy of C. S. Lewis’s leadership of the Oxford Socratic Club.

Notes

1. Christopher W. Mitchell, “University Battles: C. S. Lewis and the Oxford University Socratic Club,” in *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Angus J. L. Menuge (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 329.
2. Walter Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 137.
3. Stella Aldwinkle, “Socrates was a Realist,” in *Socratic Digest* (No. 1), June 1943; cited in Mitchell, “University Battles,” 331.
4. Mitchell, “University Battles,” 331.
5. Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” 138.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Aldwinkle, “Socrates was a Realist,” cited in Mitchell, “University Battles,” 331.
9. C. S. Lewis, “Preface,” in *Socratic Digest* (No. 1), cited in Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” 138. The entire discussion here is indebted to Lewis’s Preface.
10. Ibid., and so for all quotations in this paragraph.
11. Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” 139-40.
12. Mitchell, “University Battles,” 340.
13. Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” 141.
14. Ibid., 174-85.
15. See the summary of Lewis’s talk in the *Socratic Digest* (No. 1, p. 23), cited in Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” 143-44. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion found

there.
16. Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” 141. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion found there.
17. See Mitchell, “University Battles,” 340.
18. Ibid., 342.
19. I am quoting from Anscombe’s essay, “Reply to Lewis” (1948), as provided in Arend Smilde, “Appendices to ‘What ewis really did to Miracles,’ available at www.lewisiana.nl/anscombe/appendices.pdf. Smilde is drawing from G.E.M. Anscombe, *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, Vol. II, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981), 224-32.
20. Ibid. This quote is taken from Anscombe’s “Introduction” to *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, Vol. II, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1981), vii-x. The “Introduction” is also provided by Smilde, mentioned in the previous note.
21. Hooper, “Oxford’s Bonny Fighter,” 140.
22. Mitchell, “University Battles,” 346.
23. Ibid., 347.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.

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The Self-Understanding of Jesus

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

Jesus and the Scholars

You might be surprised to learn that today many New Testament scholars don't believe that the historical Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God, the Lord, or even the Messiah.{1} But if that's the case, how do they explain the presence of such claims in the Gospels? They believe the Gospel writers put them there! The actual Jesus of history never made such exalted claims for *himself*. It was the early church that started all that business.



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

But there's another issue that needs to be considered. Although many critical scholars don't believe that Jesus ever made such radical personal claims, nevertheless, they *do* believe that he said and did things that seem to imply that he had a very high view of himself. In other words, while they might deny that Jesus ever *explicitly* claimed to be Israel's

Messiah, or Lord, they acknowledge that he said and did things which, when you get right down to it, seem to imply that that's precisely who he *believed* himself to be! If this is correct, if Jesus really believed himself to be both Israel's Messiah and Lord, then notice that we are brought back once again to that old dilemma of traditional apologetics.{3} Jesus was either deceived in this belief, suffering from something akin to delusions of grandeur. Or he was a fraud, willfully trying to deceive others. Or he really was who he believed himself to be—Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

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

Jesus and the Twelve

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

Let's begin with a little background information. E. P. Sanders, in his highly acclaimed book, *Jesus and Judaism*, observes that ". . . in the first century Jewish hopes for the future would have included the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel."{5} Now this hope was based on nothing less than God's prophetic revelation in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the primary agent effecting this restoration is said to be the Lord (e.g. Isa. 11:11-12; Mic. 2:12). At other times it's a Messianic figure who is clearly a human being (e.g. Isa.

49:5-6). Interestingly, however, still other passages describe this Messianic figure as having divine attributes, or as being closely associated with the Lord in some way (e.g. cp. Mic. 2:13 with 5:2-4). But why is this important? And what does it have to do with Jesus' choice of twelve disciples?

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

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

Jesus and the Law

What was Jesus' attitude toward the Law of Moses? Some scholars say that Jesus was a law-abiding Jew who "broke neither with the written Law nor with the traditions of the Pharisees."{8} Others say the issue is more complex. Ben

Witherington observes that Jesus related to the Law in a variety of ways.{9} Sometimes he affirmed the validity of particular Mosaic commandments (e.g. Matt. 19:18-19). At other times he went beyond Moses and intensified some of the commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount he declared, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). We shouldn't skip too lightly over a statement like this. The prohibition against adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. By wording the statement as he did, Jesus apparently "equated his own authority with that of the divinely given Torah."{10} Indeed, it's because of sayings like this that one Jewish writer complained: "Israel cannot accept . . . the utterances of a man who speaks in his own name—not 'thus saith the Lord,' but '*I* say unto you.' This 'I' is . . . sufficient to drive Judaism away from the Gentiles forever."{11}

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

How does this relate to the self-understanding of Jesus? Think about it this way. What would Jesus have to believe about himself to seriously think he had the authority to set aside

God's commandments? Although it may trouble some critical scholars, the evidence seems to favor the view that Jesus believed that in some sense he possessed the authority of God Himself!

Jesus and the Demons

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

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

If so, then notice the startling implications of Jesus' claim: "*If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you*." At the very least, Jesus appears to

be claiming that in himself the kingdom of God is in some sense a present reality. But his claim may actually be even more radical. Some scholars have observed that in ancient Jewish literature the phrase, 'kingdom of God,' is sometimes used as a roundabout way for speaking of God Himself. If Jesus intended this meaning in the statement we are considering, then William Lane Craig's conclusion is fully warranted: "In claiming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as visibly demonstrated by his exorcisms, Jesus was, in effect, saying that in himself God had drawn near, thus putting himself in God's place."{16}

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

Jesus and the Father

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

Because of the radical nature of these claims, it's hardly surprising to learn that some critical scholars have denied that Jesus ever really said this. Nevertheless, other scholars have offered some very good reasons for embracing the saying's authenticity. Dr. William Lane Craig notes that this saying comes from the hypothetical *Q* source, a source that both Matthew and Luke may have used in writing their Gospels. If that's true, then the saying is quite early and thus has a greater likelihood of actually going back to Jesus. Additionally, "the idea of the mutual knowledge of Father and Son is a Jewish idea, indicating its origin in a Semitic-speaking milieu."{17} Finally, Dr. Ben Witherington notes that the eminent New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias showed "how this saying goes back to an Aramaic original" which "surely counts in favor of it going back to Jesus."{18} Aramaic was probably the language most often used by Jesus and his disciples. After discussing this saying in some detail, Witherington concludes, "In the end, all the traditional bases for judging this saying to be inauthentic no longer will bear close scrutiny."{19}

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

Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 242-43.
2. Ibid., 243.
3. Ibid., 252.
4. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New*

Millennium (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.
5. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 98.
6. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 199.
7. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 134.
8. Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus*, ed. Gerard Terpstra (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 109-10. This quotation does not represent Hagner's own position.
9. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 65.
10. Craig, 246.
11. Ahad ha' Am, "Judaism and the Gospels," in *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic,* ed. H. Khon (New York: Schocken, 1962), 298, cited in Hagner, 101-02.
12. Witherington, 65.
13. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Doubleday,
1993), xii, cited in Craig, 247.
14. Ehrman, 197.
15. Ibid.
16. Craig, 249.
17. Ibid., 246.
18. Witherington, 224.
19. Ibid., 225.
20. Craig, 252.

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Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip?

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides good reasons to believe that the stories about Jesus were reliably preserved by his followers before being recorded in the Gospels.

Forgetting What Lies Behind?

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



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

But it raises an interesting question about the New Testament Gospels. Although liberal and conservative scholars differ a bit over when these documents were written, most would agree

that the earliest Gospel (probably Mark) was written anywhere from twenty to forty years after Jesus' death. And the latest, the Gospel of John, probably dates to around sixty years after Jesus' death.

But why did they wait so long to write their accounts? Some scholars say this was plenty of time for Jesus' followers to distort and embellish their Master's original words and deeds. Consequently, they insist, by the time the ministry of Jesus was recorded in the Gospels, it had already reached a form that was partly fictional. In short, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is alleged to have been corrupted before the Gospel writers ever "put pen to papyrus."{1} In the words of the Jesus Seminar:

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

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

Why the Wait?

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

fellows of the Jesus Seminar put it:

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

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

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

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

> It might be better to ask, Why were the Gospels written at all? If we think in categories of delay, then this

> presupposes that the writing of the Gospels was in the minds of these authors from the beginning. However, this is almost certainly not the case. What was paramount in the apostles' earliest motives was oral proclamation of the gospel.{5}

In the early years of the church the story of Jesus was being told and retold by eyewitnesses of these events. But still, some might ask, might these "events" have become gradually embellished with the story's retelling, so that what's recorded in the Gospels is no longer trustworthy?

To Tell the Old, Old Story

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

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

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

Not only this, but New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg lists many other reasons for believing that this oral tradition was accurately transmitted by Jesus' earliest followers.{8} First, Jesus' followers believed that He "proclaimed God's Word in a

way which demanded careful retelling." Second, over ninety percent of his teachings contained "poetic elements which would have made them easy to memorize." Third, "the almost universal method of education in antiquity, and especially in Israel, was rote memorization, which enabled people accurately to recount quantities of material far greater than all of the Gospels put together." And fourth, "written notes and a kind of shorthand were often privately kept by rabbis and their disciples." Although we can't be sure that any of Jesus' disciples kept written notes of *His* teachings, it's at least possible that they did.

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

What About the Differences?

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

To cite just one example, consider the different ways in which the Gospel writers record the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples on the occasion of Peter's famous confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus begins by asking his disciples a question, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke each word the question

differently. Matthew records Jesus asking, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13).{10} But in Mark the question reads a bit differently, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27). And in Luke it’s a bit different still, “Who do the crowds say I am?” (Luke 9:18).

Not only is the precise wording of Jesus’ question different in each of these Gospels, but the wording of Peter’s response is as well. In Matthew, Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). But in Mark he simply says, “You are the Christ” (8:29), and in Luke, “The Christ of God” (9:20).

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

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

On the other hand, the “memorex” view, which holds that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ spoken words represent the exact words He spoke on the occasions reported, doesn’t seem to square with the actual evidence of the Gospels themselves. The Gospel writers do, as we saw above, report the words of Jesus and his disciples differently, and this is so even in cases

where we can be quite confident that the incident occurred only once.

This leaves us with only one more option to consider.

A "Live" Option

Dr. Darrell Bock has persuasively argued for what he calls a "live" option in explaining the differences between the Gospel accounts.{13} He describes this option this way:

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

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

But if the "live" option is correct, and the Gospels don't

always give us Jesus' exact words, does this mean that their reports of Jesus' teaching are untrustworthy? Not at all. The way in which the Gospel writers recorded the words and deeds of Jesus was totally consistent with the way in which responsible histories were written in the ancient world. As Dr. Bock observes, "the Greek standard of reporting speeches required a concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not . . . recorded."{17}

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

Notes

1. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2006), 21.
2. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 4, cited in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus,* 21.
3. Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 6, cited in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, Reinventing Jesus, 29.
4. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.
5. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 26.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 30.

8. The following points are taken from Craig L. Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 294.
9. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 33-34.
10. All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).
11. Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus Under Fire*, eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 73-99.
12. See Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987).
13. The discussion which follows is largely dependent on the essay by Darrell Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels," 73-99.
14. Ibid., 77.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 77-78.
17. Ibid., 79.
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The Value of Christian Doctrine and Apologetics

Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for why Christian doctrine and apologetics are important for spiritual growth and maturity.



Just prior to beginning college, I committed my life to Christ. Naturally, as a new believer wanting to grow in my faith, I embarked upon a program of daily Bible reading. When I came to Paul's letter to Titus in the New Testament, I was both struck and inspired by a particular command, which I found nestled among others, there in the first chapter.

Paul reminded Titus, whom he had left on the island of Crete, that he wanted him to "straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders" in the local churches which had been established (Titus 1:5). After listing various spiritual and moral qualifications that an elder was to have, Paul went on to insist that he must also "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). When I first read those words, it was as if a light went on inside my head and I thought, "That's exactly what I would like to do! I want to be able to 'encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it'" (Titus 1:9). Paul's words thus encouraged me to take up, in a serious way, the study of Christian doctrine and apologetics.

But what exactly do I mean by "Christian doctrine" and "apologetics"? At its most basic level, Christian doctrine is essentially the same thing as Christian teaching. Such teaching aims at providing a logically consistent and "coherent explication of what the Christian believes."{1} Apologetics is a bit more complicated. It comes from the Greek term, *apologia*, and means "defense." It was often used in law courts in the ancient world.{2} Indeed, the book of Acts records several instances in which the Apostle Paul was called upon to "make a defense" of himself before various governing authorities, like Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (e.g., Acts 24:10; 25:8; 26:1-2).

Of course, when we're talking about *Christian* apologetics, we're concerned with "making a defense" of the truth-claims of

Christianity. The Apostle Peter tells us, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15). Christian doctrine and apologetics play an important role in the life and health of the church. So please keep reading as we delve more deeply into these issues.

The Value of Christian Doctrine

Why is Christian doctrine important for the life and health of the church? The Apostle Paul told Titus that he wanted him to appoint elders in the local church who would be able to “encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). The teaching of sound Christian doctrine is important for several reasons, but for now let me simply mention two. First, sound Christian doctrine helps us to learn what is true about both God and ourselves. Second, it reminds us of the right way to live in light of such truths. And both of these are essential for the life and health of the church.

First, it’s important to know what is true about God and ourselves. Indeed, our eternal destiny depends on it! Not only must we know that God is holy and righteous and will punish all sin, we must also realize that we are sinners (Numbers 14:18; Romans 3:23). But this, in itself, would lead to despair. Hence, we must also understand that God loves us and sent his Son to be the Savior of the world (John 3:16; 1 John 4:14). We need to grasp that
forgiveness and reconciliation with God are freely available to those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith (Acts 3:19; 16:31). Sound Christian doctrine is thus essential for salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 John 5:9-13; 2 John 1:9). Without it, true spiritual life and health is impossible.

But this does not exhaust the importance of Christian doctrine. For once we are saved through faith in Christ, God

then calls us to grow up and become like his Son—and this would be exceedingly difficult apart from instruction in sound Christian doctrine. As Christian philosopher Bill Craig observes, "If we want to live correctly for Christ . . . we need to first think correctly about Christ. If your thinking is skewed and off-base, it is going to affect your life and your Christian discipleship."{3} Indeed, the Apostle Paul contrasts Christian *maturity*, characterized by genuine "knowledge of the Son of God," with spiritual *immaturity*, characterized by a lack of such knowledge and a proneness to being deceived (Ephesians 4:13-14).

God calls us to Christian maturity—and instruction in Christian doctrine plays an important role in our spiritual growth. But there is also a role for Christian apologetics—and we must now turn to consider that.

A Defense of Christian Apologetics

Many people question the value of Christian apologetics for the life and health of the church.{4} They contend that it's impossible to "argue" anyone into becoming a Christian. Instead of making a defense for the truth of Christianity, we ought rather to invest our limited resources in preaching the gospel of Christ, trusting that God will open people's hearts and draw them to himself.

Now while I certainly agree that we should be preaching the gospel, and trusting that God will use it to draw men and women to himself, this negative view of apologetics is frankly unbiblical, untrue, and shortsighted.

In the first place, such a view is unbiblical. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul used arguments and evidence to convince their listeners of particular theological truths (Matthew 22:15-46; Acts 17:16-34). Moreover, the
Apostle Peter tells us to always be ready to "make a defense"

(or offer an apologetic) to those who ask about our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). A negative view of Christian apologetics thus runs counter to the teaching of Scripture.

Second, it's simply untrue that no one ever comes to Christ through apologetic arguments and evidence.{5} Indeed, sometimes the Holy Spirit actually uses arguments and evidence to draw people to Christ!{6} And while such people may admittedly be in the minority, they can be extremely influential in commending the faith to others, for they are often prepared to offer good reasons for believing that Christianity is really true!

Finally, a negative view of Christian apologetics is shortsighted. The great theologian J. Gresham Machen argued that we should aim to create "favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel." Along these lines, he noted the difficulty of attempting to do evangelism once we've given up offering an intellectually credible case for the truth of Christianity. "We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer," he said, "and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation . . . to be controlled by ideas which . . . prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion."{7} Machen understood that neglecting apologetics is shortsighted. For unless we offer arguments and evidence, we make it that much easier for people to simply shrug their shoulders and continue ignoring Christianity's truth-claims.

Having now dismantled the arguments *against* apologetics, we'll next consider its *benefits* for the life and health of the church.

The Value of Christian Apologetics

Christian apologetics is concerned to offer a robust defense for the truth of Christianity. Hence, training in Christian apologetics can be of great value for the life and health of the church. This is because such training helps to instill within believers a deep confidence that Christianity is really true. And when one becomes convinced that Christianity is really true, one is typically more likely to share one's faith with others—and less likely to abandon the faith when confronted with various social, cultural, and intellectual pressures.

Let's consider that first point, that when one becomes convinced of Christianity's truth, one is more likely to share this truth with others. Many Christians admit to being hesitant about sharing their faith because they're afraid someone will ask them a question that they are ill-prepared to answer.{8} Training in apologetics can help counteract this fear. Granted, one may still be asked a question that is difficult to answer. But apologetics training can help alleviate the fear associated with such situations by helping believers understand that good answers are available—even if they can't remember what those answers are! To give an illustration, if I learn that there is excellent evidence that a particular drug can cure some disease, then I will be far more confident about sharing this fact with others—even if I can't answer all their questions about *how* the medicine works. I may not remember exactly *how* it works, but I do know that there is very good evidence *that* it works. And knowing this, I will naturally be more confident telling others about it, even if I can't answer all their questions about how or why.

Moreover, training in apologetics can help insulate believers from abandoning the faith, for they now know that there are good reasons to believe that Christianity is really true. Of course, most people who abandon the faith do

so for *non*-intellectual reasons. Still, as Paul Chamberlain observes, "A number of vocal critics who have moved from Christianity to atheism cite intellectual difficulties with Christianity" as a prime reason for quitting the faith.{9} While apologetics training can't completely prevent such outcomes, it can make them less likely. After all, it's far more difficult to abandon a view once you've become sincerely convinced of its truth.

Our Witness to the World

Over a hundred years ago, the theologian J. Gresham Machen forcefully argued that, for the faithful Christian, all of life—including the arts and sciences and every sphere of intellectual endeavor—must be humbly consecrated to the service of God.{10} Indeed, this should be true not only for every individual Christian in particular, but for the entire church in general. Our witness to the world depends on it.

Machen wrote:

> Christianity must pervade not merely all nations, but . . . all of human thought. The Christian, therefore, cannot be indifferent to any branch of earnest human endeavor. It must all be brought into some relation to the gospel. It must be studied either in order to be demonstrated as false, or else in order to be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God. . . . The Church must seek to conquer not merely every man for Christ, but also the whole of man.{11}

In this article, we've been considering the importance of Christian doctrine and apologetics for the life and health of the church. And clearly, Machen's proposal cannot be effectively implemented apart from a healthy understanding of these issues on the part of the church. After all, how can "all of human thought" be brought "into some relation to the gospel" unless we first understand what the gospel is? How can

views “be demonstrated as false” unless we first have some idea of what’s true—and how to reason correctly about it? How can views “be made useful in advancing the Kingdom of God” unless we first understand such views, along with how and why they can be useful in advancing God’s kingdom? If we are ever to have a hope of carrying out a project like this, in a manner that is both practically effective and faithful to our God, then sound Christian doctrine and apologetics must occupy a central role in our endeavors.

Christian doctrine and apologetics are not antithetical to the life and health of the church. They are rather of fundamental importance. Only by knowing what we believe, and why it’s really true, can we fulfill Peter’s injunction to always be ready “to make a defense” to anyone who asks about our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). And only thus can we progress to true spiritual maturity, avoiding the “craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:13-14). So if we care about the life and health of the church—along with its witness to the world—we must encourage a healthy dose of respect for sound Christian doctrine and apologetics.

Notes

1. Molly Marshall-Green, “Doctrine,” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 374.
2. Steven B. Cowan, “Introduction,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 8, Kindle.
3. William Lane Craig, “Foundations of Christian Doctrine (Part 1),” *Reasonable Faith*, October 22, 2014, accessed August 22, 2018, www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/s3-foundations-of-christian-doctrine/foundations-of-christian-doctrine-part-1/.
4. Many of the points made in this section are indebted to the discussion in William Lane Craig, “Foundations of Christian

Doctrine (Part 2)," Reasonable Faith, October 29, 2014, accessed August 29, 2018, www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/s3-foundations-of-christian-doctrine/foundations-of-christian-doctrine-part-2/.
5. See, for example, the "Testimonials" section of the Reasonable Faith website, accessed August 29, 2018, www.reasonablefaith.org/testimonials.
6. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 192.
7. J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 7.
8. Indeed, entire books have been written to help believers feel better prepared for such conversations. See, for example, Mark Mittelberg, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask: (With Answers)* (Tyndale, 2010).
9. Paul Chamberlain, "Why People Stop Believing," *Christian Research Journal* 41, no. 4:11.
10. Machen, "Christianity and Culture," 5.
11. Ibid., 6.

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Prophecies of the Messiah

Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues that the Bible contains genuine prophecies about a coming Messiah that were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Place of His Birth

Biblical prophecy is a fascinating subject. It not only includes predictions of events that are still in the future.

It also includes predictions of events that were future at the time the prophecy was given, but which have now been fulfilled and are part of the past. This latter category includes all the prophecies about a coming Messiah that Christians believe were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If the Bible really does contain such prophecies, then we would seem to have evidence that's at least consistent with the divine inspiration of the Bible. One can see how an all-knowing God could accurately foretell the future, but it's not clear how a finite human being could do so. Thus, if there are accurately fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, then we have yet another reason to believe that the biblical worldview is true.



Let's begin with a prophecy about the Messiah's birthplace. "Messiah" is a Hebrew term that simply means "anointed one." When translated into Greek, the language of the New Testament, the term becomes "Christ." Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mark 14:61-62).

In Micah 5:2 we read, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." This prophecy was given in the eighth century B.C., more than seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus!

Notice, first, that it refers to a future ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem. When King Herod, shortly after Jesus' birth, asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ (or Messiah) was to be born, they told him that he was to be born in Bethlehem and cited this verse from Micah as support (Matt. 2:1-6). Both Matthew and Luke confirm that

Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1 and Luke 2:4-7). So He clearly meets this necessary qualification for being the promised Messiah.

But that's not all. Micah also says that the origins of this ruler are "from of old, from ancient times." How should we understand this? One commentator notes, "The terms 'old' . . . and 'ancient times' . . . may denote 'great antiquity' as well as 'eternity' in the strictest sense."{1} Dr. Allen Ross states, "At the least this means that Messiah was pre-existent; at the most it means He is eternal."{2} Micah's prophecy thus suggests that the Messiah will be a supernatural, perhaps even divine, person. And this astonishing conclusion is precisely what Jesus claimed for Himself!{3}

The Time of His Appearing

Let's now consider a fascinating prophecy that, in the opinion of many scholars, tells us when the Messiah would make His appearance. It's found in Daniel 9.

Daniel was one of the Jewish captives who had been brought to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy in Daniel 9 was given in the sixth century B.C. While much can be said about this passage, we must focus on a few important points.

To begin, verse 24 gives us the time parameters during which the prophecy will unfold. It reads, "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin," and so on. Although we can't go into all the details, the 'seventy 'sevens'" concern seventy distinct seven-year periods of time, or a total of 490 years.

Next, verse 25 tells us that from the issuing of a decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah, there will be a total of sixty-nine "sevens," or 483 years. There are two

views we must consider. The first holds that this decree was issued by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest in 457 B.C.{4} Adding 483 years to this date brings us to A.D. 27, the year many scholars believe Jesus began His public ministry! The second view holds that the reference is to a later decree of Artaxerxes, issued on March 5, 444 B.C.{5} Adding 483 years to this date takes us to A.D. 38. But according to this view, the years in question should be calculated according to a lunar calendar, consisting of twelve thirty-day months.{6} If each of the 483 years consists of only 360 days, then we arrive at March 30, 33 A.D. Dr. Allen Ross says "that is the Monday of the Passion week, the day of the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem."{7} The views thus differ on the date of Jesus' death, but each can comfortably fit the evidence.{8}

Finally, verse 26 says that after the period of sixty-nine "sevens" the Messiah will be "cut off" and have nothing. According to one scholar, "The word translated 'cut off' is used of executing . . . a criminal."{9} All of this fits quite well with the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, the accuracy of this prophecy, written over five hundred years before Jesus' birth, bears eloquent testimony to the divine inspiration and truth of the Bible.

The Nature of His Ministry

In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses told the Israelites, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him." This verse promised a succession of prophets who would speak God's words to the people. Ultimately, however, it refers to Jesus Christ. One commentator notes that the Messianic interpretation of this passage is mentioned not only in the New Testament, but also among the Essenes, Jews, Gnostics, and others.{10} Peter explicitly applied this passage to Jesus in one of his sermons (Acts 3:22-23).

But not only was the Messiah to be a great prophet, it was also foretold that he would be a priest and king as well. The prophet Zechariah was told to make a royal crown and symbolically set it on the head of Joshua, the high priest. The Lord then said, "Here is the man whose name is the Branch . . . he will . . . sit and rule on his throne. And . . . be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two" (Zechariah 6:12-13). 'The title "Branch" is a messianic title."{11} So the scene symbolizes the future Messiah, here referred to as "the Branch," uniting the offices of king and priest in one person.

But why is it important that the Messiah be a priest? As a prophet he speaks God's word to the people. As a king he rules from his throne. But why must he also be a priest? "Because priests dealt with sin," says Michael Brown, a Christian scholar who is ethnically Jewish. "Priests bore the iniquities of the people on their shoulders."{12} And this, of course, is precisely what Jesus did for us: "He . . . bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24).

Dr. Brown points to a tradition in the Talmud that says that on the Day of Atonement there were three signs that the animal sacrifices offered by the high priest had been accepted by God. According to this tradition, in the forty years prior to the temple's destruction in A.D. 70, all three signs turned up negative every single time.{13} Dr. Brown comments, "Jesus probably was crucified in A.D. 30, and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70."{14} So during this forty-year period God signaled that he no longer accepted these sacrifices. Why? Because final atonement had been made by Jesus!{15}

The Significance of His Death

Without any doubt, one of the most astonishing prophecies about the promised Messiah is found in Isaiah 52-53. The verses were written about seven hundred years before the birth

of Jesus. They largely concern the death of the Lord's "Suffering Servant." According to many scholars, a careful comparison of this passage with the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death reveals too many similarities to be merely coincidental.

In some of the most-cited verses from this intriguing passage we read: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6). Here we have a vivid depiction of substitutionary atonement. The Lord lays upon His servant "the iniquity of us all" and punishes him "for our transgressions." In other words, God's servant dies as a substitute in our place. This is precisely what Jesus claimed for himself, saying, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The parallels between Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" and Jesus are certainly impressive. But some scholars have suggested that Isaiah's "servant" is actually the nation of Israel and not the Messiah. Dr. Michael Brown dismisses this notion however, insisting that 'nowhere in the . . . foundational, authoritative Jewish writings do we find the interpretation that this passage refers to the nation of Israel. References to the servant as a people actually end with Isaiah 48:20."{16} What's more, he says, "Many . . . Jewish interpreters . . . had no problem seeing this passage as referring to the Messiah . . . By the sixteenth century, Rabbi Moshe Alshech said, 'Our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm . . . that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall . . . also adhere to the same view.'"{17}

For his part, Dr. Brown is so convinced that this passage prophetically depicts the suffering and death of Jesus that he

feels “as if God would have to apologize to the human race and to the Jewish people for putting this passage into the scriptures” if Jesus is not the one in view!{18} Although this is a strong statement, it’s not unjustified. For Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God’s servant for the sins of the people, it also implies his resurrection!

The Mystery of His Resurrection

In the opinion of many scholars, Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God’s servant; it also implies his resurrection from the dead!

It’s important to notice that Isaiah 53 makes it absolutely clear that the Messiah is put to death. It says that “he was cut off from the land of the living” (v. 8), and that ‘he poured out his life unto death” (v. 12). On the other hand, however, it also says that ‘he will see his offspring and prolong his days” (v. 10), and that after his suffering “he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (v. 11). So the text teaches both that the Messiah will die and that he will live again. And although the passage doesn’t explicitly teach the Messiah’s resurrection, it’s certainly consistent with it. This is really staggering in light of the compelling historical evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus!{19}

Let’s now pause to consider what we’ve learned in this brief article. Micah 5:2 teaches that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, by teaching the preexistence, or even eternality, of the Messiah, the prophecy suggests that he’ll be a supernatural, possibly even divine, figure. In Daniel 9:24-27 we saw that the Messiah would appear to Israel sometime around A.D. 27 – 33, precisely the time of Jesus’ public ministry! Deuteronomy and Zechariah teach that the Messiah would minister as prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus spoke God’s word to the people. As a priest, he

offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. And while he didn't reign as king during his first advent, he was called "the king of the Jews" (Matt. 27:11, 37). And Christians believe that he's in some sense reigning now from heaven and that he'll one day reign on earth as well (Luke 1:32-33). Finally, Isaiah 53 teaches that the Messiah would die for our sins—and then somehow live again. This is consistent with the New Testament's record of Jesus' substitutionary death and bodily resurrection.

Of course, we've not been able to consider all the prophecies. But hopefully enough has been said to conclude with Dr. Brown that if Jesus isn't the Messiah, "there will never be a Messiah. It's too late for anyone else. It's him or no one."{20} Well, you've now heard the evidence; the verdict is up to you.

Notes

1. Thomas E. McComiskey, "Micah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 427.
2. Allen Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764. Accessed on September 6, 2007.
3. See, for example, Matthew 11:27; John 8:58 and 10:30.
4. Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 114. See also Ezra 7:11-26.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1362. See also Nehemiah 2:1-8.
6. See, for example, the discussion in Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764. Accessed on September 6, 2007.
7. Ibid.
8. The first holds that He was crucified in A.D. 30, the

second in A.D. 33.
9. Pentecost, “Daniel,” 1364.
10. Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 122.
11. F. Duane Lindsey, “Zechariah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1558. See also Zechariah 3:8.
12. Michael Brown, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Advance Reader Copy) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 199.
13. See Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 39a.
14. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 201.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 212.
19. For a defense of this important claim, please see some of the excellent articles by William Lane Craig at www.reasonablefaith.org. For more scriptural support, please compare Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:22-36 with Psalm 16:8-11.
20. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 203.

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Body and Soul in the New

Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on John Cooper's book Body, Soul and Life Everlasting *to provide an overview of what the New Testament teaches about the body-soul connection.*

The Teaching of Jesus

What does the New Testament teach about the nature and destiny of human beings? In a previous article, I discussed what the Old Testament has to say about these issues, giving special attention to the human body and soul. In this article, we'll consider what the New Testament has to say.



About 400 years separate the end of the Old Testament from the beginning of the New. During this so-called "intertestamental" period, Jewish biblical scholars, like the Pharisees, continued to teach and write about what God had revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. According to John Cooper, the Pharisees taught that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body to continue its existence "in an intermediate state, already enjoying or lamenting the anticipated consequences of God's judgment."{1} Interestingly, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul also seem to have held this view.{2}

Consider, for example, some of the last words spoken by Jesus just prior to His death on the cross. You may remember that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. While one of these men railed against Jesus, the other (aware of his guilt), asked Jesus to "remember" him when He came into His kingdom (Luke 23:39-42). Jesus responded by promising *this* man that he would join Him "in Paradise" that very day (v. 43). Paradise, in the Jewish thinking of the time, was understood to be a pleasant and refreshing place where the souls of the righteous continue their existence between the death and resurrection of the body.{3}

The body, in other words, may die, but the soul, or person, continues to exist apart from their body. Although this criminal had only hours left to live, his elementary confession of faith in Jesus resulted in Jesus promising him that they would be together in Paradise that very day! This ought to encourage all of us who have put our hope in Christ for salvation. Our bodies may wear out and die. But when they do, we shall go to be with Christ, awaiting the resurrection of our bodies while enjoying the presence of the Lord!

But what about the other criminal, the one who mocked and insulted Jesus? Although we're not told what happened to him, we know from elsewhere in Scripture that the souls of the unrepentant also continue to exist after the death of the body. In the next section we'll take a closer look at the fate of the righteous and unrighteous dead.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

What happens to us when we die? Do we continue to exist in some sense? Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus appears to offer some answers to these questions (see Luke 16:19-31). The story concerns a rich man, who lacks for nothing, and a poor beggar, named Lazarus, who is laid at the rich man's gate (v. 20). The story implies that the rich man could have helped Lazarus, but never did so.

Eventually, both men died. Lazarus is said to be "carried by the angels to Abraham's side" (v. 22). Essentially, he is depicted as being with the Jewish patriarch Abraham in Paradise. Paradise, you'll remember, was considered a place of rest and refreshment for the righteous dead. By contrast, the rich man, his body having been buried, finds himself in "torment" in Hades (vv. 22-23). Seeing both Abraham and Lazarus at a great distance, he pleads with them for help. Abraham, however, tells him that this just isn't possible (vv. 24-31).

What might this story teach us about the nature and destiny of human beings? Though we should perhaps be careful about reading the story too literally, it seems to teach that we will each continue to exist (in some sense) even *after* the death of our body. Moreover, this existence will be experienced as either joyful or sorrowful, depending on our relationship with God. Although the story seems to depict the rich man and Lazarus as if they still have bodies of some sort, John Cooper offers several reasons for believing that the story is using figurative language to describe a time in which these men exist apart from their bodies.{4} This would be the period between the death and resurrection of the body. What are some of the reasons that Cooper offers for this view?

First, at the time Jesus tells this story, He regarded the resurrection as a still future event (see Luke 20:34-36). It is thus unlikely that the story here concerns some sort of literal bodily existence. Second, the story locates the rich man in "Hades"—and this term appears only to be used of the intermediate state, between the death and resurrection of the body.{5} The story thus appears to depict the rich man and Lazarus as consciously existing persons between the death and resurrection of their bodies. And if this is so, then we are *more* than just our bodies (as we'll see more fully in the next section).

Paul's Heavenly Vision

Do you view yourself as *more* than just your body? Might you also have a soul? We've previously considered evidence for the human soul in the teachings of Jesus. In this section, we'll consider further evidence from the writings of the Apostle Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts an extraordinary experience which he had fourteen years earlier (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, 7). He describes being "caught up . . . into paradise" and hearing "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (vv. 2-4).

For our purposes, the most important element of this experience concerns a peculiar detail mentioned twice by the apostle. According to Paul, he was unsure whether he had this experience while "in the body or out of the body" (vv. 2-3). That is, Paul was unsure whether he had been "caught up into Paradise" (v. 3) in his body, or out of it. But why is this important? Because it shows that Paul regarded the "out of body" option as a genuine possibility.{6}

You see, many scholars have argued that Paul did not believe in any sort of conscious existence apart from the body. The great New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce claimed that Paul "could not conceive" of a situation in which he might exist and have experiences apart from his body.{7} Now you might be thinking, "Well wait just a minute. Didn't you say that Paul was unsure whether this experience had occurred while in the body or out of it? Maybe he remained in his body and the experience was just a *vision* of Paradise, occurring while he was in some sort of trance-like state on earth."{8}

Yes, you're right. That *is* possible (although it doesn't seem consistent with what Paul actually says).{9} And here's the thing: the very fact that Paul was unsure whether this experience occurred while he was in (or out of) his body, tells us that he regarded the "out of body" explanation as a genuine possibility. And if this is so, then contrary to what some scholars have said, Paul most certainly *could* conceive of conscious existence apart from his body. Indeed, he thought he may have had just such an experience himself.

But we can take this argument further. For as we'll see in the next section, Paul (like the Pharisees and Jesus), seemed to think that we'll continue to exist and have experiences between the death and resurrection of our bodies.

Our Heavenly Dwelling

When I was a child, our family would occasionally go camping. Although we usually went in a camper, with air-conditioning and beds, I've also spent a few nights camping out in a tent. Most of us have probably had such an experience (though whether we enjoyed it or not is another matter). A tent is basically a portable structure that provides a temporary place to stay while we're away from our permanent home.

In 2 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul has a fascinating discussion that touches on some of these issues (see vv. 1-10). The discussion is challenging, but if we consider it step by step, I think we can get a handle on what the apostle is saying. He begins, "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (v. 1).

When Paul writes of "the tent that is our earthly home," he is referring to our physical bodies here and now. If our body is "destroyed," and we die physically, "we have," says Paul, "a building from God . . . eternal in the heavens" awaiting us. According to John Cooper, this "building" can plausibly refer to one of two things.{10} It *might* refer to our future resurrection body. However, it may also refer simply to "being 'with Christ'." If the second option is meant, then Paul is speaking about going to be "with Christ" at the time of death, in which we are (as he later puts it), "at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8; see also Philippians 1:23).

Paul characterizes our present "earthly" state as one of groaning, "longing to put on our heavenly dwelling" that "we may not be found naked" (1 Corinthians 5:2-3). Although these verses are difficult to interpret, it is probable that "nakedness" refers to temporarily existing without a body when we die. If so, then Paul is saying that when we die, we go immediately to be "with Christ." There we are "at home with the Lord," awaiting that day in which we will "put on our

heavenly dwelling” (v. 2). This likely refers to our resurrection body. At the time of the resurrection, our souls will be united with a glorious new body, so that we might eternally enjoy life with Christ ad fellow believers in the new heaven and new earth. We will consider these issues more fully in the next section.

The Resurrection of the Body

The Bible envisions a future time in which all who have died will be raised from the dead into some sort of physical, bodily existence. The New Testament writers refer to this as “the resurrection of the dead” and it will include both believers and unbelievers. Hence Jesus, referring to His own unique role in executing divine judgment, claims that “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29). Although evidence elsewhere in the New Testament suggests that different groups of people may be raised at different times, the key point here is that this event has not yet taken place. It’s still in the future.

Paul says much the same thing in several of his letters. To cite just one example, he tells the Philippians that “we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20-21). Elsewhere Paul tells us that our resurrection bodies will be “imperishable,” “powerful,” and glorious (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). It’s incredibly exciting to contemplate the fact that the Lord intends to give his people marvelous new bodies, patterned after his own resurrection body, so that we might enjoy eternal life with him forever. When that day dawns, our joy will truly be complete!

So how might we attempt to summarize our discussion in this

article? First, both Jesus and Paul seem to have taught that human beings are (in some sense) composed of both a body and a soul. John Cooper describes the relationship of soul and body as one of "functional holism." Our body and soul *function* as a thoroughly integrated *whole* during our present earthly lives. But when our body dies, our soul continues to exist, awaiting the resurrection of our body at some future time.{11}

On that day, our soul will be united with our resurrection body, either to enjoy eternal life with Jesus, or face eternal judgment in hell. This, it seems to me, is what the New Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of humanity. In Christ we are offered a sure and steadfast hope for both our soul—and our body!

Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Kindle Loc. 1208.
2. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 55, Kindle.
3. This becomes a bit complicated. John Cooper points out that Jewish thinking about the afterlife continued its development during the intertestamental period. While some Rabbis conceived of "Paradise" as a special place for the righteous dead within Sheol, others began to think of Paradise as outside Sheol altogether. Regardless of such differences, however, Cooper reminds us that "Paradise" was understood as the place "where the blessed dwell with the Lord" (see Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1175-1200).
4. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1605; see also Loc. 1592-1607.
5. Again, see Cooper's discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1592-1607.
6. Cooper makes this point emphatically in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1880-86.
7. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 313; cited in John Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1840.
8. This possibility is also mentioned in *Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1871.
9. Again, see Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1872.
10. See Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1837.
11. See Cooper's discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 699-712.

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