

“Why Can’t God Just Destroy Those Who Reject Him Instead of Sending Them to Hell?”

Why can’t God just destroy people who reject him, cause them to cease to exist instead of sending them to hell where they are tortured for eternity? I know they cannot be a part of God or heaven since God is perfect in all ways, but why not end their existence entirely or just keep them separated for eternity instead of sending them to hell for eternal torment?

Thanks for your question. It’s a good one. The Bible indicates that those who reject the sacrifice of Christ for their sins must pay for their sins themselves. This certainly seems fair and just. The problem comes when we ask why a person who has committed a finite number of sins should be punished forever and ever. This, I will admit, sounds unfair. But the Bible tells us that God is perfectly fair and just. So how can we reconcile this apparent discrepancy?

Some say that any sin committed against the infinitely holy God is worthy of eternal punishment. In other words, it’s not so much the number of sins committed that determine the duration of the punishment, it’s rather the fact that they have sinned against their Creator, the infinitely good and holy God. To sin against such a One as God deserves eternal punishment, these people would say.

This may be true, but my own view is a bit different. Think about it this way. Through Adam, all human beings are born with a nature that is inclined toward sin, rebellion and disobedience against God. When someone trusts Christ for salvation, they are “born again” as a child of God. They receive the Holy Spirit and will one day be completely freed from the presence and power of sin. The one who rejects

Christ, however, will never be free from the presence and power of sin. Thus, the one who rejects Christ will never cease sinning. Even in hell I imagine that men and women will curse and blaspheme God. If this is so, then eternal punishment is just because such people never quit sinning against God. Indeed, the longer they are punished, the more their debt increases.

This, at any rate, is my own opinion about the justice of eternal punishment. I hope it helps a little bit.

The Lord bless and keep you,

Michael Gleghorn

Probe Ministries

“How Can an Omnipresent God be Around Sin and Evil?”

If God is a perfect God who cannot be in the presence of sin because He is so holy, then how can He be an omnipresent God if there is all kinds of sin going on in the world and if there is a hell?

Good question! God cannot look WITH FAVOR upon sin and evil, but He can certainly be in the presence of sinners. This is proven by God's omnipresence (as you noted), the incarnation of God the Son, and even God's continued (if temporary) interaction with some of the fallen angels (including Satan – e.g. Job 1-2, etc.).

The limitation is not on God. Sometimes we have this image of God as needing to back off from sin and evil because He can't

allow Himself to be in its presence (rather like Superman avoiding Kryptonite because it weakens him?!). But we would suggest it's more like the reaction of mold in the presence of bleach, or of anything combustible in the presence of fire: God's holiness is so consuming and so purifying that unless He restrains Himself (and that only for a time), nothing impure and unholy can remain in HIS presence. It affects the creature, not God.

Hope this clears things up a bit.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn

Probe Ministries

“Are People in Hell Isolated and Alone?”

My wife says that if you go to hell, you will be alone and not able to talk to anyone else. We tried to find an answer in the Bible, but we could not find a scripture that said that. I have also heard this from different people. Where is the proof?

Thanks for your question. I have also heard this many times myself. It's interesting to note that C.S. Lewis, the famous Christian apologist, once wrote something to the effect that “Hell is no one but yourself, forever and ever.” On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous French atheistic existentialist philosopher, once wrote that “Hell is other people.” But what does the Bible actually say?

Here are just a few passages to consider:

1. Isaiah 14:3-21: This passage is a taunt against the king of Babylon. What's interesting is the description of the king's reception in Sheol, the place of the dead. Notice such verses as 9-10: "Sheol from beneath is excited over you to meet you when you come; it arouses for you the spirits of the dead, all the leaders of the earth; it raises all the kings of the nations from their thrones. They will all respond and say to you, 'Even you have been made weak as we, you have become like us.'" Thus, this passage seems to indicate some sort of communication between departed spirits in Sheol. How literally this should be taken is, of course, quite difficult to say. Additionally, it must be remembered that, strictly speaking, Sheol is not the same as Hell. In the Old Testament all the dead were believed to reside in Sheol, both the righteous and the wicked. Hell, on the other hand, is a place of eternal punishment only for the wicked. God could redeem a righteous man from the power of Sheol (Ps. 49:15), but there is "No Exit" from Hell.

2. Luke 16:19-31: In this parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we learn that Lazarus is received into "Abraham's bosom" at death whereas the rich man goes to Hades. "Abraham's bosom" is pictured as a place of both comfort and honor; Hades is pictured as a place of fire and torment. Strictly speaking, "Abraham's bosom" is not Heaven and Hades is not Hell, but each does seem to be a precursor of the other (i.e. Hades is a sort of pre-hell Hell—see Rev. 20:14). Although the rich man is not said to converse with anyone else in Hades, he does converse with Abraham! In the parable, the two men are able to speak with one another even though a great chasm prevents them from crossing over to one another. Again, it is difficult to know how literally such a parable should be read. Is it an actual description of the afterlife prior to one's final judgment? I'll let you come to your own conclusion on that one!

3. Revelation 20:10-15: This passage does actually deal with the eternal destiny of the unsaved in Hell. In v. 10, we see that Satan, the beast and the false prophet will all be there. In vv. 14-15 we learn that "death" and "Hades" (and presumably all their inhabitants), along with everyone whose name is not found written in the book of life, will be cast into "the lake of fire" (i.e. Hell). Thus, all the unsaved, along with Satan and his demons, appear to be ultimately consigned to the same place of punishment (see Matt. 25:41). But nothing is said about whether these lost souls will have any communication with one another, or even whether they will be able to see one another. In other words, just because they are consigned to the same place of punishment, it does not necessarily follow that they will have any opportunity to communicate with one another. It could be that Hell is analogous to a large number of prisoners, all at the same prison, but all separated from one another in something like solitary confinement! But I honestly don't know.

Thus, to answer your question (which is a good one!), I do not personally think there is enough scriptural evidence to reach a firm conclusion concerning whether or not those in Hell will be utterly alone and unable to communicate or not. I'm sorry I can't answer your question any better, but at least my answer is an honest one!

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

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“My Christian Girlfriend Doesn't Want to Follow My Hindu Faith”

I read Rick Rood's [article on Hinduism](#) with interest; I am faced with a dilemma and was hoping if you could offer me some advice and solace. I am a Hindu and have received a proposal from a Christian girl – AG denomination; (she converted from Hinduism 3 years ago).

Whilst my parents expect her to follow my religion after marriage; I am of the view that she can follow her religion but she has to partake in all my Hindu religious activities; and that we have to have a Hindu marriage. I also respect Christianity and she can go to church etc. with myself accompanying her whenever possible.

She has come back to me saying that all the above will be a sin in Christianity and that she will be punished if she participates in my activities. I have been advised by my priest to participate in her activities where possible. I respect her choice of religion coz for me there is only one god; it's just that we all have our own ways of faith.

I also realize that there are other factors like children to be considered here. I like this girl and will find your advice invaluable.

It would also help if you could provide me the details of people who have been in a similar situation. And at the same time it would also help if you could look into the prospects of taking out a “best practices” manual for lets say hindu/christian; christian/muslim marriages etc. which would provide some sort of a guideline.

Thank you for your kind letter. I do not know which article of

Rick's that you read, but if you haven't yet read his article entitled, [Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions](#) I would encourage you to do so. I think it will help you better understand your Christian girlfriend's perspective on participating in your Hindu religious activities.

In the Bible, the second book is called Exodus. In Exodus 20:1-6 the Lord gives His people the first two of the Ten Commandments. These are: 1. To have (or worship) no other gods except the Lord, and 2. Not to make, or worship, any idols or images of anything in all creation. As you can probably see, these first two commandments would make it very difficult for your Christian friend to be faithful to her own religious convictions AND participate in Hindu religious activities.

Christians believe that Jesus is the only way to God. In fact, this is what Jesus Himself claimed in John 14:6. Jesus demands our exclusive devotion and allegiance. We are not allowed to worship anyone else but the one true God of the Bible.

Although I cannot tell you what to do about marriage, I do know that (statistically speaking) interfaith marriages are much more difficult and face many more problems than do marriages in which both partners have shared religious beliefs. I would encourage both of you to seriously consider these difficulties BEFORE you get married. For example, in what religious tradition will your children be raised? What will they be taught about God, what happens after death, etc.?

Finally, if you're interested in learning what the Bible says about how a person can have a personal relationship with God, please visit the following web page: http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=276. This website also has the entire Bible available for you to read and study if you like.

Thanks again for writing.

Wishing you all the best for your future,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Aren't Miracles Impossible?

Of the four canonical gospels, there are two, Matthew and Luke, that provide details about the birth of Jesus. The accounts may reflect the unique perspectives of both Joseph (in Matthew's gospel) and Mary (in Luke's), for there are many differences between the two.^{1} However, of the things they share in common, one cannot be missed. They both declare that Jesus was miraculously conceived through the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a young virgin named Mary.^{2} Today, some scholars regard the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth as simply a legendary development of the early church. The story is said to be myth—not history.^{3} But if we ask why they think this, we may notice something very interesting. For the virgin birth is usually not rejected on grounds of insufficient historical evidence. Rather, it is more often rejected on the presupposition that miracles are simply impossible.^{4} This is quite revealing. For if such scholars really believe that miracles are impossible, then no amount of evidence can convince them that one has actually occurred. Their minds are made up before they examine the evidence. In theory, they view miracle claims as guilty until proven innocent. In actual practice, however, they never reach a verdict of “Not Guilty”!

The belief that miracles are impossible often arises from a naturalistic worldview. Strict naturalism completely rejects any notion of the supernatural.^{5} All that exists are atoms and the void.^{6} If naturalists are right, it follows that miracles are indeed impossible. While strange things that we do not fully understand may sometimes occur, there must, in principle, be a naturalistic explanation for every event in the universe.

But are such naturalists right? Since my aim in this article is to explore the historicity of Jesus' virgin birth, I will not attempt now to refute naturalism. Instead, I will simply point out that if a personal Creator God exists (and there is good evidence to believe that One does), then miracles are at least possible. For clearly, such a God might choose to intervene in His creation to bring about an effect for which there was no prior natural cause. And that is at least one way of describing a miracle.

Thus, if a personal Creator God exists, miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then Jesus' virginal conception and birth are possible. And if the virgin birth is possible, then the only way we can determine if it actually occurred is by carefully examining the evidence both for and against it. Next we will continue our inquiry by looking at an ancient prophecy that some think actually foretold Christ's virgin birth!

Didn't Matthew Misread Isaiah?

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus was conceived through the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit while Mary was still a virgin.^{7} He then goes further, however, by declaring that this miraculous event fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy in the book of Isaiah. He writes:

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the

virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which... means, "God with us."{8}

Some scholars are unimpressed with Matthew's interpretation of Isaiah. John Dominic Crossan unequivocally states, "The prophecy in Isaiah says nothing whatsoever about a virginal conception." {9} Did Matthew misread Isaiah?

Let's acknowledge that the original context of Isaiah's prophecy may not be exclusively about the virginal conception of Jesus. The year is 734 B.C. and King Ahaz of Judah is terrified to learn that Aram and Israel have formed an alliance against him. Isaiah is sent to reassure Ahaz that God is in control and that the aims of the alliance will not succeed. Ahaz is told to request a sign from the Lord, a means of confirming the truth of Isaiah's message. But he refuses! {10} Annoyed at the king's stubbornness, Isaiah declares that the Lord will give a sign anyway: an *almah* (a maiden of marriageable age) will conceive a son and call his name Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey upon reaching an age of moral discernment. But before this happens, the land of the two dreaded kings will be forsaken. {11} Should this prophecy be understood to refer exclusively to Jesus' virginal conception? If so, how does it relate to the promise that the Aram-Israel alliance would soon be broken and their lands forsaken (a promise fulfilled within twelve years time)? {12}

It's quite possible that Isaiah's prophecy had a *dual fulfillment*: {13} initially, in Isaiah's day; and ultimately, at the birth of Jesus. In this view the *almah*, or young maiden of Isaiah's prophecy, is a type of the virgin Mary, who later conceived Jesus through the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit. {14} So although a young woman in Isaiah's day bore a child named Immanuel, Jesus is later recognized by Matthew to also be Immanuel, "God with us" in a new and unprecedented way. Thus, Matthew didn't misread Isaiah. And if

this is so, we must continue to consider this prophecy in weighing the evidence for Jesus' virgin birth.

But even if we've correctly explained Matthew's use of Isaiah's prophecy, we must still consider the alleged contradictions in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. We will address this issue in the next section.

Don't Matthew and Luke Contradict Each Other?

[{15}](#) Some scholars see the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke as contradictory. If so, their historical reliability is in doubt, along with their accounts of Jesus' virgin birth. But are these narratives really contradictory? Let's take a closer look.

First, some think Matthew implies that Mary and Joseph resided permanently in Bethlehem before Jesus' birth, whereas Luke says they lived in Nazareth and only came to Bethlehem for the census.[{16}](#) But Matthew never actually tells us the couple's residence before Jesus' birth. He simply says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just like Luke.[{17}](#)

But if Mary and Joseph resided in Nazareth prior to Jesus' birth, then why, after their flight into Egypt, does Matthew seem to suggest that they intended to return to Judea rather than their home in Nazareth?[{18}](#) It's helpful to recall that Jesus was "the promised king of David's line."[{19}](#) Might not his parents, then, have wished to raise Him in His ancestral home?[{20}](#) This is actually quite probable. But regardless of their original intention, let's not forget that Matthew goes on to write that Joseph, being warned in a dream not to settle in Judea, did take his family back to Nazareth after all.[{21}](#)

Finally, some think Luke's narrative leaves no room for Matthew's account about the visit of the magi and sojourn in Egypt. These events could only have occurred after Jesus'

presentation in the Temple, forty days after His birth.[{22}](#) But Luke 2:39, which concludes this presentation, says that when Jesus' parents "had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to . . . Nazareth." This raises a question. Does Luke's statement prohibit an initial return to Bethlehem, thus casting doubt on Matthew's account of the magi and flight into Egypt?

It's important to notice the emphasis in Luke 2:39. It's not so much on when Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth, but rather that they did not return until after they had fulfilled the requirements of the Law.[{23}](#) Strictly speaking, Luke 2:39 does not disallow the events recorded by Matthew. Luke may not have known of the visit of the magi and flight into Egypt, or he may have chosen to omit this information. Either way, however, "the silence of one narrative regarding events recorded in another is quite a different thing from actual contradiction."[{24}](#) Thus, the virgin birth cannot be dismissed on the grounds that the infancy narratives are contradictory—they're not.

But aren't we forgetting the most obvious hypothesis of all? Is the story of Jesus' virgin birth simply a myth, comparable to other such stories from the ancient world? We'll examine this question in the next section.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Pagan Myths?

Not long after Matthew and Luke finished writing their gospels, some scholars began contending that the story of Jesus' virgin birth was derived from pagan myths. Unfortunately, such ideas continue to haunt the Church even today. John Dominic Crossan cites parallels between the deification of Octavius by the Roman Senate and that of Jesus by the early church.[{25}](#) In each case, says Crossan, the decision to deify their leader was closely connected with the

invention of a divine birth story. The official biography of Octavius claimed the god Apollo in the form of a snake impregnated his mother.^{26} Jesus' biographers claimed the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary conceived Him. In Crossan's view, neither story is historically true: "The divine origins of Jesus are...just as...mythological as those of Octavius."^{27} The stories simply help explain why these men received divine honors.

Is Crossan's hypothesis plausible? One can certainly find scholars who embrace such ideas. But a careful comparison of the biblical accounts of Jesus' birth with the many miraculous birth stories in pagan literature reveals several important differences.

First, the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth show none "of the standard literary marks of the myth genre."^{28} Matthew and Luke are written as history—not mythology. They mention places, people, and events that can be verified through normal methods of historical and archaeological inquiry. The beginning of Luke's gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity."^{29} Thus, there is a clear difference in genre between the gospels and pagan myths.

Another difference can be seen in the religious atmosphere of these stories. The pagan myths are polytheistic; the gospels, monotheistic. The miraculous birth stories in pagan literature usually focus on a god's lust for some mortal woman.^{30} Since this lust is typically gratified through sexual intercourse, the resulting conception and birth are hardly virginal. We are thus far removed from the description of Jesus' virginal conception in the gospels. There we find no hint that God's love for Mary in any way parallels the lust of Apollo for the mother of Octavius.

These are just two of many differences between the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and the miraculous birth stories in

pagan literature. But even these differences make the theory of pagan derivation unlikely. Remember, this theory requires us to believe that strict moral monotheists, who claimed to be writing history, borrowed some of the crudest elements from polytheistic myths to tell the story of Jesus' birth! Frankly, it's incredible. But could a theory of Jewish derivation still work? We'll conclude with this question.

Wasn't the Virgin Birth Story Derived from Jewish Thought?

Some scholars have speculated that the story of Jesus' virgin birth may have been derived from an imaginative Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament.[{31}](#) The story is not historical; it is a literary fiction of early Jewish Christians. It may have resulted from reflection on Isaiah 7:14, which says in part, "Behold, a virgin will be with child." What could be more natural than this verse becoming the source of inspiration for a legendary tale about the virgin birth of the Messiah?[{32}](#)

But would this really have been natural? There's actually no clear evidence that pre-Christian Judaism understood Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah at all, much less his virginal conception.[{33}](#) Indeed, many contend that the Hebrew text of Isaiah says nothing whatever about a virginal conception and birth.[{34}](#) But if that is so, it would seem quite unlikely for early Jewish Christians to have read the verse in such a way!

Others believe the translation of Isaiah from Hebrew to Greek, known as the Septuagint, may have provided the initial impulse for such a reading. The Greek text of Isaiah 7:14 translates the Hebrew term *almah*, meaning "a young woman of marriageable age," with the Greek term *parthenos*, meaning "virgin". Could this translation have led some Jewish Christians to conclude that Isaiah was prophesying the virgin birth of the Messiah?

And if so, might they have invented the story of Jesus' virgin birth as the alleged "fulfillment" of Isaiah's prediction?

While one can claim that they might have done so, there's no evidence that they actually did. But if not, what could account for early Christianity's understanding of Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of the Messiah's virgin birth? Well, the historical reality of Jesus' virgin birth could have done so! After all, it's one thing to think that early Jewish Christians, without any precedent in Jewish thought, would invent the story of Jesus' virgin birth from an imaginative interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy. But it's another thing entirely to think that by beginning with a historically reliable account of Jesus' virgin birth, they eventually concluded that Isaiah had indeed prophesied such an event. [\[35\]](#)

Only the latter hypothesis is supported by evidence. Particularly important in this regard are the gospels of Matthew and Luke. These sources have been shown to be quite historically reliable. Their accounts of Jesus' birth, though apparently written independently of one another, are free of contradiction. Indeed, apart from an unproven bias against the supernatural, there is little reason to doubt the accuracy of their reports. Thus, there do appear to be adequate grounds for believing that Jesus really was born of a virgin!

Notes

1. Such differences do not, of course, imply contradictions. See the third section for more information.
2. See Matt. 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-35.
3. For instance, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), writes, "I understand the virginal conception of Jesus to be a confessional statement about Jesus' status and not a biological statement about Mary's body. It is later faith in Jesus as an adult

retrojected mythologically onto Jesus as an infant. . .” (23). And again a little later, “Jesus . . . was born . . . to Joseph and Mary.” (26)

4. For example, in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? A debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 61, Dr. Craig questions Dr. Crossan about his anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions and whether they do not rule out the possibility of miracles a priori. Dr. Crossan admits that, insofar as miracles are concerned, “[I]t’s a theological presupposition of mine that God does not operate that way.”

5. Ibid. In fact, although it is difficult to pin him down this appears to be Dr. Crossan’s position. At one point in the debate, Dr. Craig asks Dr. Crossan, “What about the statement that God exists? Is that a statement of faith or fact?” Dr. Crossan responds, “It’s a statement of faith for all those who make it” (49). But suppose no human beings existed to make such statements of faith. In order to clarify Dr. Crossan’s response, Dr. Craig later asks, “Was there a being who was the Creator and Sustainer of the universe during that period of time when no human beings existed?” Dr. Crossan’s answer is quite revealing: “Well, I would probably prefer to say no because what you’re doing is trying to put yourself in the position of God and ask...’How is God apart from faith?’ I don’t know if you can do that. You can do it, I suppose, but I don’t know if it really has any point” (emphasis mine, 51). This answer appears to commit Dr. Crossan to an atheistic (and thus strictly naturalistic) worldview.

6. So said the famous Greek atomist philosopher, Democritus of Abdera.

7. See Matt. 1:20-25.

8. Matt. 1:22-23.

9. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 17. He goes on

to say, "Clearly, somebody went seeking in the Old Testament for a text that could be interpreted as prophesying a virginal conception, even if such was never its original meaning"(18).

10. See Isaiah 7:1-12.

11. See Isaiah 7:13-16.

12. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978). Ryrie comments, "Within twelve years after this prophecy, Damascus was captured by Assyria (732) and Israel had fallen (722)." (1024)

13. Although some writers object to the notion of a "dual fulfillment" of prophecy, there appear to be other examples of this phenomenon in Scripture. For instance, in Joel 2:28-32 we find a promise of a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The prophecy is linked with various cosmic disturbances that will immediately precede the Day of the Lord. Later, in connection with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter declares, "This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel" (v. 16). He proceeds to quote almost the entire passage of Joel 2:28-32. However, it seems that only the first part of the prophecy, concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was actually fulfilled in Peter's day. What's more, the book of Revelation seems to indicate that the cosmic disturbances mentioned by Joel await a yet future fulfillment (see Rev. 6:12). While scholars have offered various solutions to account for Peter's use of Joel in Acts 2, it seems best to understand Joel's prophecy as having some sort of "dual fulfillment": an initial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost; an ultimate fulfillment before the second coming of Christ. The "dual fulfillment" view has the advantage of preserving the original integrity of the prophet's message, while at the same time recognizing that some prophecies may be Divinely intended to include more than one fulfillment throughout salvation history. In light of this very real possibility, we should humbly acknowledge that Matthew's use of Isaiah and

Peter's use of Joel confront us with complex interpretive issues. It is partly for this reason that very capable scholars reach different conclusions about the meaning of these passages. After careful consideration I was inclined toward the "dual fulfillment" position; however, I recognize that others will want to adopt some other perspective.

14. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, 1024.

15. In this section I have relied heavily on the analysis given in J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1971), 192-97.

16. I have chosen to examine some of the more difficult "contradictions." But it's important to point out that some of the alleged difficulties are quite easily dealt with. For instance, Luke records that shepherds visited the baby Jesus in response to an angelic announcement (Luke 2:8-20). Matthew, however, tells not of shepherds but of magi, who responded not to an angelic announcement, but to an astronomical observation (Matt. 2:1-12). But surely there's no contradiction here. After all, it's entirely possible that both the shepherds and the magi visited Jesus! Doubtless the accounts are selective and have not recorded every detail, but this does not mean they are contradictory.

17. Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:1-7.

18. Matt. 2:19-23.

19. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 193.

20. Ibid.

21. Matt. 2:22-23.

22. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 196, explains: "The visit of the magi could hardly have taken place during this forty-day interval; for it would have been impossible to take the child into the Temple when the wrath of the king was so

aroused...Evidently, therefore, the flight into Egypt took place immediately after the magi had come; no visit to the Temple could have intervened. If, therefore, the two narratives are to be harmonized, we must suppose that when the presentation in the Temple had been completed, Joseph and Mary returned with the child to Bethlehem, received there the visit of the magi, and then fled into Egypt."

23. Ibid., 196-97.

24. Ibid., 197.

25. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1-5, 26-28.

26. Peter Jennings, interview with John Dominic Crossan, "The Search for Jesus," ABC Special, June 26, 2000. More general information about this ABC special program can be found at the following URL:
http://more.abcnews.go.com/onair/abcnewsspecials/pjr000626_jesus_promo.html. A conservative, evangelical response to Peter Jennings' ABC special was done by John Ankerberg, "A Response to ABC's The Search for Jesus: Part 1: Questions About His Birth," The John Ankerberg Show (videotape copy), 2001. More general information can be found at John Ankerberg's Web site at: www.ankerberg.com.

27. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 26-27.

28. Norman L. Geisler, "Virgin Birth of Christ," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 763.

29. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 39-40.

30. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 338.

31. This might be referred to as midrash, or midrash pesher, which "is an imaginative interpretation or expansion based on

some OT text.” B. Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 60.

32. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 287.

33. Witherington, “Birth of Jesus,” 64. See also Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 297.

34. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 288. See also, John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 17.

35. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 286-87.

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“Are Pastors Bound to Marry Anyone Who Asks?”

As an ordained Baptist pastor, my question is this: Am I bound by the Bible to marry anyone who asks me to? If a couple comes to me to ask me to marry them, and they tell me they are not saved, but want to get married anyway, should I? If they are living together, am I supposed to marry them just the same? I am confused by what other pastors have told me, and have read scripture, but I still need some advice outside that of my denomination.

Thank you for your letter. As far as I’m aware, you are not biblically bound to marry anyone who asks you to. There are probably other pastors in your immediate area who would be willing to marry such people. If you really feel uncomfortable about it, you could probably refer such people to these other

pastors.

However, another Probe staff member made some really good points about this issue. This person's previous pastor, who had a genuine heart for God and for people, would usually marry unbelievers. His reasoning was as follows:

1. Once married, such people would no longer be living in sin.
2. When they had kids and looked for a church, they'd possibly come back to his.
3. It gave him a chance to share the gospel with them.

Also, if you require such couples to go through pre-marital counseling, it would give you extensive time with them to impart biblical principles about marriage and family.

Finally, marriage is a God-ordained institution for all people, not just believers. We want people to understand that God takes marriage very seriously and that He will hold them accountable for violating their marriage vows. We also want to be available to those who are struggling with marriage difficulties and contemplating divorce. Ultimately, however, people must bear a personal responsibility before God for what they do (or don't do) with their marriages.

Thus, I personally do not believe that it would be morally wrong for you to marry such people (generally speaking, at least. I suppose there might always be exceptions). However, if you don't feel comfortable before God, I would simply refer the people to another local pastor. You're not morally obligated to marry them either.

Hope this helps a bit.

The Lord bless you,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

Probing the Shroud of Turin

The Gospels and the Shroud

Few historical artifacts generate as much heated controversy as the Shroud of Turin. Some claim it is merely a clever painting; a forger's work of art.[{1}](#) Others think it might be the actual burial shroud of Jesus.[{2}](#)

The Shroud is a linen cloth 14.25 feet long by 3.5 feet wide. On its surface is the image of a man who appears to be a Jewish crucifixion victim. Could this be Jesus of Nazareth? While some researchers reject this idea as fanciful, others believe the weight of available evidence points to just such a remarkable conclusion.

In this article we will examine evidence both *for* and *against* the claim that the Shroud of Turin is the actual burial garment of Jesus. My goal is simply to present the evidence. I will leave the verdict to the reader. But where should we begin our inquiry?

If we want to find out if the Shroud may have been the actual burial garment of Jesus, a good place to begin is with an examination of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death. After all, if the evidence on the Shroud is *not* consistent with the Gospels, we can safely conclude that *whatever* the source of the image, it could not be that of Jesus. So how well do the Gospel accounts line up with the image on the Shroud? Are there any obvious inconsistencies or contradictions?

Actually there is remarkable agreement between the two. The Gospels say that Jesus was scourged,[{3}](#) crowned with thorns,[{4}](#) and crucified.[{5}](#) The man's image on the Shroud

likewise gives evidence of one who suffered such things. In addition, John's Gospel says that the legs of those crucified with Jesus were broken. However, when the soldiers saw that Jesus was already dead, rather than break His legs they "pierced His side with a spear."[\[6\]](#) Careful examination of the Shroud again reveals consistency with the Gospels on this point. Like Jesus, the man's legs were not broken, but his side appears to have been pierced with a spear.

Of course different researchers interpret such parallels differently. Kenneth Stevenson, a Christian researcher, views such consistency as an important link in determining whether the image might be that of Jesus. But Walter McCrone, a humanistic scientist who rejects miracles, contends that the Shroud is simply a medieval artist's painting.[\[7\]](#)

While the different philosophical commitments of Stevenson and McCrone may have influenced their interpretations of the data, we must still ask which interpretation is correct. Does the Shroud image depict an actual crucifixion victim or is it rather an ingenuous painting? We will address this question next.

The Shroud under a Microscope

One of the most qualified researchers to contend that the Shroud of Turin is merely a painting is Walter McCrone. An expert microscopist and member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, McCrone has "examined several hundred paintings, by artists from Giotto to Pollock" in order to determine their authenticity.[\[8\]](#) He sums up his own examination of the Shroud this way, "From my experience as a painting authenticator, the shroud is authentic—a beautiful and inspired authentic painting."[\[9\]](#)

McCrone reached this conclusion after examining thirty-two sticky tape samples taken from both image and non-image areas on the Shroud. He later wrote, "I identified the substance of

the body-and-blood images as the paint pigment red ochre. . . . The blood image areas consist of another pigment, vermilion, in addition to red ochre. . . . These paints were in common use during the Middle Ages”.{10}

These statements give the impression that a careful analysis of the Shroud conclusively demonstrates the image to be merely a painting. However, it’s only fair to note that virtually all of McCrone’s statements are hotly disputed by other, equally competent, pro-Shroud researchers!

For instance, McCrone tested for blood on the Shroud and claimed to find none.{11} But Professor Alan Adler, a highly skilled chemist, states that the stains on the shroud were from blood.{12} Also, as previously mentioned, McCrone thinks the Shroud image was produced with various paint pigments. But Kenneth Stevenson notes that the primary statement to which the Shroud of Turin Research Project publicly agreed was that “the image is the result of some cellulose oxidation-dehydration reaction rather than an applied pigment.”{13} Finally, although Alan Whanger admits that threads were obtained from the Shroud which *did* have the red ochre pigment observed by McCrone, he claims that these are merely “translocated fibers” from the many copies of the Shroud “that were painted during the Middle Ages.”{14} According to professor Whanger, such copies “were laid face down . . . on the shroud” and therefore “have nothing to do with the formation of the shroud images.”{15}

Finally, Dr. Max Frei claimed to have “identified key pollens that definitely placed the Shroud in both Palestine and Turkey at some time in the past.”{16} Of course, this observation is quite difficult to square with the theory that the Shroud has never been outside of Europe! But McCrone accuses Frei of deception and states, “There were very few pollen grains on his tapes (I examined them very carefully).”{17}

So which expert should one believe? As we’ll see, the

complexity of this question is increased when one considers rival views of the Shroud's history.

Rival Histories of the Shroud

Both Gary Vikan and Walter McCrone maintain that there is no reliable evidence for the Shroud of Turin prior to the year 1356.^{18} Kenneth Stevenson, relying on the work of Ian Wilson, believes the Shroud's history might be reconstructed all the way back to the 1st century!^{19} So who's right?

Most scholars agree that the Shroud only became widely known in 1357 when it was exhibited in Lirey, France. Those who think the Shroud is merely a 14th century painting cite Bishop Henri of Poitiers' claim that he actually knew the artist!^{20} But those who think the Shroud is older suggest that he may have only been referring to one of the medieval *copies* of the Shroud. These researchers attempt to reconstruct the Shroud's history via the Mandylion, an ancient cloth supposedly imprinted with the facial image of Christ. They observe that historical descriptions of the Mandylion bear similarity to the image on the Shroud. But what do we know of the Mandylion's history?

It is alleged that Abgar V, a 1st century ruler of Edessa, sent a letter to Jesus requesting healing from leprosy. After Jesus' death and resurrection, a disciple came to Edessa with a cloth "imprinted with the Savior's image."^{21} Seeing the cloth, Abgar was cured and Christianity took root in the city.

Although there may be legendary elements in this story, certain historical facts *do* underlie it. For instance, Abgar V was ruler of Edessa and tradition links the early evangelization of the city to "a holy image of the Lord."^{22}

In 525 the Mandylion was discovered in the walls of Edessa. It was probably hidden there at a time when Christians were being persecuted. In 944 it was taken to Constantinople, but was

lost again when the city was sacked in 1204. Later, in 1357, the Shroud was publicly displayed in France. Ian Wilson speculates that the Mandylion and the Shroud are the same object. He suggests that between 1204 and 1357 the cloth was secretly kept by the Knights Templars. If Wilson is correct, a case can be made for dating this cloth to the 1st century.

But there's a problem. The Shroud is a full-body image; the Mandylion was only a facial image. Wilson, however, thinks the Mandylion was probably folded so that only the face was visible. He may be right. Careful photographic analysis reveals that the Shroud may once have been folded as Wilson describes. But this is uncertain.

While other difficulties could be mentioned, the primary problem with a 1st century date for the Shroud is the conflict with its radiocarbon date of about 1325. We will examine this next.

Carbon 14 An Insurmountable Objection?

In 1988 three laboratories received samples of the Shroud of Turin to be tested with the carbon 14 dating method. The results indicated that the Shroud was a medieval artifact and its date was set at 1325 +/- 65 years. This date is generally considered to be about 95 percent reliable. Thus for many researchers the issue is settled: the Shroud is a medieval relic.

But why isn't everyone convinced? Why do a number of researchers contend that this date may be in error? The chief reason for skepticism concerns the nature and quality of the samples tested. John McRay, a respected scholar and archaeologist, notes that "there is a high probability of sample contamination" which can undermine the carbon 14 dating method.[\[23\]](#) Other scholars have offered a number of reasons why such sample contamination may have affected the dating of the Shroud.

For instance, Kenneth Stevenson notes that the samples were taken from an area of the Shroud just “two to three centimeters from a repair site due to the 1532 fire.”[\[24\]](#) Two potential problems result from this. First, what if the sample was *actually part of a repair site*? If this happened a medieval date would be expected, for that was when the repair was made. Second, carbon molecules from the Shroud’s silver casing may have altered the cloth’s carbon content by becoming mixed with the cloth during the fire. “By not checking out these factors and including them as part of the dating equation, the labs left themselves open for a faulty date”.[\[25\]](#)

Another researcher, Dr. Leoncio Garza-Valdes, has discovered a bacterium which produces a clear “bioplastic” coating on many ancient objects. When he studied samples of the Shroud, he found them to be “covered by the bioplastic coating . . . and by many colonies of fungi.”[\[26\]](#) Additionally, Dr. Garza-Valdes claims that hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide, the standard cleansing agents used on ancient artifacts, do not remove this bioplastic coating. If he’s right, and the Shroud sample included additional carbon 14 atoms from contamination material, a medieval date for the Shroud *might* be misleadingly young.

Of course, none of this *proves* that a medieval date for the Shroud is incorrect. Still, it is worth remembering a statement by Dr. Willy Wolfi, a researcher at one of the labs that dated the Shroud: “The C-14 method is not immune to grossly inaccurate dating when non-apparent problems exist in samples from the field. The existence of significant indeterminate errors occurs frequently.”[\[27\]](#) Given such a possibility in the case of the Shroud, the need for further testing seems essential.

How Was the Image Formed?

What process led to the formation of the image on the Shroud of Turin? While this remains something of a mystery, there are only three possibilities: human artistry, natural processes, or supernatural processes.

Walter McCrone maintains the image was painted with red ochre and vermilion.[{28}](#) John Heller and Alan Adler disagree. They say the Shroud had too little of either of these pigments for even “one painted drop of blood.”[{29}](#) Furthermore, Don Lynn and Jean Lorre “discovered that the Shroud’s image is nondirectional.”[{30}](#) That is, it does not appear to have been caused by any hand movement across the cloth. Such observations make the artistic hypothesis at least questionable.

But others think the image was formed naturally. Sam Pellicori and John German believe it resulted from bodily contact with the cloth over a period of time. But this view also has difficulties. First, it postulates that the darker areas formed by more direct contact with the body over time. As Dr. German explains, the hypothesis was that “the oils in the skin (which Pellicori experimentally demonstrated produced the same fiber degradation we saw on the Shroud) would have longer to migrate into the linen and cover more individual fibrils.”[{31}](#) This would result in the image being darker at those places where the cloth had longer contact with the skin. But some have argued that, if this were so, the back of the image should be darker than the front—which it’s not. In addition, if it did form naturally, then it’s at least a bit surprising that no other burial cloth images have yet been found.”

If the image resulted from neither art nor nature, could supernatural processes have formed it? Adherents of this view typically believe the image was created by something like a burst of radiant energy, possibly at the moment of Jesus’ resurrection. Unfortunately, this hypothesis cannot account

for *all* the Shroud image features. Still, supporters observe that the image reveals a dead man in a state of rigor mortis. Yet there is no trace of bodily decomposition on the Shroud. This *may* indicate that the man was removed during rigor mortis, which generally lasts less than forty-eight hours after death. But there are difficulties in supposing the body was removed by human agency. "Since the cloth was loosely attached to the body from the dried blood, any attempt to remove it probably would have damaged the stains. Yet these . . . stains are anatomically correct." [\[32\]](#) Nevertheless, while proponents admittedly have some good arguments, they cannot *prove* that the Shroud offers us an image of the risen Christ.

So we may be left with something of a mystery. We simply don't have enough information to reach absolute certainty about the Shroud. It's important to remember, however, that the truth of Christianity does not depend on whether or not the Shroud is Jesus' burial cloth. A solid case for the bodily resurrection of Christ can be made with or without the Shroud. Thus, having tried to fairly present some of the evidence, I must now leave you to reach your own verdict on the Shroud.

Notes

1. See Gary Vikan, "Debunking the Shroud: Made by Human Hands," and Walter C. McCrone, "The Shroud Painting Explained," *Biblical Archaeology Review* Vol. 24 No. 6 (November/December 1998), 27-29.

2. Dr. Kenneth E. Stevenson, *Image of the Risen Christ* (Toronto, Ontario: Frontier Research Publications, Inc., 1999). In this section I have relied heavily on Stevenson's research in *Image of the Risen Christ*, pp. 93-105.

3. John 19:1.

4. Matt. 27:29.

5. Luke 23:33.
6. John 19:32-34.
7. Walter C. McCrone, personal e-mail, October 5, 2000.
8. Walter C. McCrone, "Walter C. McCrone Responds," *Biblical Archaeology Review* Vol. 25 No. 2 (March/April 1999), 66.
9. Ibid.
10. McCrone, "The Shroud Painting Explained," 29.
11. Ibid.
12. Giles F. Carter, "The Chinks in Their Armor," *Biblical Archaeology Review* Vol. 25 No.2 (March/April 1999), 17.
13. Steven Schaferamen, "Comment," *Current Anthropology* 24 (June 1983):301, cited in Stevenson, 73.
14. Alan D. Whanger, "Bolstering the Case for the Shroud," *Biblical Archaeology Review* Vol. 26 No.3 (May/June 2000), 65.
15. Ibid.
16. Stevenson, 127.
17. McCrone, "Walter C. McCrone Responds," 66.
18. Vikan, "Debunking the Shroud: Made by Human Hands", and McCrone, "The Shroud Painting Explained," 29. Vikan gives the date 1357, McCrone 1356. At any rate, both would agree that there is no reliable documentation for the Shroud prior to 1356.
19. Stevenson, 29-42. I have relied heavily on the historical reconstruction of the Shroud presented by Stevenson in this section.
20. Vikan, "Debunking the Shroud: Made by Human Hands," and McCrone, "The Shroud Painting Explained," 29.

21. Stevenson, 34.

22. Ibid.

23. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), 34. However, McRay himself appears to accept a medieval date for the Shroud (see p. 221).

24. Stevenson, 118. I have again relied heavily on Stevenson in this section, pp. 107-124.

25. Ibid.

26. Leoncio A. Garza-Valdes, *The DNA of God* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1999), 34, cited in Stevenson, 121.

27. Willy Wolfi, *Nuclear Instruments and Methods in Physics Research*, B29 (1987): 1-13, cited in Stevenson, 120.

28. Walter C. McCrone, "The Shroud Painting Explained," 29.

29. John H. Heller, *Report on the Shroud of Turin* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 194, cited in Stevenson, 187.

30. Stevenson, 188.

31. John D. German, personal e-mail to the author, December 29, 2005.

32. Ibid., 205.

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Taoism and Christianity

The Chinese translation of John 1:1 reads, 'In the beginning was the Tao...' Are Taoism and Christianity compatible? Dr. Michael Gleghorn says that even though there are some similarities, Christianity's uniqueness remains separate from all philosophies, including Taoism.

Historical Background

The philosophy of Taoism is traditionally held to have originated in China with a man named Lao Tzu. Although some scholars doubt whether he was an actual historical figure, tradition dates his life from 604-517 B.C. The story goes that Lao Tzu, "saddened by his people's disinclination to cultivate the natural goodness he advocated",^{1} decided to head west and abandon civilization. As he was leaving, the gatekeeper asked if he would write down his teachings for the benefit of society. Lao Tzu consented, retired for a few days, and returned with a brief work called *Tao Te Ching*, "The Classic of the Way and its Power."^{2} It "contains 81 short chapters describing the meaning of Tao and how one should live according to the Tao."^{3}

The term *Tao* is typically translated into English as "way", but it can also be translated as "path," "road," or "course." Interestingly, however, one scholar cites James Legge as stating that the term might even be understood "in a triple sense as at once 'being', 'reason', and 'speech'."^{4}

After Lao Tzu, probably the most important Taoist philosopher has been Chuang Tzu, who is generally believed to have lived sometime between 399-295 B.C.^{5} Like the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, Chuang Tzu viewed all of reality as "dynamic and ever-changing."^{6} Also like Heraclitus, he embraced a sort of moral relativism, believing that there is no ultimate difference between what men call good and evil for all

opposites are reconciled in the Tao.{7}

Throughout history, Taoist ideas have been expressed in various ways. Huston Smith, in *The World's Religions*, divides Taoist thought into three different, yet related, camps—the philosophical, “vitalizing”, and religious Taoisms.{8}

Historically, the two most prominent representatives of philosophical Taoism have been Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. The chief object of philosophical Taoism “is to live in a way that conserves life’s vitality by not expending it in useless, draining ways, the chief of which are friction and conflict.”{9} One does this by living in harmony with the Tao, or Way, of all things: the Way of nature, of society, and of oneself. Taoist philosophers have a particular concept characterizing action that is in harmony with the Tao. They call it *wu-wei*. Literally this means “non-action”, but practically speaking it means taking no action which is contrary to nature. Thus, “action in the mode of *wu-wei* is action in which friction—in interpersonal relationships, in intra-psychic conflict, and in relation to nature—is reduced to the minimum.”{10}

“Vitalizing” Taoists have a different approach to life. Rather than attempting to *conserve* vitality by taking no action contrary to nature, “vitalizing” Taoists desire to *increase* their available quota of vital energy, which they refer to as *ch’i*. “Vitalizing” Taoists have sought to maximize *ch’i*, or vital energy, through—among other things— nutrition, breathing exercises, and meditation.{11} The last variety, religious Taoism, did not take shape until the second century A.D.{12} Religious Taoists attempt to use magical rites to harness occult powers for humane ends in the physical world.{13} Sadly, this form of Taoism is filled with many harmful superstitions.

The Taoism of Lao Tzu

Having briefly described the three dominant forms of Taoism, let us now turn our attention back to the thought of Lao Tzu in *Tao Te Ching*.

In the first place, what did Lao Tzu teach about Tao? Interestingly, (and somewhat ironically), *Tao Te Ching* begins by asserting that words are not adequate for explaining Tao: "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao."[{14}](#)

Of course, just because words cannot adequately explain Tao does not mean that we can gain no conception of Tao whatsoever. Indeed, if that were so the first sentence should have also been the last. But it was not. Thus, chapter 25 reads in part:

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete,
Which existed before heaven and earth.
Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not
change.
It operates everywhere and is free from danger.
It may be considered the mother of the universe.
I do not know its name; I call it Tao.[{15}](#)

From this passage we learn a great deal about Tao: it existed prior to the physical world;[{16}](#) it is independent and immutable (i.e. does not change); its action is omnipresent; and finally, "it may be considered the mother of the universe." It is quite interesting that Tao, as described above, appears to share many attributes with the Christian conception of God. However, it is important to keep in mind that some of these similarities are more apparent than real—and there are also major differences. We will mention some of these later.

Another way to describe the indescribable is to say what Tao most closely resembles. The closest analogue to Tao in the

physical world is water. Thus we read in chapter 8:

The best (man) is like water.

Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them.

It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain.

This is why it is so near to Tao.[{17}](#)

According to Lao Tzu, man should model himself after Tao. Since water so closely resembles the workings of Tao, the Taoist sage could draw certain lessons for human behavior by carefully observing the behavior of water. Thus, the sage might observe the beneficial qualities of water, and that these qualities are combined with water's natural tendency to seek the lowest places. It may have been just such observations that led Lao Tzu to conclude his classic thus:

The Way of Heaven is to benefit others and not to injure.

The Way of the sage is to act but not to compete.[{18}](#)

Such principles have application not only for the individual, but also for society. A proper application of Tao to the art of government requires the principle of *wu-wei* (i.e. taking no action contrary to nature). Taoism seeks a harmonious relationship with nature rather than one of domination or interference. Likewise, Lao Tzu believed the best government to be the one which interfered least with the governed (i.e. a *laissez-faire* approach).[{19}](#) So long as men live in harmony with Tao, both their private and public lives will be free from conflict. But when Tao is abandoned, conflict is inevitable—and with it misery, oppression, and war.[{20}](#)

The Taoism of Chuang Tzu

In some respects the Taoism of Chuang Tzu represents a significant departure from that of Lao Tzu. Still, there are also important similarities that should not be overlooked. One of these concerns the relationship of Tao to the physical

universe. In words reminiscent of *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu* declares:

Before heaven and earth came into being, Tao existed by itself from all time. . . . It created heaven and earth. . . . It is prior to heaven and earth. . . . [{21}](#)

The most interesting part of this statement is the assertion that Tao “created heaven and earth.” How are we to understand this? Does Chuang Tzu view Tao as Creator in the same sense in which Christians apply this term to God? Probably not. In addressing such questions one commentator has written: “Any personal God . . . is clearly out of harmony with Chuang Tzu’s philosophy.”[{22}](#) Properly speaking, Taoists view Tao more as a *principle* than a *person*.

This distinction is more clearly seen when one considers Chuang Tzu’s moral philosophy. Chuang Tzu embraced a doctrine of moral relativism; that is, he did not believe that there was really any ultimate distinction between what men call “right” and “wrong”, or “good” and “evil.” He writes:

In their own way things are all right . . . generosity, strangeness, deceit, and abnormality. The Tao identifies them all as one.[{23}](#)

This statement helps clarify why the notion of a personal God is inconsistent with Chuang Tzu’s philosophy. Persons make distinctions, have preferences, and choose one thing over another. However, according to Chuang Tzu, Tao makes no distinction between right and wrong, but identifies them as one.

This has serious implications for followers of Tao. Unless educated to suppress such notions, most people inherently recognize the validity of moral distinctions. Indeed, the *Chuang Tzu* confirms this, but belittles those who embrace such distinctions by saying that they “misunderstand . . . the reality of things” and “must be either stupid or wrong.”[{24}](#)

Once the goal of the Taoist sage is to live all of life in harmony with Tao, it seems that Chuang Tzu would have his followers abandon genuine moral distinctions. This appears to be his intention when he writes, "...the sage harmonizes the right and wrong and rests in natural equalization. This is called following two courses at the same time."[{25}](#) In my opinion, this represents somewhat of a departure from the doctrines of Lao Tzu. True, slight strains of moral relativism can be found in *Tao Te Ching*, but Chuang Tzu elevates this doctrine to a place of central importance in his own philosophy.

Finally, something must be said of Chuang Tzu's belief that all reality is characterized by incessant change and transformation. Although Heraclitus had already taught a similar doctrine to the Greeks, one scholar points out the originality of this concept in China by calling it "a new note in Chinese philosophy."[{26}](#) According to Chuang Tzu:

Things are born and die . . . they are now empty and now full, and their physical form is not fixed . . . Time cannot be arrested. The succession of decline, growth, fullness, and emptiness go in a cycle, each end becoming a new beginning. This is the way to talk about the . . . principle of all things.[{27}](#)

With Chuang Tzu the doctrine of change assumed something of a permanent significance in Taoist thought.

Heraclitus, Chuang Tzu, and the Apostle John

Heraclitus was a Greek philosopher who thrived around 500 B.C. Although there are differences, the similarities between his philosophy and that of Chuang Tzu are quite impressive. Both held the doctrine of monism, believing that all reality is essentially one, or of the same essence. Both emphasized that this reality is in a state of constant change and

transformation. And both embraced a doctrine of moral relativism, the idea that there are no objective moral standards that are universally true for all people at all times. In light of these similarities, it is no wonder that Fritjof Capra referred to Heraclitus as the “Greek ‘Taoist.’”[{28}](#)

But here a distinction emerges which is very important to the rest of this discussion. Heraclitus wrote in Greek; Chuang Tzu wrote in Chinese. Thus, Heraclitus never explicitly referred to *Tao*, for this is a Chinese term. He did, however, begin using a particular Greek word in a new, technical sense, to communicate concepts *similar* (though *not* identical) to that of *Tao*. The Greek word Heraclitus chose was *logos*.[{29}](#) Depending on its context, the word *logos* can have a variety of meanings; however, it is most commonly used in the sense of “word,” “message,” “speech,” and “reason.” It is the word John used of the pre-incarnate Christ in the prologue of his Gospel when he wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). In this verse it is the Greek term *logos* which is translated as “Word.” Now think back to the beginning of this discussion. It was mentioned that while *Tao* is generally translated “way” or “path,” at least one scholar has said the term might also be understood “in a triple sense as at once ‘being’, ‘reason’, and ‘speech.’”[{30}](#) This makes a conceptual comparison with the term *logos* possible.

But only a comparison. The terms do not mean exactly the same thing and would not be interchangeable in every context. Still, some translators have seen enough similarity to justify using one term in place of another in at least some contexts. Remember John’s prologue? The Chinese translation reads, “In the beginning was the *Tao*, and the *Tao* was with God, and the *Tao* was God.” What are we to make of this?

Probably the first issue we must consider is whether the Apostle John was influenced by pagan thought in his use of the

term *logos*. Although there have been many scholars in the past who thought he was, the drift of contemporary scholarship has been away from such notions.[\[31\]](#) In fact, more recent scholarship contends that we need only look to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, for the source of John's *logos* doctrine. In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase "The word of the Lord" is often used. And, often enough, the Hebrew term for *word* was translated into Greek as *logos*. Since John intends to communicate that Jesus is *the* Word of God *incarnate*, we need look no further than the Septuagint for the source of this doctrine. Thus, John was most likely influenced by the Jewish scriptures rather than pagan philosophy in his doctrine of the *logos*.

Taoism and Christianity

Given that the Apostle John, in his doctrine of the *logos*, was likely influenced by the Septuagint, what would those Gentile readers, not familiar with the Septuagint, but quite familiar with Greek philosophy make of John's Gospel? A similar difficulty arises with the Chinese translation: might not the use of the term *Tao* affect their understanding of Christ?

Of course it might. Indeed, it seems that John's use of the term *logos* did influence some people to read ideas from Greek philosophy into their conception of Christ. Likewise, some Chinese readers might interpret Christ in a more Taoist manner due to the use of the term *Tao* in John's Gospel. We all approach every text with a certain *pre-understanding* that naturally influences our interpretation. Still, there would seem to be certain limits on how far this can *reasonably* influence our interpretation of Christ in John's Gospel. Consider a statement by D. H. Johnson:

. . . verbal similarities do not necessarily imply conceptual similarities. The use of similar words in seemingly similar ways can deceive us into thinking that two authors are discussing the same concept. Only when one

document is understood in its own right can it be compared to another which must also be understood in its own right.”[\[32\]](#)

We might say that every text will, to some extent, *impose* a particular meaning on the terms it uses. In the Chinese translation of John’s Gospel it soon becomes apparent that the term *Tao*, while retaining some of its original meaning, has been endowed with a remarkable new significance! How so?

First, although the *Chuang Tzu* credits *Tao* with creation, we should not understand *Tao* as a *personal Creator*. In contrast, as D. H. Johnson writes, “The meaning of *logos* in the Johannine prologue is clear. The Word is the person of the Godhead through whom the world was created.”[\[33\]](#) *Personality* is thus a crucial difference between the *Tao* of Taoism and the *Tao* of Christianity. Second, John 1:14 declares that “the *Tao* became flesh.” The incarnation of *Tao*, like the incarnation of the *logos*, is a significant development in the meaning of this term. A Taoist would instantly recognize that *Tao* has assumed new meaning in John’s Gospel, making it difficult to read too much Taoism into his understanding of Christ.

Thus, even though the term *Tao* is used of Christ in the Chinese translation of John’s Gospel, we should not infer that Taoism and Christianity are really about the same thing. They are not. Christianity proclaims a *personal* Creator who is morally outraged by man’s sinfulness and will one day judge the world in righteousness (Rom. 1:18-2:6). Taoism proclaims an *impersonal* creative principle which makes no moral distinction between right and wrong and which judges no one. Christianity proclaims that Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25), and that eternal life is freely given to all who trust Him as Savior (John 1:12; Rom. 6:23). In contrast, the doctrine of moral relativism in Taoism clouds the need for a Savior from sin. Finally, and most shocking of all, is Jesus’ claim to be the only true *Tao*—or *Way*—to the Father (John 14:6). If He is right, then Taoism, for all its

admirable qualities, cannot have told *the eternal Tao*.

Notes

1. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 197.
2. Ibid.
3. Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions and the Occult* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 57.
4. James K. Feibleman, *Understanding Oriental Philosophy* (New York: Mentor, 1977), 108.
5. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 177.
6. Ibid., 178.
7. Ibid., 184.
8. Huston Smith, 199-218.
9. Ibid., 200.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 201.
12. Ibid., 205.
13. Ibid., 206.
14. *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), chap. 1.
15. *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 152.
16. However, in chap. 7 of Chan's translation we read, "Heaven is eternal and earth everlasting." There are some apparent inconsistencies in *Tao Te Ching*.
17. Ibid., 143.
18. Ibid., 176.
19. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 48.
20. Ibid., chaps. 30 and 31.
21. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 194.
22. Ibid., 181.
23. Ibid., 184.
24. Ibid., 206.
25. Ibid., 184.

26. Ibid., 178.