

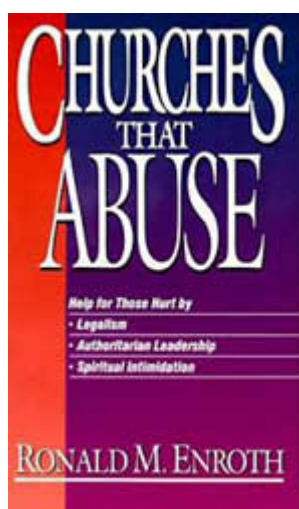
Abusive Churches

What characterizes abusive churches is their cultic method of ministry. Although outwardly orthodox in their theology, these churches use abusive and mind control methods to get their followers to submit to the organization. In this article Dr. Pat Zukeran covers eight characteristics of abusive churches.

[This article is also available in Spanish.](#)



We are all familiar with traditional cults such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. There are, however, other groups with cultic characteristics that do not fit the same profile as the traditional cults. Sometimes called "abusive churches" or even "Bible-based cults," they appear outwardly orthodox in their doctrinal beliefs. What distinguishes these groups or churches from genuine orthodox Christianity is their abusive, cultic-like methodology and philosophy of ministry.



In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth carefully examines several of these churches throughout the United States. He reveals the cultic methods these groups use and points out several distinguishing marks of abusive churches. At this point I will briefly introduce each of these characteristics and some of my own. Later, I'll discuss all these characteristics in detail.

First, abusive churches have a control-oriented style of leadership. Second, the leaders of such churches often use manipulation to gain complete submission from their members. Third, there is a rigid, legalistic lifestyle involving numerous requirements and minute details for daily life. Fourth, these churches tend to change their names often,

especially once they are exposed by the media. Fifth, denouncing other churches is common because they see themselves as superior to all other churches. Sixth, these churches have a persecution complex and view themselves as being persecuted by the world, the media, and other Christian churches. Seventh, abusive churches specifically target young adults between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. The eighth and final mark of abusive churches is the great difficulty members have in getting out of or leaving these churches, a process often marked by social, psychological, or emotional pain.

Those involved in a church that seems to reflect these characteristics would be wise to evaluate the situation thoroughly and leave the church if it is appropriate. Staying may increase the risks of damaging your family relationships and multiplies the likelihood of losing your perspective. Members of such churches often develop a distorted view of reality, distrust everyone, and suffer from stress, fear, and depression. Some former members even continue to experience these things after escaping from an abusing church. There are also several documented cases in which associating with an abusive church has led to the deaths of individuals or their relatives.

Some of these groups have networks of many sister churches. In some cases these groups have split off from more mainstream denominations. Occasionally the new groups have even been denounced by the founding denomination. Such groups often disguise themselves by frequently changing the name of their organization, especially following adverse publicity. This practice makes the true nature of these organizations more difficult to determine for the unsuspecting individual. Some abusive churches have college ministries all across the country. On some university campuses such student movements are among the largest groups on their respective campuses.

It is important that Christians today know the Bible and know

how to recognize such churches so as not to fall into their traps. In order to help people become more aware of churches which may be abusing their members, I now want to go through in more detail the eight characteristics I mentioned earlier.

Control-Oriented Leadership

A central feature of an abusive church is control-oriented leadership. The leader in an abusive church is dogmatic, self-confident, arrogant, and the spiritual focal point in the lives of his followers. The leader assumes he is more spiritually in tune with God than anyone else. He claims insight into Scripture that no one else has. Or, he may state that he receives personal revelations from God. Because of such claims, the leader's position and beliefs cannot be questioned; his statements are final. To members of this type of church or group, questioning the leader is the equivalent of questioning God. Although the leader may not come out and state this fact, this attitude is clearly seen by the treatment of those who dare to question or challenge the leader. The leader of the movement often makes personal decisions for his followers. Individual thinking is prohibited; thus the followers become dependent on the leader.

In the hierarchy of such a church, the leader is, or tends to be, accountable to no one. Even if there is an elder board, it is usually made up of men who are loyal to, and will never disagree with, the leader. This style of leadership is not one endorsed in the Bible. According to Scripture all believers have equal access to God and are equal before Him because we are made in His image, and we are all under the authority of the Word of God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 believers are directed to measure all teachings against the Word of God. Acts 17:11 states that even the apostle Paul was under the authority of the Bible, and the Bereans were commended because they tested Paul's teachings with the Scriptures. Leaders and laity alike are to live according to Scripture.

Manipulation of Members

Abusive churches are characterized by the manipulation of their members. Manipulation is the use of external forces to get others to do what someone else wants them to do. Here manipulation is used to get people to submit to the leadership of the church. The tactics of manipulation include the use of guilt, peer pressure, intimidation, and threats of divine judgment from God for disobedience. Often harsh discipline is carried out publicly to promote ridicule and humiliation.

Another tactic is the “shepherding” philosophy. As practiced in many abusive churches this philosophy requires every member to be personally accountable to another more experienced person. To this person, one must reveal all personal thoughts, feelings, and discuss future decisions. This personal information, is not used to *help* the member, but to *control* the member.

Another means of control is isolation. Abusive churches may cut off contact between a new member and his family, friends, and anyone else not associated with the church.

How different this style of leadership is from the leadership of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lovingly, gently, humbly, and sacrificially leads His sheep.

Rigid, Legalistic Lifestyle

The third characteristic of abusive churches is the rigid, legalistic lifestyle of their members. This rigidity is a natural result of the leadership style. Abusive churches require unwavering devotion to the church from their followers. Allegiance to the church has priority over allegiance to God, family, or anything else.

Often members are required or pressured to attend Bible studies five, six, or seven days a week. There is a

requirement to do evangelism; a certain quota of contacts must be met, and some churches even require members to fill out time cards recording how many hours they spent in evangelism, etc. Daily schedules are made for the person; thus he is endlessly doing the church's ministry. Former members of one church told me they were working for their church from 5:00 am to 12:00 midnight five days a week.

Members of such churches frequently drop out of school, quit working, or even neglect their families to do the work required by the church. There are also guidelines for dress, dating, finances, and so on. Such details are held to be of major importance in these churches.

In churches like these, people begin to lose their personal identity and start acting like programmed robots. Many times, the pressure and demands of the church will cause a member to have a nervous breakdown or fall into severe depression. As I reflect on these characteristics I think of Jesus' words concerning the Pharisees who "tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger" (Matt. 23: 4). What a contrast from the leadership style of Jesus who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. . . .For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Frequent Changing of Group/Church Name

A fourth characteristic of abusive churches is a pattern of constantly changing the name of the church or campus ministry. Often a name change is a response to unfavorable publicity by the media. Some abusive churches have changed their name several times in the course of a few years.

If you are in such a church, one that has changed its name several times because of bad publicity, or if you feel unceasing pressure to live up to its demands, it is probably

time to carefully evaluate the ministry of the church and your participation in it.

Denouncing All Other Churches

Let us now take a look at the fifth characteristic: abusive churches usually denounce all other Christian churches. They see themselves as spiritually elite. They feel that they alone have the truth and all other churches are corrupt. Therefore, they do not associate with other Christian churches. They often refer to themselves as some special group such as, "God's Green Berets," "The faithful remnant," or "God's end-time army." There is a sense of pride in abusive churches because members feel they have a special relationship with God and His movement in the world. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth quotes a former member of one such group who states, "Although we didn't come right out and say it, in our innermost hearts we really felt that there was no place in the world like our assembly. We thought the rest of Christianity was out to lunch." However the Bible makes it clear, that there are no spiritually elite groups or churches. Ephesians 4:36 states, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope, when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all."

The Christian church universal is united by the same God, the same Holy Spirit, and the fundamental beliefs of the Bible which include such things as the Trinity, authority of the Bible, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the deity of Christ, justification by faith alone, and so on. In these central truths we stand united. A church which believes itself to be elite and does not associate with other Christian churches is not motivated by the spirit of God but by divisive pride.

Persecution Complex

The sixth characteristic follows naturally. Because abusive churches see themselves as elite, they expect persecution in the world and even feed on it. Criticism and exposure by the media are seen as proof that they are the true church being persecuted by Satan. However, the persecution received by abusive churches is different from the persecution received by Jesus and the Apostles.

Jesus and the Apostles were persecuted for preaching the truth. Abusive churches bring on much of their negative press because of their own actions. Yet, any criticism received, no matter what the source—whether Christian or secular—is always viewed as an attack from Satan, even if the criticisms are based on the Bible. This makes it difficult to witness to a person in such a church for he will see your attempt to share the gospel with him as persecution. Often in cases like these, when I am accused of persecuting, I simply reply, “I am here talking to you with the Word of God which you say you believe. How can this be persecution?” This approach often helps in continuing the dialogue with a member of an abusive church who has been brainwashed to believe that all opposition is persecution.

Targeting Young Adults

The seventh characteristic of abusive churches is that they tend to target young adults ages 18-25 who are in the middle class, well educated, idealistic, and often immature Christians. Young adults are the perfect age group to focus on because they are often looking for a cause to give their lives to, and they need love, affirmation, and acceptance. Often these churches will provide this, and the leaders frequently take the role of surrogate parents.

Painful Exit Process

The eighth characteristic is a painful and difficult exit process. Members in many such churches are afraid to leave because of intimidation, pressure, and threats of divine judgment. Sometimes members who exit are harassed and pursued by church leaders. The majority of the time, former members are publicly ridiculed and humiliated before the church, and members are told not to associate in any way with any former members. This practice is called shunning.

Many who leave abusive churches because of the intimidation and brainwashing, actually feel they have left God Himself. None of their former associates will fellowship with them, and they feel isolated, abused, and fearful of the world. One former member of a particular campus ministry said, "If you leave without the leadership's approval, condemnation and guilt are heaped upon you. My pastor told me he thought it was satanic for me to leave and wondered if I could continue my salvation experience."

Let me conclude this discussion by sharing some practical ways of reaching those who are involved in abusive churches. First, we must begin with prayer. Witnessing to those brainwashed in abusive churches is often intimidating and difficult. Often leaders will not allow an individual member to meet with an outsider unless accompanied by an older, more experienced person who is trained in debating and/or intimidation. Therefore, we must pray (1) for a chance to speak with the individual^{1} and that he would be open to what we have to share.^{2}

Second, lovingly confront the person and surface some biblical issues. Often, abusive churches have a bizarre teaching or a theological error that can be pointed out. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth documents several examples of this. For instance, the leader of one church had strange teachings based on his claims of extra-biblical revelations

from God.^{3} These included dietary laws, sexual behavior, home decorations, and others. The leader of another group called doctors “medical deities.” He also claimed medicines had demonic names and if taken, opened a person up to demonic influence.^{4} Pointing out errors, inconsistencies, and bizarre beliefs may open the individual’s mind and prompt him to begin asking questions.

Third, share articles you may find in the newspaper or in magazines on the particular church under discussion. The book that I have often quoted from, *Churches That Abuse*, is an excellent resource. The key is to get the individual to start asking questions and research answers for himself. Tell him to test everything with the Scriptures and not to be afraid to ask questions. If the leader is afraid or hesitant to answer a member’s honest questions, the maturity of that leadership may be suspect.

Jesus, however, said that truth is a means of freedom, not bondage. He said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

Notes

1. Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), p. 118.
2. Ibid., p. 181.
3. Ibid., p. 128.
4. Ibid., p. 170.

©1993 Probe Ministries.

Mormon Doctrine of Jesus: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at a Mormon view of Jesus, comparing it to an authentic Christian perspective. He finds that the Mormon view is not supported by the biblical text.

Jesus a Procreated Being?

The Mormon Church claims to have restored the true teachings of Jesus. In this article, we will compare the Mormon doctrine of Jesus to the New Testament.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus, God the Son, is eternal and has no beginning. However, Mormonism teaches that Jesus is a procreated being, the literal offspring of God the Father and one of His heavenly wives. According to Mormon theology, God the Father, Elohim, dwells on a planet with His many spirit wives producing numerous spirit children who await to inhabit physical bodies so that they too may one day ascend to godhood as their parents did. Jesus is believed to be the firstborn spirit child of Elohim. The *Doctrine and Covenants*, one of the four sacred books of Mormonism states, "Christ, the Firstborn, was the mightiest of all the spirit children of the Father."[{1}](#) The *Gospel Principles*, which is the manual of the Mormon Church, states, "The first spirit born to our heavenly parents was Jesus Christ."[{2}](#) James Talmage, one of the early apostles of the church wrote, "[A]mong the spirit-children of Elohim, the firstborn was and is Jehovah or Jesus Christ to whom all others are juniors."[{3}](#)

According to the Mormon view, Jesus is not unique from the rest of mankind. He is simply the firstborn spirit child. The *Doctrine and Covenants* states, "The difference between Jesus and other offspring of Elohim is one of degree not of kind."[{4}](#) That is why Mormons refer to Jesus as elder brother.

James Talmage wrote, "Human beings generally were similarly existent in spirit state prior to their embodiment in the flesh. . . . There is no impropriety, therefore, in speaking of Jesus Christ as the Elder Brother of the rest of mankind." {5}

Mormon doctrine deviates significantly from the Bible, which teaches that Jesus is eternal and not procreated. Although Mormons teach that Jesus is eternal, what they mean is that He existed as a spirit child prior to His incarnation. Being an offspring of Elohim means He was created at some point in time.

To support their view, Mormons appeal to John 3:16, which states Jesus is the "only begotten." The Greek word used there is *monogenes*, which means "unique" or "one of a kind." It does not mean procreated, but emphasizes uniqueness.

Mormons also appeal to Colossians 1:15, which calls Christ the "Firstborn over all creation." The Greek word for firstborn is *prototokos*, meaning "first in rank, preeminent one." It carries the idea of positional supremacy. Christ is the firstborn in the sense that He is preeminent over all creation. Renowned Greek scholar, the late F.F. Bruce, wrote on how the term was used during the time in which Paul wrote. "The word firstborn had long since ceased to be used exclusively in its literal sense, just as prime (from the Latin word *primus*—first) with us. The Prime Minister is not the first minister we have had; he is the most preeminent. . . . Similarly, firstborn came to denote (among the ancients) not priority in time but preeminence in rank." {6} Psalm 89:27 in the Septuagint calls David the firstborn. We all know David is not the first-born son in his family, nor is he the first king of Israel. "Firstborn" here is a title of preeminence.

These Bible verses do not support the teaching that Jesus is a procreated being. The Bible further teaches Jesus is an eternal being. He had no beginning.

Colossians 1:17 states, "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Christ as the eternal Son of God existed before all creation. Since Christ is "before all things," He did not depend on anyone or anything for His creation or existence.

John 1:1 shows Jesus is eternal and has no beginning. John wrote, "In the beginning was the word." Scripture indicates that the universe was not created in time, but that time itself was created along with the universe.^{7} In other words, time was not already in existence when God created the world. The world was created with time rather than in time. Back before the beginning mentioned in Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1 lay a *beginningless* eternity.^{8} The verb *was* is in the imperfect tense, indicating continued existence. So Jesus did not come into existence at some point in eternity past, He always existed. There has never been a point where He was not in existence.

In John 8:58 Jesus tells the religious leaders, "Before Abraham was born, I am." Jesus is identifying Himself as the eternal God, quoting the words from Exodus 3:14. For this reason the Jews were seeking to stone Him for the crime of blasphemy. The words "I am" or "Yahweh" in the Hebrew language is the verb, to be. This name conveys the meaning of eternal self-existence. Yahweh, whom Jesus is identifying with, is eternal and beyond the realm of time. Abraham came to exist at a point in time, but Jesus never had a beginning. He is uncreated and eternal. Since the Bible teaches the eternal nature of Christ, He cannot be a procreated being as Mormon doctrine teaches.

Lucifer and Jesus

According to Mormon theology, God the Father lives on a planet with His spirit wives procreating spirit children who await physical bodies to inhabit. As we learned earlier, Jesus is the first son born to Elohim. God the Father had numerous

other offspring, which included Lucifer. This makes him a spirit brother of Jesus and of all human beings. Mormon theologian LeGrand Richards writes, "Satan was just as much a man in the spirit world, as were those spirits who have been given bodies through birth in this world."[{9}](#)

Mormonism teaches that Jesus and Lucifer were involved in planning mankind's eternal destiny. In order to attain godhood like our heavenly parents, the spirit children needed to leave the presence of their heavenly Father, inhabit a physical body, and live a worthy life. Elohim knew that mankind would sin and thus require a savior to pay for sin and show us how to return to our heavenly father. At the heavenly council, Jesus and Lucifer proposed their plans. Lucifer offered to go to earth and be the savior but he wanted to force everyone to be saved and do everything himself. Jesus desired to give man the freedom of choice. The Father chose Jesus' plan. Angered by the decision, Lucifer persuaded one third of the spirit children to rebel and a war in heaven took place between Satan's forces and Jesus and His followers. Lucifer was defeated, cast out of heaven, and denied the right to inhabit mortal bodies.[{10}](#) Without the ability to attain physical bodies, exaltation to the Celestial kingdom is impossible. He became known as Satan and his followers became the demons who now exist on earth as spirits opposing God's work.

Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, "The appointment of Jesus to be the Savior of the worlds was contested by one of the other sons of God. He was called Lucifer, son of the morning. Haughty, ambitious, and covetous of power and glory, this spirit-brother of Jesus desperately tried to become the savior of mankind."[{11}](#)

The Bible teaches that Jesus is not the spirit brother of Lucifer or of human beings. Lucifer is an angel and part of the created order. Ezekiel 28:13-19 reveals that Lucifer, in contrast to Jesus, is a created cherub angel. Colossians 1:16 tells us that Christ is the Creator of all things, including

the angelic realm. The words “thrones”, “dominions”, “principalities” and “powers” were used by rabbinical Jews to describe different orders of angels. In Colossae, there was a problem of worshipping angels. Christ had been degraded to their level. Paul’s argument here is that Christ is superior to the angels for Christ created them. Lucifer falls into this category of a created angel, thus making him a created being. Hebrews 1:4 also reinforces the fact that Jesus, being God the Son, is superior in nature to the angels. Christ is Creator, while Lucifer is creature, two totally different classes and they cannot be spirit brothers as Mormonism teaches.

The Incarnation of Christ

The Mormon doctrine of Jesus deviates from biblical teaching regarding the preincarnate life of Christ. It also deviates in its teaching on the incarnation of Jesus. Mormonism teaches that Jesus’ incarnation was the result of sexual relations between the flesh and bone Heavenly Father and Mary. Jesus is the only earthly offspring so conceived. Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, “Christ was begotten by an Immortal Father in the same way that mortal men are begotten by mortal fathers.”[{12}](#)

He also writes, “God the Father is a perfected, glorified, holy man, an immortal Personage. And Christ was born into the world as the literal Son of this Holy Being; He was born in the same personal, real and literal sense that any mortal son is born to a mortal father. There is nothing figurative about this paternity; He was begotten, conceived, and born in the normal and natural course of events, for He is the Son of God, and that designation means what it says.”[{13}](#)

James Talmage wrote, “Jesus Christ is the Son of Elohim both as spiritual and bodily offspring; that is to say, Elohim is literally the Father of the spirit of Jesus Christ and also of the body in which Jesus Christ performed His mission in the flesh.”[{14}](#)

Mormon theology teaches that the Father was the main person involved in Mary's conception, not the Holy Spirit. Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, "Christ is not the Son of the Holy Ghost, but of the Father." [{15}](#) Mormon Historian Stephen Robinson states, "Mary was in some unspecified manner made pregnant by God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit." [{16}](#) Dr. Robinson attempts to remain faithful to Mormon theology and the Bible, but his attempt falls short.

The Bible makes it clear: Jesus was conceived as the result of a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, not a physical union with the Father. John 4:24 says that God is spirit. He is not a resurrected man.

Luke 1:35 states, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The Holy Spirit's supernatural work in Mary's body enabled Christ—eternal God—to take on human nature. Jesus thus had a dual nature. He was fully God and fully man. Mormons reject this teaching.

Stephen Robinson writes, the "unbiblical doctrine of the two natures in Christ was added to historic Christianity by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D." [{17}](#) This might be a consistent conclusion for Mormonism, but it is contrary to the Bible. Throughout the Gospels Jesus showed His humanity: He was hungry, He got tired, and His human body experienced death. However, He also revealed His divinity, demonstrating omnipotence (Colossians 1:17), omniscience (John 2:25), eternity (John 1:1), and omnipresence (Matthew 28:20).

There is a wide separation between the Mormon doctrine of the incarnation of Christ and what the Bible teaches.

The Atoning Work of Christ

Another key area in which Mormon theology deviates from biblical teaching is their view of the atoning work of Christ. To understand this, we must understand the Mormon view of the

fall. According to Mormon theology, Adam was given two conflicting commands by God: one to become mortal and the other not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; out of which mortality, children, and death would result. Adam chose to eat of the fruit for it was the only way salvation could come to mankind.[{18}](#) As a result of the fall, Adam and Eve left their purely spiritual state and became physical beings. Mortality and child bearing would provide the way to exaltation and godhood. Man then inherited a dual nature, one physical and the other spiritual.[{19}](#)

Jesus' death is believed to have atoned for only Adam's sin, leaving us responsible for our sins.[{20}](#) Adam's act brought mortality and death. The result of Jesus' atonement is that all humankind will be resurrected. Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, "Unconditional salvation, that which comes by grace alone without obedience to gospel law, consists in the mere fact of being resurrected."[{21}](#) The Second Article of Faith states, "We believe that men are responsible for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression."[{22}](#)

In Mormon theology, there is a distinction between general salvation–resurrection for all, and individual salvation which refers to exaltation. Mormonism teaches that that we have all attained universal resurrection as a result of Jesus' death, but we must now earn our own place in heaven by doing all we can do.

Mormonism teaches there are three levels of heaven: telestial is the lowest level, the terrestrial, and celestial. The resurrection of Christ allows non-Mormons entrance to the telestial or terrestrial kingdom. All Mormons desire the celestial level where they attain exaltation to godhood. Attaining to this level depends on their life here on earth. The Mormon Church and Joseph Smith play the major roles in achieving exaltation. The *Gospel Principles* tell us that Jesus "became our savior and He did His part to help us return to our heavenly home. It is now up to each of us to do our part

and become worthy of exaltation.”[{23}](#)

The Bible does not equate salvation with resurrection. Jesus' death provides atonement for all of humanity (Isaiah 53:6), but salvation is contingent on one's response to Christ's atoning work. Salvation applies only to those who accept Christ's work on the cross. It is not universal as in Mormonism.

All mankind will be resurrected, but it is at the resurrection that some will be condemned to hell and others to eternal life in God's presence (Rev. 20:11-15). Those who reject Christ will not be saved (John 3:18). So resurrection is not equated with salvation.

Finally, individual salvation is by faith alone, not by works. (Ephesians 2:8-9) It is through faith in Jesus alone that one receives the full measure of the gift of salvation. The Bible does not teach three levels of glorification. There is only eternal life with Christ, or eternal separation from God.

Jesus the Polygamist?

As we have studied, the Mormon doctrine of Jesus deviates from the Jesus of the Bible in several key areas. Another unique teaching of Mormonism on the life of Christ is in regards to His marital state. Mormonism teaches that while on earth, Jesus was married to at least three women. Although Mormons today try to distance themselves from this teaching, it is clearly a part of their historical record. Orson Hyde, one of the original Twelve Apostles of the Mormon Church and who was ordained by Joseph Smith, cites the gospel of John when he writes, “Jesus was the bridegroom at the marriage of Cana of Galilee, and He told them what to do. Now there was actually a marriage; and if Jesus was not the bridegroom on that occasion, please tell who was. I shall say here, that before the Savior died, He looked upon his own natural children as we look upon ours.”[{24}](#)

Mormonism teaches that Jesus was not only married, but He had a family. In a speech given by Hyde in the Salt Lake City Tabernacle, he exclaimed, "I discover that some of the Eastern papers represent me as a great blasphemer, because I said, in my lecture on marriage, at our last conference, that Jesus Christ was married at Cana of Galilee, that Mary, Martha, and others were His wives, and that He begat children. All that I have to say in reply to that charge is this—they worship a Savior that is too pure and holy to fulfil the commands of his Father. I worship one that is just pure and holy enough 'to fulfil all righteousness;' not only the righteous law of baptism, but the still more righteous and important law 'to multiply and replenish the earth.' Startle not at this! For even the Father Himself honored that law by coming down to Mary, without a natural body, and begetting a Son; and if Jesus begat children, He only 'did that which He had seen His Father do.'" {25}

This would be consistent with Mormon theology, since marriage is a requirement for exaltation to godhood. {26}

According to the New Testament, there is no evidence to indicate that Jesus was married or that He had children. It is even more inconceivable that He would enter into a polygamous relationship, for it was not God's intended will for marriage. (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5, and 1 Timothy 3)

Our study reveals that the Jesus of Mormonism is not the Jesus of the Bible. The Mormon view of Jesus teaches that He was not eternally God, that He was procreated as the first spirit child of the Father, He is a spirit brother of Lucifer, and was begotten of the Father through physical relations with Mary. For these reasons, we cannot consider the Mormon teachings on Christ to be consistent with the New Testament.

Notes

1. *Doctrine and Covenants* 93:21-23.

2. *Gospel Principles*, 11.
3. James Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 425.
4. *Doctrine and Covenants* 93:21
5. James Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 426.
6. F.F. Bruce, *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979) quoted in *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 126.
7. Harold Kuhn, "Creation," in *Basic Christian Doctrines*, ed. Carl F. Henry. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983.), 61, quoted in *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 100.
8. Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1983), 996, quoted in *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 100.
9. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and Wonder* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Publishing Company), 277.
10. *Gospel Principles*, 16-17.
11. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 193.
12. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 546-547.
13. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 742.
14. James Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 466.
15. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1975), 1:18-20.
16. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 135.
17. Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson, *How Wide the Divide?*, 78.
18. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, 47.
19. "Church News" in *Deseret News*, July 31, 1965, 7.
20. LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and Wonder*, 98
21. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 669.
22. *Articles of Faith* 2.
23. *Gospel Principles*, 19.
24. *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 2, 89.
25. *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 2, p. 210.

26. *Doctrine and Covenants* 132.

Bibliography

Book of Mormon. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986.

Doctrine and Covenants. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Gospel Principles. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979.

Pearl of Great Price. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992.

Beckwith, Francis, Norman Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998.

Blomberg, Craig & Stephen Robinson. *How Wide the Divide?* Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997.

McConkie, Bruce. *Mormon Doctrine*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991.

Ostling, Richard. *Mormon America*. San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1999.

Richards, LeGrand. *A Marvelous Work and Wonder*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.

Talmage, James. *The Articles of Faith*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, Revised Edition, 1984.

Young, Brigham. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997.

©2002 Probe Ministries.

Mormon Doctrine of God: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran examines the Mormon doctrine of God from a Christian perspective. Is their view of God consistent with the biblical view?

Monotheism or Polytheism?

The Mormons consider themselves to be Christian, but many question this claim. In this article we will investigate the teaching of Mormonism regarding the doctrine of God and compare it with Biblical teaching.

Mormon doctrine is derived from four primary sources. The first is the Bible; the second are the sacred texts of Mormonism, the *Book of Mormon*, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. The third comes from the writings of the founder of the church Joseph Smith, and the fourth is the writings of church leaders, especially the church presidents who are considered to be inspired prophets of God. In regard to the God of the Bible, Stephen Robinson, chairman of the Department of Ancient Scriptures at Brigham Young University, writes, "The Latter-day Saints (should) be considered worshipers of the one true God."[\[1\]](#) He also states, "The Latter-day Saints accept unequivocally all the biblical teachings on the nature of God."[\[2\]](#)

Christianity has taught monotheism from its foundation, the belief in the existence of one God. Mormonism believes in the existence of a plurality of gods. According to Mormonism, there are an infinite number of planets like earth in the universe, each with their god or gods who were once men who have evolved into godhood. Mormon theologian and Apostle Bruce McConkie states, “[A] plurality of gods exist . . . there is an infinite number of holy personages, drawn from worlds without number, who have passed on to exaltation and are thus gods.”[\[3\]](#)

Joseph Smith wrote, “In the beginning, the head of the gods called a council of the gods; and they came together and concocted a plan to create the world and (the) people in it.”[\[4\]](#)

The *Pearl of Great Price* states in the Book of Abraham, “And they (the gods) said: let there be light and there was light. And they (the gods) comprehended the light, . . . and the gods called the light Day and the darkness they called Night. . . .” In these two chapters, the plural designation “gods” is used over fifty times.

Although they believe that numerous gods exist, Mormons consider themselves to be monotheists because they focus their worship exclusively on the Godhead of this earth. With this being the case, a more accurate description of Mormon practice is *henotheism*, a form of polytheism that stresses a central deity.

The Bible clearly teaches monotheism. This truth is taught in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Isaiah writes about God, “Before me there was no god formed, nor will there be one after me.” There was no god created before or any to come for there is only one God. Later he adds, “You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock: I know not one.” God knows of no other, not because God is limited in knowledge, but because

there is no other like Him in existence.

Doctrine of the Trinity

Christians and Mormons share many similar theological terms. We both refer to God, salvation, and heaven. However, the words often have radically different meanings. Such is the case with the doctrine of the Trinity. Biblical Christianity teaches there is one God eternally coexisting in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. As we will see, the Mormon view of the Godhead is quite different.

The Mormons reject the traditional Christian view of the Trinity as being in error. Joseph Smith wrote,

Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God. I say that is a strange God [anyhow]—three in one and one in three. . . It is curious organization All are crammed into one God according to sectarianism (Christian faith). It would make the biggest God in all the world. He would be a wonderfully big God—he would be a giant or a monster. (Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 372)

Church president James Talmage stated, “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are as distinct in persons and individualities as are any three personages in mortality.”[\[5\]](#)

Mormons believe that there are an infinite number of planets, each with their own god or gods. On this earth, there are three separate gods, God the Father or Elohim, Jehovah or Jesus the son, and the Holy Ghost who make up the Godhead. Instead of Trinitarian, *tritheistic* would be a better word to describe Mormon belief. Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie states, “There are three Gods— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”[\[6\]](#) He further explains that, “[T]hree separate personages—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost comprise the Godhead.

As each of these persons is a god, it is evident, from this standpoint alone, that a plurality of gods exists. To us, speaking in the proper finite sense, these three are the only gods we worship.”{7}

Jesus is believed by Mormons to be the literal offspring of the Father. The Mormon Church teaches that “Jesus Christ is the son of Elohim both as (a) spiritual and bodily offspring; that is to say, Elohim is literally the Father of the spirit of Jesus Christ and also of the body in which Jesus Christ performed his mission in the flesh. . . .”{8}

The Bible teaches that there is only one true God, not three separate gods. Deuteronomy 6:4 states, “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” God has revealed Himself in three coeternal and coequal persons of the same substance or essence, however, distinct in subsistence. The Bible reveals that all three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—have the attributes of deity. All three have existed for eternity, took part in creation, and play a role in salvation. The whole, undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three Persons.{9}

God Was Once a Man

As we discussed earlier, Mormon theology teaches that there is a plurality of gods. All gods were once mortal men on other planets who, through obedience to the commands of their God, attained exaltation or godhood. All Mormon men have the potential of attaining godhood as well. God’s progression from man to God is clearly stated throughout Mormon literature. Joseph Smith wrote:

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . . I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. . .

. He was once a man like us; yea that God himself, the Father dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did. . . .[{10}](#)

Brigham Young, the second president taught “[T]hat God the Father was once a man on another planet who ‘passed the ordeal we are now passing through. . . .’”[{11}](#) The *Doctrine and Covenants* states, “God is a glorified and perfected man, a personage of flesh and bones. Inside his tangible body is an eternal spirit.” (130:22)

Jesus is believed to have been a mortal man who attained godhood and showed that all men can do the same. The goal of every Mormon man is to achieve exaltation to godhood. Bruce McConkie states, “That exaltation which the saints of all ages have so devoutly sought is godhood itself.”[{12}](#) Joseph Smith exhorted all Mormon men to strive for this goal. He stated,

Here then, is eternal life— to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you. . . .[{13}](#)

The Mormon Church teaches that if a couple marries according to Mormon ceremony, and each lives an obedient life, they may attain godhood at the resurrection. The *Doctrine and Covenants* teaches,

[Y]e shall come forth in the first resurrection; . . . and shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths . . . (and you) shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to (their) exaltation.” (132)

The passage concludes, “Then they shall be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting because they continue. . . . Then they shall be gods because they have all power, and the angels are subject to them.” (132:20)

The Bible teaches that God has always been God. Psalm 90 states, "From everlasting to everlasting you are God." God did not evolve from mortal man. Isaiah 43 reveals, "Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me." This verse destroys any hope of any man thinking he may become a god.

Celestial Parenthood

In Mormon theology, there are three levels of heaven, terrestrial, tellestial, and celestial. It teaches that almost everyone will make it to the first level, terrestrial, but Mormons seek entrance to celestial heaven, because there they are exalted to godhood. Once a man is exalted to godhood, he and his wife will reproduce offspring for eternity. These spirit children will in turn inhabit physical bodies and have the opportunity to become gods as well. This privilege is reserved for those who go through the sacred marriage ceremony in the Temple and live in obedience to Mormon teachings.

As we discussed previously, the Mormon book *Doctrine and Covenants* teaches that Mormons who marry within the context of the church, and remain obedient, shall be resurrected together. They shall then inherit thrones and kingdoms and are then declared gods because they will then rule together for eternity. Church president James Talmage adds, "[W]e are to understand that only resurrected and glorified beings can become parents of spirit offspring . . . and the spirits born to them in the eternal worlds will pass in due sequence through the several stages or estates by which the glorified parents have attained exaltation."[14](#)

God the Father is, therefore, believed to be married to God the Mother, and together they are producing spirit children. Bruce McConkie states, "An exalted and glorified man of holiness could not be a Father unless a woman of like glory, perfection, and holiness was associated with him as a Mother. The begetting of children makes a man a father and a woman a mother whether we are dealing with man in his mortal or

immortal state.”{15}

All men and women are thus the offspring of this heavenly union. James Talmage wrote, “God the Eternal Father, whom we designate by the exalted name-title ‘Elohim,’ is the literal Parent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and of the spirits of the human race.”{16}

The Bible teaches that God the Father is not married. Isaiah 46:9 states, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God; and there is none like me.” The Bible teaches that men and women who receive Christ as their savior will be glorified and live eternally in the presence of God. However, they will never be equal to God, nor will they be married. If marriage were essential to attain exaltation, it seems strange that Paul would write in 1 Corinthians 7, “It is good for a man not to marry.” When Jesus was questioned about the state of marriage in eternity he said, “When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like the angels in heaven.” The covenant of marriage is for our earthly existence only. The Bible does not teach a doctrine of celestial parenthood.

God is a Physical Being

Christianity teaches that God is immaterial. Mormonism teaches that God has a physical body. The Mormon *Doctrine and Covenants* teaches, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s, the Son also. . . .”{17} Brigham Young wrote, “We cannot believe for a moment that God is destitute of body, parts, passions, or attributes.”{18}

Although John 4:24 clearly teaches that God is spirit, Mormons like Bruce McConkie teach that this is a mistranslation of the text. He writes:

False creeds teach that God is a spirit essence that fills the immensity of space. . . . In a vain attempt to support

this doctrine, formulated by councils in the early days of the great apostasy, it is common for apologists to point to the statement in the KJV Bible, which says, "God is a Spirit." The fact is that this passage is mistranslated: instead the correct statement, quoted in context reads: "For unto such hath God promised his Spirit. And they who worship him, must worship in spirit and in truth." [{19}](#)

However, there is no justification for McConkie's translation. The KJV translation of "God is a spirit" is misleading; modern translators are more accurate rendering the passage "God is spirit." The Greek construction and word order place the emphasis on the essential character of God; thus the essence of true worship must be on God's terms and in accord with his nature. [{20}](#) Jesus further taught in Luke 24:36-43, "[A] spirit does not have flesh and bones." 1 Timothy 1:17 states, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God." God is invisible because He is immaterial. 1 John 4:12 and John 1:18 tell us that no one has seen God. The second of the Ten Commandments forbids anyone from making an image of God, partially because nothing physical could accurately reflect God, who is immaterial. If God created the universe, as the Bible teaches, He could not be a physical being.

Scripture often uses anthropomorphic language, attributing human characteristics to God to help describe God's activities. Psalm 17 pleads, "Keep me (Lord) as the apple of your eye, hide me in the shadow of your wings." Mormons have used this kind of language to prove that God has a physical body. In doing so they ignore the use of figurative language. God no more has a physical eye than He has wings and feathers.

God also revealed Himself in temporary physical forms that men could understand called theophanies. Examples are the burning bush, the fiery cloud in Exodus, and the unique incarnation of Christ. God the Son humbled Himself and took on human form. He was not a pre-existent spirit-being, waiting for a body, as the Mormons teach. John 1 reveals that the Son was God from

eternity and became a man to redeem humanity. We must conclude, based on our study of the doctrine of God, that Mormonism and traditional Christianity are indeed two different religions.

Notes

1. Stephen Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 65; quoted in John Ankerberg, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992), 99.
2. *Ibid.*, 103.
3. Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991), 576-577.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 349; quoted in Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 220.
5. James Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 37.
6. McConkie, 317.
7. McConkie, 576.
8. Talmage, 421.
9. Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), 54.
10. Smith, 321.
11. Brigham Young, *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*, (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 29.
12. McConkie, 321.
13. Smith, p. 345-347. Also quoted in McConkie, 321.
14. Talmage, 426.
15. McConkie, 516.
16. Talmage, 421.
17. *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:22.
- 18, Young, 29.
19. McConkie, 218.

20. *Expositors Bible Commentary*.

Bibliography

Book of Mormon. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986.

Doctrine and Covenants. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Pearl of Great Price. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.

Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992.

Beckwith, Francis, Norman Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1998.

Blomberg, Craig, & Stephen Robinson. *How Wide the Divide?* Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997.

McConkie, Bruce. *Mormon Doctrine*. Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991.

Ostling, Richard. *Mormon America*. San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1999.

Richards, LeGrand. *A Marvelous Work and Wonder*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.

Talmage, James. *The Articles of Faith*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, Revised Edition 1984.

Young, Brigham. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints, 1997.

© 2001 Probe Ministries International

Examining the Book of Mormon – A Christian View

The book of Mormon needs to be evaluated by the light of scripture and its purported evidence for its reliability. Dr. Pat Zukeran shows that the bad character of the book's witnesses, the lack of archaeological support, and internal errors reveal it to be the flawed work of man, not God.

The Mormon Story

Some people believe the *Book of Mormon* is a new revelation from God given to Joseph Smith. Mormons recognize it as divinely inspired and equal in authority to the Bible, but others have reason to doubt its claims.

Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt wrote in 1851, “The *Book of Mormon* claims to be a divinely inspired record. . . . This book must be either true or false. . . . If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever planned upon the world, calculated to deceive and ruin millions who will sincerely receive it as the word of God. . . . If true, no one can possibly be saved and reject it; if false, no one can possibly be saved and receive it.”[\[1\]](#)

In this article, we will take a look at internal and external evidences for the *Book of Mormon* to see if it should be considered inspired writing.

The *Book of Mormon* is said to be a record of two ancient

Jewish civilizations that migrated to America. The Jaredites left Babylonia during the building of the Tower of Babel in approximately 2,250 B.C. After establishing a civilization in America that lasted two thousand years. They eventually succumbed to corruption and apostasy and were judged by God and destroyed.

The second group of Jews left Jerusalem in 600 B.C. before the Babylonian exile during the reign of King Zedekiah. This group crossed the Pacific and landed on the west coast of South America. Lehi and his son Nephi led these righteous Jews. This group eventually divided into two warring camps, the Nephites and the Lamenites and spread throughout North and South America. The Lamenites were cursed with dark skin because of their evil deeds and were the forefathers of the American Indians.[{2}](#)

Latter-day Saints believe that during the end of the 4th century A.D. the Nephite prophet general Mormon and his son Moroni, compiled the records of these two civilizations using the Reformed Egyptian language and recorded them on gold plates. Moroni hid the plates in the hills of Cumorah near Palmyra, New York to be revealed at a later time. The Lamenites eventually destroyed the Nephites in 421 A.D. on the Hill Cumorah. The Lamenite civilizations continued to degenerate and had forgotten their Jewish history. When Columbus found them centuries later, they had become as the *Book of Mormon* describes them, a "filthy and a loathsome people." (*Book of Mormon* 5:15)

Does the *Book of Mormon* qualify as divinely inspired scripture? In determining the answer, we will take a critical look at several key issues. First we will look at the nature in which Joseph Smith received his revelations. Second, we will investigate the character of the author and the key witnesses. Third, since the *Book of Mormon* claims to be a historical work, we will see if there is evidence to support this claim. Finally, since the *Book of Mormon* says it is the

most perfect book ever written, we will examine it to see if it contains any false precepts. Let's examine the Book to see if it is an inspired ancient historical record or a nineteenth century product.

Origin of the *Book of Mormon*

Mormons believe Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith in 1823 as a glorified resurrected being, and delivered to him the golden plates from their hiding place in the Cumorah hills. Using an occult seer stone, Smith translated the history of the Laminites and Nephites into the *Book of Mormon*.[\[3\]](#)

In studying the origin of the *Book of Mormon*, we must first investigate the issue of the canon of scripture. Christians believe the canon is closed with the 66 books of the Bible. There are no more revelations outside these books. Here are some reasons why.

First the authority to write the Holy Scripture was given to the Old Testament prophets of God and the New Testament Apostles of Christ. The last apostle died at the end of the first century A.D. and there has not been anyone who fulfills the qualifications for apostleship since then.

Second, the canon is confirmed to be closed by Judaism, Jesus, the Apostles, and the early church. According to the writings of eye witnesses—Emma Smith (one of Joseph Smith's wives), William Smith (his brother), and David Whitmer (one of the three key witnesses), Smith used a common occult practice of crystal gazing.

In 1877 David Whitmer wrote,

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the *Book of Mormon* was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of

something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the *Book of Mormon* was translated by the gift and power of God and not by any power of man.”{4}

Emma Smith wrote to her children, “In writing for your father, I frequently wrote day after day. . . . He sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”{5} So according to these accounts, Joseph Smith received his revelations word for word and used a seer stone.

By contrast, the Bible was not given to us in a word for word dictation form, nor is there a case of any biblical writer using an occult object to receive revelations from God. Mormons point to the use of the Urim and Thummim but their purpose was quite different. The Urim and Thummim were used for a time by the Aaronic priests only to gain answers of Yes or No from God to particular questions. Lots were cast to discern God’s will, not to receive content for revelation. Finally, we must understand, the Aaronic priesthood and its practices are replaced by the finished work of Christ (Hebrews 7:12). Occult methods, such as crystal gazing, are forbidden in the Bible (Deuteronomy 18:9-14, Leviticus 19:26, 31). Mormon theologian Bruce McConkie even denounces using objects to gain new revelation. He condemns Hiram Page, one of the witnesses of the *Book of Mormon* for using a seer stone to gain new revelations. Joseph Smith obtained his revelations contrary to the method of inspiration received by the biblical Prophets and Apostles.

Character of the 11 Witnesses

Joseph Smith claims that after he translated the plates, he returned them to the angel Moroni. Therefore, there is no way to verify the veracity of the plates or Smith's translation. Smith's only defense of his account is the eleven men who signed statements claiming to have seen the golden plates. Therefore, the credibility of Smith's account rests on the testimony of these eleven witnesses. There are three key witnesses who claim to have seen the angel show the golden plates to them. The remaining eight allege to have seen the plates but not the angel. The LDS church asserts these men never denied their testimony. However, when we examine the lives of the witnesses, we find they were untrustworthy, wavering, and gullible witnesses.

Six of the eleven witnesses, including the three key witnesses were eventually excommunicated from the church. Former Mormon President Ezra Taft Benson summed up the legacy of the eleven witnesses this way. "Six of the original Twelve Apostles selected by Joseph Smith were excommunicated. The three Witnesses to the *Book of Mormon* left the church. Three of Joseph Smith's counselors fell—one even helped plot his death. . . . The wolves among our flock are more numerous and devious today than when President Clark made a similar statement [in 1949]."[\[6\]](#)

Let us first examine the character of the three key witnesses since their testimony is the most important. In a letter dated December 16, 1838, Joseph Smith stated this about the three key witnesses and John Whitmer, one of the eight. "John Whitmer, David Whitmer, Oliver Cowdery, and Martin Harris are too mean to mention."[\[7\]](#)

Martin Harris' testimony shows him to be a gullible and unstable man. He changed his religious conviction approximately thirteen times. He had joined several Christian denominations and other cult groups that include the

Universalists, Strangites, and the Shakers. {8}(Ankerberg, 196) In *Doctrine and Covenants*, Joseph Smith gave revelations in which he denounces Martin Harris and calls him a “wicked man.”{9} The Mormon leaders published an article in the *Elder’s Journal*, a Mormon publication edited by Joseph Smith, in which they accused Harris guilty of “swearing, lying, cheating, swindling, drinking, with every species of debauchery. . .” (*Elders Journal*, August, 1838, 59).{10} Here the leaders of the Mormon Church strongly criticize the character of Harris.

Oliver Cowdery was also shown to be a very gullible man. He was led astray by Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses who himself claimed to have divine revelations from his own seer stone. Although Joseph Smith denounced Hiram as a false teacher, Smith stated “to our grief, however, we soon found that Satan had been lying in wait to deceive. . . . Brother Hiram Page had in his possession a certain stone, by which he obtained certain ‘revelations’ . . . all of which were entirely at variance with the order of God’s House, . . .”{11} Despite Smith’s condemnation, Oliver Cowdery joined Page’s movement. Not only was he a gullible man, he was also indicted on several accounts of fraudulent business practices. The Mormon Church in a letter wrote, “During the career of Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer’s bogus money business, it got abroad into the world that they were engaged in it. . . . We have evidence of a very strong character that you are at this very time engaged with a gang of counterfeiters, coiners, and blacklegs . . .”{12} Cowdery was eventually excommunicated and he later joined the Methodist Church.

David Whitmer wrote, “God spake to me again by his own voice from the heavens, and told me to ‘separate myself from among the Latter- day Saints, for as they sought to do unto me, so should it be done unto them.” In the spring of 1838, the heads of the church and many of the members had gone deep into error and blindness. . . . About the same time that I came out, the

Spirit of God moved upon quite a number of the brethren who came out, with their families, all of the eight witnesses who were then living (except the three Smiths) came out; . . .”{13} Here David Whitmer denounced the Mormon Church and encouraged people to follow his example and the example of the other witnesses and leave the church.

Joseph Smith in response attacked the character of David Whitmer. Smith stated, “God suffered such kind of beings to afflict Job . . . this poor man who professes to be much of a prophet, has no other dumb ass to ride but David Whitmer, to forbid his madness when he goes up to curse Israel: and this ass not being of the same kind as Balaam’s . . . he brays out cursing instead of blessings. Poor ass!”{14}

The character and life of the eleven witnesses to the *Book of Mormon* are very different from the Apostles of Christ. None of the Apostles wavered in their defense of Christ, even though all suffered and most died for their faith. The Apostles remained consistent in their teaching and never fell into any type of apostasy. Their lives were marked by honesty and integrity. They were never indicted for any criminal activity except for preaching Christ. The character of the *Book of Mormon’s* eleven witnesses does not strengthen Smith’s defense but cast further doubt on its authenticity.

Archaeology and the *Book of Mormon*

According to the *Book of Mormon*, Jews migrated from the Middle East to Central and South America and established great civilizations on the continents of North and South America. The *Book of Mormon* states that large cities were built so that by 322 A.D. “The whole face of the land had become covered with buildings and the people were as numerous almost as it were the sand of the sea.” (Mormon 1:7) Thirty-eight cities are specifically mentioned in the *Book of Mormon*. Also in the final battle between the Nephites and Lamenites, 230,000 Nephites were killed near the hills of Cumorah in New York.

With such a vast population and cities, one would expect to find numerous archaeological evidences to substantiate such large civilizations. However, there is no evidence to validate the claims of the *Book of Mormon*. Despite expeditions financed by the Mormon Church, archaeologists have concluded the *Book of Mormon* is not historical but a work of fiction.

The Smithsonian Institute in a letter to the Mormon Church states, "The Smithsonian Institution has never used the *Book of Mormon* in any way as a scientific guide. Smithsonian Archaeologists see no connection between the archaeology of the New World and the subject matter of the Book." [{15}](#)

The National Geographic Society writes, "With regard to the cities mentioned in the *Book of Mormon*, neither representatives of the National Geographic Society nor archaeologists connected with any other institution of equal prestige have ever used the *Book of Mormon* in locating historic ruins in Middle America or elsewhere." [{16}](#)

Even Mormon archaeologists admit there is no conclusive evidence. Dr. Hugh Nibley, a Mormon apologist, states in his book *Since Cumorah* that no real archaeological proof for the Nephite civilization exists. He writes regarding the Nephites, "All that we have to go on to date is a written history . . . there is nothing whatever that an anthropologist or archaeologist as such can say about the *Book of Mormon*." [{17}](#)

Dee Green, professor of anthropology at Weber State University and a respected Mormon scholar states, "The first myth we must eliminate is that *Book of Mormon* archaeology exists . . . no *Book of Mormon* location is known with reference to modern topography. Biblical archaeology can be studied because we do know where Jerusalem and Jericho were and are, but we do not know where Zarahemla and Bountiful (nor any other location for that matter) were or are. It would seem that a concentration on geography should be the first order of business, but . . . years of such an approach has left us empty-handed." [{18}](#)

Another prominent Mormon scholar is B.H. Roberts. He was described as one of the most valiant writers and speakers in defense of the *Book of Mormon*. However, after years of research he concluded at the end of his life that the *Book of Mormon* was a fictional work created by Joseph Smith. He wrote, "the evidence I sorrowfully submit, points to Joseph Smith as their creator. It is difficult to believe that they are the product of history, that they come upon the scene separated by long periods of time, and among a race which was the ancestral race of the red man of America."[\[19\]](#)

Another prominent defender of the *Book of Mormon* was Thomas Ferguson, who was president of the New World Archaeological Foundation, which was funded by Brigham Young University and the Mormon Church. He hoped to discover archaeological support for the *Book of Mormon*. In 1962 he announced, "Powerful evidences sustaining the book are accumulating."[\[20\]](#) However, after years of research and many fruitless expeditions, his original hopes were shattered.[\[21\]](#) He eventually wrote,

With all these great efforts, it cannot be established factually that anyone, from Joseph smith to the present day, has put his finger on a single point of terrain that was a *Book of Mormon* geographical place. And the hemisphere has been pretty well checked out by competent people I must agree with Dee Green, who has told us that to date there is no *Book of Mormon* geography. I, for one, would be happy if Dee were wrong.[\[22\]](#)

In contrast, biblical archaeology has provided thousands of discoveries that have confirmed biblical references. Hundreds of ancient civilizations, artifacts, historical records and inscriptions have been discovered that prove the historical accuracy of the Bible. Archaeological discoveries confirming biblical accounts have been acknowledged by Christians as well as skeptics. Foremost Middle East archaeologist Dr. William Albright wrote, "Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of innumerable details, and has brought increased

recognition to the value of the Bible as a source of history.”{23} When asked if archaeology confirms the accuracy of the New Testament, scholar John McCray states, “Oh, there is no question that the credibility of the New Testament is enhanced.”{24} A historical faith should have historical proofs. Historical research has led both Christians and skeptics to affirm the historicity of the Bible. However, historical research has proven damaging for the *Book of Mormon*.

Errors in the *Book of Mormon*

Mormons claim the *Book of Mormon* is the most perfect book ever written. Joseph Smith stated, “I told the brethren that the *Book of Mormon* was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than any other book.”{25}

Is Joseph Smith’s claim true? Errors in the *Book of Mormon* should cause one to question its divine inspiration.

In studying the *Book of Mormon*, one soon finds numerous historical, geographical, and scientific errors. First, in Mormon 9:32 the *Book of Mormon* claims to have been written in Reformed Egyptian, but Egyptologists say this language does not exist. Second, in Alma 7:10, Jerusalem is called a land or country when it is a city. In Alma 46:15 the saved in America take on the name Christian in 73 B.C. In the Bible, believers are not called Christian until 50 A.D. in Acts 11:3. Nephi 17:7 teaches that leprosy occurred in America in 34 A.D. but no cases of leprosy here are known until 1758. Mormon 9:2 and other references teach that the Indians had official records, scrolls, and other writings, but historical research shows no such records were kept. (Mormon 5:23, 3 Nephi 9:18, 12:18)

Not only are there historical errors, but there are false teachings as well. Alma 24:16 teaches that burying swords deep in the earth will keep them bright. Basic science proves that

burying steel objects causes decay and rust. 2 Nephi 13:24 teaches that baldness is caused by sin. Other absurdities include the teaching that God curses Indians with dark skin and anyone who marries an Indian will be cursed (2 Nephi 5:21 Jacob 3:3-9, Mormon 5:15-17, Alma 3:6-10). However, when Indians accept the Mormon teaching, they will become white and delightsome. (2 Nephi 30:5-7)

There appear to be internal contradictions also. In 3 Nephi 9:18, Jesus allegedly preached to the Nephites who fled Jerusalem in 600 B.C. with concepts communicated in the Greek language. But the Nephites are said to have written and spoken in Reformed Egyptian. Therefore, they would have no knowledge of Greek since Alexander, who lived in the 4th century, had not Hellenized the world yet. Jesus preaching to the non-Greek Nephites declaring, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," would have not made any sense. Moreover, Joseph Smith and the Mormons claim the gold plates from which the *Book of Mormon* was translated had no Greek or Latin in them.[\[26\]](#) However, Alpha and Omega are Greek, not Egyptian terms. Even stranger is that the French word "adieu" is used as a farewell in Jacob 7:27.

In contrast to the *Book of Mormon*, the Bible proves to be historically accurate and internally consistent. It also does not have the absurd teachings that we find in the *Book of Mormon*. The evidence appears to point to the fact that the *Book of Mormon* is not an ancient historical text, but an 18th century work created by Joseph Smith.

Notes

1. Orson Pratt, "Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon," *Orson Pratt's Works*, (Liverpool: 1851), 1, quoted in Richard and Joan Ostling, *Mormon America*, (San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishing, 1999), 263.
2. Joseph Smith, *Book of Mormon*. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Introduction page.
3. Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*. (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991), 98.

4. David Whitmer, "An Address to All Believers in Christ by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon" (1887 reprint, Concord, CA: Pacific Publishing Company, 1972), 12, quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *What do Mormons Really Believe?* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2002), 167-168.
5. *The Saints Herald*, May 19, 1888, 310, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, *What do Mormons Really Believe?*, 167-168.
6. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, (Salt Lake City, UT.: Bookcraft, 1988), 89.
7. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Volume 3, 232.
8. John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism*. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992), 196.
9. Joseph Smith, *Doctrine and Covenants* 3:12-13 & 10:7.
10. Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 96.
11. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Volume 1, 109-110, quoted in Tanner, 96.
12. Letter quoted in Senate Document 189, February 15, 1841, 6-9, quoted in Tanner, 98.
13. David Whitmer, "An Address to All Believers in Christ," 1887, 27-28, quoted in Tanner, 97.
14. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, Volume 3, 228, quoted in Tanner, 97.
15. Official Letter from the Smithsonian Institution, Summer, 1979.
16. Ankerberg & Weldon, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism*, 184.
17. Tanner, 138-139.
18. Ibid., 139-140.
19. B.H. Roberts, *Studies in the Book of Mormon*, (Urbana, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 243, quoted in Richard Abanas, *One Nation Under Gods*, (New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002), 76.
20. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *One Fold and One Shepherd* (1962),

263, quoted in Tanner, 140.

21. Tanner, 140-141.

22. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, "Written symposium on the Book of Mormon Geography:

Response of Thomas Ferguson to the Norman and Sorenson Papers," 4, 7, 29, quoted in Abanas, 77.

23. William Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, Pelican Books, 1960, 127, quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, (San Bernadino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 65.

24. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 96.

25. *Book of Mormon*, Introduction page.

26. Times and Seasons, 4:194; J.N. Washburn, Contents, Structure and Authorship of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City UT; Bookcraft, 1954), 161, cited in Tanner, 124.

Bibliography

- *Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981.
- *Doctrine and Covenants*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.
- *Pearl of Great Price*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982.
- Abanas, Richard. *One Nation Under Gods*. New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002.
- Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992.
- _____. *What do Mormons Really Believe?* Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 2002.
- Beckwith, Francis, Norman Geisler, Ron Rhodes, Phil Roberts, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Counterfeit Gospel of Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest

- House Publishers, 1998.
- Blomberg, Craig, & Stephen Robinson. *How Wide the Divide?* Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
 - Givens, Terry L. *By the Hand of Mormon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
 - Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997.
 - McConkie, Bruce. *Mormon Doctrine*. Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1991.
 - Ostling, Richard. *Mormon America*. San Francisco: Harper and Collins Publishers, 1999.
 - Richards, LeGrand. *A Marvelous Work and Wonder*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976.
 - Richardson, Allen and David, & Anthony Bentley. *1000 Evidences for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City: Envision Press, 2001.
 - Talmage, James. *The Articles of Faith*. Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, Revised Edition 1984.
 - Tanner, Jerald and Sandra Tanner. *The Changing World of Mormonism*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981.
 - Young, Brigham. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997.

The Lives of Muhammad and Jesus

Dr. Pat Zukeran explores the radical differences between Muhammad and Jesus, and the implications of following their examples and teachings.

Muhammad and Jesus are the founders of the two largest religions in the world and two of the most influential people in the history of the world. Both men serve not only as founders but also the ideal models whose lives are to be emulated by all their followers. What kind of lives did they live? What example did they leave behind, and how is their example impacting our world today?

This work will examine the lives of both men. In my research I have relied on what is considered by Muslims to be some of the most authoritative historical sources on the life of Muhammad. The first source is the Qur'an, the inspired text of Islam. Second is the Hadith, a record of the many sayings and the life events of Muhammad. The most recognized collection is by Ismail Sahih Bukhari, written in 870. Third is the first and most authoritative biography of Muhammad, written by Ibn Ishaq nearly 150 years after Muhammad's death.



In examining the life of Jesus, I relied primarily on the New Testament. The four Gospels are biographies of His life. Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written prior to AD 70, and John was written in AD 95. The letters of the New Testament written by His disciples also serve as a historical source. Most were written prior to AD 70 while some, like 1 Corinthians, were written as early as AD 55.

Muslims believe that Muhammad is the perfect example to follow in all aspects of life. The Qur'an states that in Muhammad,

“Ye have indeed in the Apostle of God a beautiful pattern and excellent model of conduct” (Surah 33:21). It also states that Muhammad demonstrates “an excellent standard of character” (Surah 68:4).

The Qur’an also emphasizes that obedience to Muhammad’s teachings is equivalent to obeying Allah, as evidenced when Surah 4:80 states that “he who obeys the Apostle, obeys Allah.” Moreover, Surah 4:115 also reflects how highly Muslims revere Muhammad as it explains the fate of one who disobeys: “If anyone contends with the Apostle even after guidance has been plainly conveyed to him, and follows a path other than that becoming to men of faith, we shall leave him in the path he has chosen, and land him in Hell—what an evil refuge.”

Muslims are called to imitate Muhammad in all aspects of their lives, even in their daily activities. Islamic scholar John Esposito writes, “Muslims look to Muhammad’s example for guidance in all aspects of life: how to treat friends as well as enemies, what to eat and drink, how to make love and war. . . . His impact on Muslim life cannot be overestimated, since he served as both religious and political head of Medina: prophet of God, ruler, military commander, chief judge, lawgiver. . . . Traditions of the Prophet provide guidance for personal hygiene, dress, eating, marriage, treatment of wives, diplomacy, and warfare.”[\[1\]](#)

Christians are not called to copy Christ in all aspects of their lives as Muslims do Muhammad. Rather, Christians are called to reflect the character, mindset, and attitude of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1, Philippians. 2:5, 1 Peter 2:21). Christ focused on the inner transformation of the heart and mind of the individual which would result in righteous living (Matthew 5:8, 6:21, 15:8, 18).

When making decisions in their lives, Muslims will ask, “What would Muhammad do?” while Christians ask, “What would Jesus do?” Since these two men serve as models of perfect conduct

for their followers to imitate, it is important to learn what kind of lives they lived. This work will present a brief overview and highlight key events in the lives of each person as we explore that which can be learned from their examples.

The Call of Muhammad and Jesus

Muhammad and Jesus lived remarkable yet radically different lives. Muhammad was born in AD 570. His family was part of the Quraysh tribe, which oversaw the Mecca temple where the deities of Arabia were worshipped. His father died when he was very young, and his mother died when he was six. He was raised by his grandfather and later by his uncle. At the age of twenty-five, he married Khadija, his employer, who was fifteen years his elder.

At the age of forty, Muhammad received his first visitation from the angel Gabriel. According to Ibn Ishaq, the giving and receiving of the revelation was quite violent in nature. Gabriel came to Muhammad and ordered him to read his message. Being illiterate, Muhammad asked Gabriel, "What shall I read?" It is then Gabriel pressed Muhammad so hard that Muhammad thought he was going to die. This was repeated three times until Muhammad read the following message from Gabriel: "Read in the name of thy Lord who created, who created man of blood coagulated. Read! Thy Lord is the most beneficent, who taught by the pen, taught that which they knew not unto men." After this the angel Gabriel departed.[{2}](#)

Muhammad was terrified by this incident. Bukhari records that Muhammad returned home trembling and sought to hide under a blanket. His first thought was that he had come under demonic influence.[{3}](#) In fact, he was so troubled that he became suicidal. Ishaq records that since Muhammad did not want anyone in his tribe to discover that he was possessed, he resolved to go to the top of a mountain and commit suicide.[{4}](#) However, his wife and her cousin Waraqa, an Ebionite Christian, encouraged him that he was not possessed but rather

a prophet of God.[{5}](#) Through their encouragement, he came to believe that he had received a divine message from Allah.

Prior to his encounter with Gabriel and throughout his life, Muhammad struggled with demonic possession. Ishaq records an incident during Muhammad's childhood when his foster parents, al-Harith and Halima, were raising him. One day while behind the tents, two men clothed in white threw Muhammad to the ground, opened up his belly, and searched through it. His foster father felt the boy might have suffered a stroke. Halima, his foster mother who had nursed Muhammad, believed a demon had possessed him.[{6}](#)

Another account of Muhammad's struggle with demon possession occurred a few years after his prophetic calling when Muhammad believed he received a revelation allowing Muslims to worship the three gods of the Quraysh. However, he later admitted that Satan possessed him when he uttered those verses.[{7}](#) Allah eventually forgave Muhammad but gave him a stern warning recorded in Surah 17:73-75. Also another time after his prophetic calling Muhammad fell under the spell of a Jewish magician named Labid for one year.[{8}](#)

In contrast, biblical prophets and apostles clearly understood their visions were from God rather than Satan or demons. Although some were frightened by their vision of God or the angels before them, they were not violently handled. Instead they were given an assuring introductions such as "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:13, 28-30, 2:10, Isa. 6:6-7, Revelation 1:17). Jesus' birth was miraculous, and He understood His mission from His childhood (Luke 2:41-52). Throughout His life, Jesus clearly distinguished between God's message and Satan's. During His temptation in the desert, He did not struggle with possession but instead defeated Satan's attacks using the word of God. Throughout His ministry, Jesus demonstrated authority over the demonic realm, and the demons were terrified of Him (Matthew 8:16, Luke 8:26-39). Through His death and resurrection, Jesus defeated Satan and the demonic hosts. Paul

states that Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in Him” (Colossians 2:15).

The contrast is readily apparent. One man struggled from demonic presence in his life; the other conquered the devil.

The Warrior and the Rabbi

At the beginning of their mission, both Muhammad and Jesus began preaching in their home territory, and both were persecuted for their message. However, the two responded very differently to their opposition. Muhammad resorted to the use of force while Jesus pursued the path of peace.

Muhammad began preaching in Mecca. During his thirteen years preaching in Mecca he preached a message of tolerance towards other religions as he sought to win the favor of the people. It is at this time that several passages teaching tolerance of the Jews and Christians were recorded (Surah 2:62, 5:69, and 22:17). However, as the persecution grew, he fled to Medina in 622. This event is one of the most important events in Islam known as the *Hijira*. In Medina he gained a following and became the leader of the city. It is in Medina as his power grew that his message transformed to one of intolerance of unbelievers. Moreover, he began to encourage the use of military force. Earlier Suras of tolerance were abrogated by the new revelations exhorting Muslims to Jihad against unbelievers.

To sustain his growing army and impress the Quraysh in Mecca of his growing power, he raided commercial caravans on their way to Mecca. He received revelations endorsing his raids to attack unbelievers and seize their valuables (Surah 8:38-45 & 60-65, 22:39-40, 2:244, 4:95-97). Bukhari records that on his first raid at Al-Abwa, Muhammad was asked if it was permissible to attack at night since doing so would endanger the lives of the women and children traveling with the

caravans. Muhammad replied, "They (women and children) are from them (the opposition)." In other words, he permitted the killing or capture of women and children during the raids.[{9}](#) The booty collected from the raids was distributed among his men.

These raids incited the Meccans to war against Muhammad. Four major battles were fought between Muhammad and the Quraysh armies of Mecca. In 624 the two armies met at Badr where Muhammad defeated the armies of Mecca. This victory instilled confidence in Muhammad of his calling. He believed Allah fought for him to bring about victory (Surah 3:123-125, 8:9, 12-13).

A year later the Meccan army returned and engaged Muhammad's army at Uhud, a mountain near Mecca. This time Muhammad was defeated, and his army retreated to Medina. Muhammad was bloodied in the battle and he vowed revenge on his enemies.[{10}](#)

In the spring of 627, the Jews of Medina plotted with the army of Mecca against Muhammad. Hearing of this plot, Muhammad dug a trench around the city of Medina. The Meccan army laid siege to the city but were unable to capture the city and returned to Mecca. After the retreat of the Meccan army, Muhammad sought to deal with the Jews of Medina who had plotted against him. Ibn Ishaq records that Muhammad "went out to the market of Medina and dug trenches in it. Then he sent for them and struck off their heads in those trenches as they were brought to him in batches." Ishaq records that the estimates of those killed were six to seven hundred; others estimate the numbers to be as high as eight to nine hundred.[{11}](#)

After the Siege of Medina, a peace treaty was signed between the two armies. However, the treaty was soon violated, and in 630 Muhammad gathered an army of ten thousand and marched on the city of Mecca. Seeing their hopeless situation, the Meccans surrendered to Muhammad. Muhammad ordered his men to

enter the city and fight only those who resisted. He also had a list of those who were to be killed even if they sought refuge in the Ka'bah Temple. Most on the list were those considered apostates.[{12}](#) Muhammad rode his camel to the Ka'bah and cleared the temple of all its idols and burned them. Along with these major conflicts were other raids and battles as Muhammad spread his religion. Ibn Ishaq records that in all Muhammad participated in twenty-seven battles, personally fighting in nine of them.[{13}](#)

Islam spread throughout the Middle East through the sword. Muhammad sent messengers throughout Arabia and neighboring countries, ordering them to convert to Islam or suffer the consequences. Those who did not submit to his rule were attacked and forced to pay a tax called a Jizya to Muhammad. In Surah 9, Muhammad gave instructions to his men on dealing with unbelievers:

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by Allah and His Apostle, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued (Surah 9:29).

In this passage, unbelievers are given three options: to convert to Islam, to pay the tax, or to prepare for battle. Today, fundamentalist Muslims who seek to follow the example of Muhammad and follow the literal teachings of the Qur'an view *jihad* (holy war) as a military conflict for the cause of Islam. These believe that jihad will be waged worldwide against all unbelievers until the world comes under the rule of the House of Islam.

In contrast to Muhammad, Jesus preached, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus praised those who make peace by teaching, "Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be

called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). During His earthly ministry, Christ never engaged in military conflict. Instead, He spread His message through preaching, teaching and accomplishing miracles. His mission culminated in His death on the cross for the sins of mankind and His resurrection from the dead.

Christ's disciples followed the example of Christ. Christianity was spread through the preaching of gospel message. Christ's disciples did not die on the battlefield as mighty warriors but were instead martyred for proclaiming the name of Christ. Today, Christianity is spread through the preaching, teaching, and humanitarian aid in the name of Christ. One leader was a man of the sword; one was a man of peace.

Facing Their Critics

Both Muhammad and Jesus faced sharp criticism for their message and lifestyle. However, the two men dealt very differently with their critics. There were times Muhammad forgave his critics, but there were also many times he exacted revenge on those who criticized him. Jesus, on the other hand, responded in love to those who were critical of Him.

Ibn Ishaq records several of Muhammad's dealings with those who criticized him. On one occasion, a Jewish Poet named Ka'b bin Al-Ashraf composed a poem that was critical of Muslim women. Muhammad asked, "Who will rid me of Ibnu'l-Ashraf?" A young man named Muhammad Maslama volunteered to kill the poet. Maslama's plan, which Muhammad endorsed, was to deceive the poet and lure him into a trap. After luring Ka'b into meeting, Maslama and his companions stabbed him to death and presented his dead body to Muhammad who then praised the men.^{14} After the assassination of Ka'b, Muhammad ordered his men to "kill any Jew that falls into your Power."^{15} The first victim of that decree was Ibn Sunayna, a Jewish merchant.

Another poet killed by Muhammad was a man named Abu Afak, who was nearly one hundred years old. He had written poems mocking Muhammad. Muhammad asked, "Who will deal with this rascal for me?" A young man named Salim bin Umayr volunteered and killed the old man while he was sleeping.[{16}](#) A female poet named Asma bint Marwan was infuriated by the murder of Afak and wrote verses condemning Muhammad's men. Hearing of her criticism, Muhammad asked, "Who will rid me of Marwan's daughter?" Umar bin Adiy al-Khatami volunteered and killed her and her unborn child that night. Umar was worried that he had committed a sin, but Muhammad reassured him saying, "Two goats won't butt their heads about her."[{17}](#) On another occasion Ishaq records that Muhammad killed two girls who wrote satirical songs about him.[{18}](#)

Muslims today take seriously any criticism against Muhammad. Many respond peacefully to the criticism but many responses are much harsher. A death *fatwa* (religious ruling) was declared against Salman Rushdie, author of the fictional novel *The Satanic Verses*. Moreover, in early 2006, riots, many of which were violent, broke out worldwide over Danish cartoons depicting Muhammad. Many who reacted violently believed they responded in a manner exemplifying Muhammad's example.

In contrast to Muhammad, Christ never exacted revenge on those who criticized Him. Christ taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:43-48)

This does not mean Christ passively ignored those who opposed His teachings. Christ often sharply rebuked those who spoke out against Him (Matthew 12:22-32), or He pointed out their error (Matthew 7:37-50, 9:10-12, 12:9-14), or He allowed his character to speak for itself (Luke 19:1-10). When Jesus was beaten and mocked, He was silent and in the end prayed for the forgiveness of His enemies. Like Muhammad, Christ had the

power to take revenge. Before He was taken away by the mob to stand an illegal trial He told Peter that He could call “twelve legions of angels” to destroy His enemies at hand. However, Christ chose to forgive and even love those who hated Him.

One leader chose the sword of vengeance while the other taught us to overcome evil with good.

Treatment of Women

Muhammad’s view of women is reflected in his personal relationships and his teachings revealed in the Qur’an and Hadith. Muhammad remained loyal to his first wife Kadhija and did not take any other wives until after her death. They had been married for 25 years. Islamic historians record that Muhammad married eleven to thirteen wives. The Qur’an allows a man to marry up to four wives (Surah 4:3); however, Muhammad received a special revelation from Allah that he may have more (Surah 33:50). Muhammad’s marriages have been a source of criticism of his moral character. However, Muslim historians state that Muhammad’s marriages were not immoral but instead followed the normal practices of the culture. Many of his marriages were to solidify political alliances and to provide and protect the widows of his men who had fallen in battle.[\[19\]](#) Here is a brief overview of the circumstances regarding the marriages to some of his more prominent wives.

After the death of Kadhija, Muhammad chose a young girl named Aisha, who was Muhammad’s favorite wife. He married her when she was seven and consummated the marriage when she was nine.[\[20\]](#) At the time, Muhammad was in his fifties. Aisha was the daughter of Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad’s first and loyal followers who eventually became the first Caliph (spiritual leader) after the death of Muhammad. In his final moments, Muhammad died in the arms of Aisha.

One of his most controversial marriages was to Zaynab bint

Jahsh, the wife of his adopted son Zayd bin Haritha. Zayd was unhappy in the marriage and knowing of Muhammad's interest in his wife, sought to divorce her. Initially Muhammad discouraged Zayd (Surah 33:37). However, the marriage worsened, and they divorced. Soon after Muhammad married Zaynab. Arabs considered this marriage equal to incest and criticized Muhammad. However, he received a revelation justifying his action (Surah 33:37).

Ibn Ishaq records the story of another wife Safiya. Safiya was the wife of Kinana al-Rabi, the leader of Jews living at the Khaybar oasis. Muhammad attacked this settlement. Ishaq records, "We met the workers of Khaybar coming out in the morning with their spades and baskets." [{21}](#) Muhammad and his men killed 93 men during the raid. Muhammad then sought to obtain the riches in the city. Muhammad ordered his men to torture Kinana so that he would reveal the location of hidden treasure. Ishaq writes that Muhammad ordered his men to "'Torture him until you extract what he has,' so he kindled a fire with flint and steel on his chest until he was nearly dead. Then the apostle delivered him to Muhammad b. Maslama and he struck off his head, in revenge for his brother Mahmud." [{22}](#) After Kinana's death Muhammad took his wife Safiya and married her. [{23}](#)

Muhammad's relationships with his wives were often a source of sorrow and struggle for him. On one occasion, Muhammad threatened to divorce his wives because one of them disclosed a secret to one of his consorts. This caused some of his wives to join together against him. Muhammad then received a revelation rebuking them, saying Allah and Gabriel would back him up. Allah would allow him to divorce them and Allah would provide "consorts better than you." [{24}](#) On another occasion, Muhammad's wives continued to irritate him by asking for money. In exasperation, he gave them the choice of divorcing him and seeking worldly pleasure or remaining with him. [{25}](#)

Muhammad's teachings regarding women give us insight into his

attitude that he did not view women as equals to men. First, it appears that Muhammad viewed women as less intelligent than men. In Surah 2:282, Muhammad taught that the testimony of a woman is worth half that of a man. Moreover, the Hadith also echoes Muhammad's belief in the "deficiency" or inferiority of women's intelligence. Bukhari gives this account:

Once Allah's Apostle went out to Musalla (to offer prayer) of Id-al-Adha or Al-Fitr prayer. Then he passed by a woman and said, "O woman! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women). . . . I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you." The women asked, "O Allah's Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?" He said, "Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?" They replied in the affirmative. He said, "This is the deficiency in her intelligence." {26}

Also, the *Hadith* further reinforces this teaching the inadequacy of a woman's intellect as follows:

The Prophet said, "Isn't the witness of a woman equal to half of that of a man?" The women said, "Yes." He said, "This is because of the deficiency of a woman's mind." {27}

These passages teach that women are considered to have a "deficiency" of the mind, which leads us to conclude that they are inferior to men. Second, Muhammad appears to teach that women have less value than men. This is evidenced in passages such as Surah 4:11 which states that a son's inheritance is to be twice that of a daughter's. Also, men are allowed up to four wives, and sex with slave girls is also allowed (Surah 4:3). Third, Muhammad's teachings lead one to conclude that women are less spiritual than men. One reason is that women are not able to pray during their menstrual cycles: "'Isn't it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?' The women replied in the affirmative. He said, 'This

is the deficiency in her religion.'”[{28}](#) Moreover, women are spiritually deficient to men because, although prayers are an important part of Islam, a man’s prayers will be canceled if a woman walks in front of a man while he is praying. Aisha wrote the following:

The things which annul the prayers were mentioned before me. They said, “Prayer is annulled by a dog, a donkey and a woman (if they pass in front of the praying people).” I said, “You have made us (i.e. women) dogs.” I saw the Prophet praying while I used to lie in my bed between him and the Qibla [Ed. note: the direction that should be faced for prayer]. Whenever I was in need of something, I would slip away for I disliked to face him.”[{29}](#)

Finally, Muhammad’s teachings reveal that wives were to live in subjection to their husbands or face physical and spiritual discipline. Muhammad taught, “Your wives are as a tilth [Ed. note: a measure of the quality of soil] for you; so approach your tilth when or how you will” (Surah 2:223). Chapter four of the Qur’an taught men to “beat [their wives] (lightly)” if their wives were guilty of “disloyalty,” “ill conduct,” or “refusing to share their beds” (Surah 4:34). There may also be spiritual consequences for a woman’s lack of subservience as the Hadith states that “If a husband calls his wife to his bed (i.e. to have sexual relation), and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels will curse her till morning.”[{30}](#)

Moreover, the spiritual consequences of wives who were not subservient to their husbands is seen in a passage which records when Muhammad looked into the bowels of hell and stated that the majority in hell were women who, although they believed in God, were there because they were ungrateful to their husbands.[{31}](#)

Thus, based on these passages, not only is a woman’s physical well-being dependent on her husband, but her eternal destiny

is also connected to her subjection to her husband.

From these passages we can conclude that Muhammad did not view women as equals to men. They had a "deficiency" of the mind; thus, their testimony was only worth half that of a man's. They were less valuable; thus, sons received a double portion of inheritance than daughters, and men could have multiple wives or sexual partners. They were less spiritual because of their inability to pray during menses and the fact that they would cancel out the prayers of a man simply by walking in front of him. Finally, the physical and spiritual well-being of a woman was not within her own power, but instead was dependent upon her submission to her husband.

In contrast, Jesus never married; however, He valued women, and several were a very important part of his ministry. Several traveled with Jesus and ministered to Him and His disciples (Luke 8:1-3). Jesus often praised women for their example of love and faith in the Lord (Mark 5:21-34, Luke 7:36-50, 21:1-4). In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus praised a sinful woman as being a person of greater faith than the men who were present! Jesus spent time with and taught women (Luke 10:38-42). The women were at the cross, and in His dying moments Jesus made sure His mother was taken care of (John 19:25-27). The women were also the first ones entrusted with the message of His resurrection. Jesus' treatment of women showed that He viewed women as important and equal in value to men.

Jesus' disciples reflected the attitude of Christ in their teachings. Peter exhorted husbands to honor their wives and treat them as co-heirs of eternal life (1 Peter 3:7). Paul stated in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul also exhorted husbands to "love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25.)

Muhammad and Jesus were considerably different in the way they treated and valued women. Muhammad's relationship with his wives and consorts and his teachings reflect his attitude toward women. Today, in nations where Islamic law is enforced, women struggle for equal rights. In contrast, Jesus valued women, and the teachings of the New Testament have been the foundation for [improving the status of women throughout the world](#).

Muhammad, Jews, and Christians

Jews believe that God presented special revelation to them through the prophets and the Old Testament. When writing the book of Deuteronomy, Moses prophesied that God would raise up another prophet similar to himself who would speak God's words and bring deliverance to the nation. Deuteronomy 18: 15 and 18 state, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— . . . I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him."

Christians believe that this prophet of whom Moses and the other prophets wrote is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the predicted Messiah who fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. Muslims believe that the prophet Moses spoke of was Muhammad and that there are New Testament prophecies such as John 14:16 that predict the coming of Muhammad. Islam claims that God's revelation began with the Jews, was built upon by the Christians, and culminates with Islam. Since Muslims believe there is a connection between the three, it is important to explore the relationship of Muhammad to the Jews and the Christians.

Early in his preaching, Muhammad appealed to the Jews and Christians, hoping to win their acceptance. He believed that he was a prophet in the lines of the Old and New Testament prophets and apostles. Various Surahs were written during this

period, teaching tolerance of Christians and Jews (Surah 2:62, 5:69, 22:17). In harmony with Jewish teachings, Muhammad taught that pork was forbidden, and he taught followers to pray facing Jerusalem.[{32}](#) Muhammad even challenged the Jews and Christians to look in their writings for confirmation of his teachings (Surah 10:92).

However, the Jews and Christians rejected his message, and he became hostile towards them. He received revelation denouncing the Christians and Jews for rejecting his message (Surah 5:12-16). In Surah 3:110 he calls the Jews and Christians ("People of the Book") "perverted transgressors." Coming to the realization the Jews would not acknowledge his prophetic call, Muhammad ordered Muslims to turn from Jerusalem and face Mecca when praying (Surah 2:143-150). Muhammad chastised Jews and Christians for distorting previous revelation and called them to return to the true teachings of scripture (Surah 5:14-16).

After winning control over Mecca and Arabia, Muhammad received a revelation to fight against the Jews and Christians until they accepted paying taxes and living as second-class citizens (Surah 9:29). Muhammad taught that Jews and Christians rejected his message due to their perversion and rebellion to the truth. Therefore, Muhammad announced that the Jews and Christians were accursed (Surah 5:12-16).

According to Bukhari, Muhammad's final moments were spent in the arms of his youngest wife Aisha. His final words were, "May Allah curse the Jews and Christians, for they built the places of worship at the graves of the prophets."[{33}](#) Islamic eschatology teaches that Jesus will return, break crosses, slaughter the Christians and the Jews, and establish Islam as the true religion.[{34}](#)

Muhammad's example influences the attitude that Muslims display towards Jews and Christians. Throughout Islamic history, Muslims have had conflict with the Jews and

Christians. Non-Muslims in Islamic countries continue to face discrimination and, in many cases, persecution.

What was the relationship of Christ to the Jews? The apostle John writes of Jesus that "He came to His own, and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11). Jesus came to save His people but was rejected by them. However, He never stopped reaching out to them in love and, in the end, cried over the city of Jerusalem, knowing the judgment that was coming upon them (Matthew 23:37). Paul reflects the heart of Christ saying, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3). Jesus and His disciples gave their lives for the lost, including the Jewish nation that rejected their message.

Christians continue to follow the example of Christ and preach the Gospel message to the Jews and non-Christians throughout the world. There have been times when Christians were guilty of the misuse of force; however, Christians can refer to the teachings of the New Testament and the example of Christ and the disciples to show clearly such use of force to spread Christianity is contrary to Christ's example and teaching. Muhammad cursed the Jews and Christians while Christ gave His life to save both Jews and non-Jews who were lost.

Conclusion

This article focused on the lives of Muhammad and Jesus. Both serve as the founders and exemplary models of their religion. We have seen that they lived radically different lives. Their examples influenced their early followers and continue to influence followers today.

Both men lived remarkable yet radically different lives. Muhammad's call reflects the struggle he had with the demonic forces while Christ conquered Satan, sin, and death. Muhammad was a warrior and chose the way of the sword while Christ was

a rabbi who gave His life to rescue mankind from sin and death. Muhammad exacted revenge on his critics while Christ reached out to the lost, even those who rejected Him. Muhammad's treatment and teaching on women stand in stark contrast to Christ. It is apparent that the lives and teachings of both men were significantly different.

It is important that we understand the lives they lived and realize the implications of their teachings and examples for our present situation. I encourage every person to examine the lives of both men and consider the implications of following their examples. Following the path of Muhammad leads one down the road of the sword. Following in the footsteps of Christ will lead one to righteousness and eternal life.

For it is Christ who claimed to be the divine Son of God, and He is the only one who confirmed His claims through His sinless, miraculous life, death, and resurrection from the dead. Even the Qur'an affirms the miraculous birth, sinless life, and miracles of Christ. Even the Qur'an teaches that He did not die but was raised to heaven. So even in the Qur'an, Jesus performs greater works than Muhammad. I encourage all Muslims to study the life of Jesus in the Bible. Muhammad even encouraged Muslims to study the Bible (Surah 10:94, 2:136, 4:163, 5:56, 5:68, 35:31). I believe once you study the life of Christ you will inevitably realize this was indeed was more than a prophet, He was the Son of God, the author of eternal life. [\[35\]](#) (For more, please read my article ["Jesus in the Qur'an"](#)).

Notes

1. John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), 13-14.
2. Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1955), 106.
3. Hadith, ed. Sahih Bukhari, vol. 1, bk. 1, no. 3. This translation can be found online at the Univ. of Southern

California's Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement at <http://tinyurl.com/p2ujny>.

4. Ishaq, 106.
5. Ibid., 107.
6. Ibid., 71-72.
7. Ibid., 165-66; Qur'an 22:52, 53:19-23.
8. Ibid., 240. Guillaume's footnote states Muhammad was under the spell for one year.
9. Bukhari, vol. 4, bk. 52, no. 256.
10. Ishaq, 382.
11. Ibid., 464.
12. Ibid., 550.
13. Ibid., 659-60.
14. Ibid., 367-68.
15. Ibid., 369.
16. Ibid., 675.
17. Ibid., 675-76.
18. Ibid., 551.
19. Esposito, 19-20.
20. Bukhari, vol. 5, bk. 58, no. 234, and vol. 7, bk. 62, no. 65.
21. Ishaq, 511.
22. Ibid., 515.
23. Ibid., 511.
24. Surah 66:1-5 and Bukhari, vol. 6, bk. 60, Verse 274.
25. Surah 33:28-29 and Bukhari, vol. 6, bk. 60, Verse 309.
26. Bukhari, Vol. 1, Bk. 6, No. 301, narrated by Abu Said Al-Khudri.
27. Bukhari, Vol. 3, Bk. 48, No. 826, narrated by Abu Said Al-Khudri.
28. Bukhari, Vol. 1, Bk. 6, No. 30, narrated by Abu Said Al-Khudri.
29. Bukhari, Vol. 1, Bk. 9, no. 490, narrated by 'Aisha.
30. Bukhari, Vol. 4, Bk. 54, No.460.
31. See note 26.
32. Bukhari, vol. 6, bk. 60, no. 13.
33. Bukhari, vol. 1, bk. 8, no. 427.

34. F. E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 390.

35. For more please read my article, "Jesus in the Qur'an," Probe, 2008, probe.org/jesus-in-the-quran/.

© 2009 Probe Ministries

The Apologetics of Jesus: A Defense of His Deity

Dr. Zukeran shows us that the greatest defense of the deity of Jesus was made by Jesus Himself. Claiming to be God in the flesh, His words and His actions had to be an apologetic for His claim. People could see He was a man; He had to prove to them that He was also deity, God in the flesh.

Jesus was one of the greatest leaders, teachers, and remarkable individuals that ever lived, but few realize that Jesus was also the greatest apologist. Apologetics is the rational defense of Christianity. Christian apologists use reason and evidence to present a convincing case for Christianity, challenge unbelief, expose errors, and defend the message of the gospel. Apologetics was an essential part of Jesus' ministry. If it was important in His ministry, it certainly should be in all ministries looking to impact the unbelieving world for Christ.



The Bible commands us in 1 Peter 3:15, "But set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be prepared to give an answer [apologia] to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have." We are commanded to provide a well-reasoned answer for our faith in Christ to an unbelieving world. Jesus

commanded us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37). Apologetics involves knowing why you believe and complies with Christ’s command of loving God with your mind.

There exists some misunderstanding among Christians as to whether apologetics is necessary. Some believe that our belief in Christ is based on “faith” and thus does not require solid reasons or evidence to support it. Therefore, in witnessing to unbelievers, some mistakenly suppose that apologetics is ineffective in leading anyone to faith. The call of the Christian is to simply present the gospel, and the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures will do the rest. However, this was not the example of Christ.

Christ made extraordinary claims to be the divine Son of God. He made such claims as being the source of life, forgiver of sins, the embodiment of truth, and authority over the Old Testament Law. Such claims were met with skepticism, doubt, and hostility. Jesus knew He was making remarkable claims, and He did not expect people to simply believe His message without good reasons. He was not seeking or wanting people to exercise “blind faith.” Jesus understood that we are rational and moral beings, for we are created in the image of God who is a rational and morally perfect being. For this reason, we exercise our rational capacity and investigate the evidence before making decisions.

Christ knew He would have to make a convincing case to uphold His claims and He did. Throughout His ministry, Christ presented compelling reasons and evidence to uphold His claim to be the divine Son of God. Jesus’ apologetics included the testimony of witnesses, miracles, the resurrection, prophecy, reason, the use of parables and more. The apologetic methods of Jesus serve as a model for every believer who desires to engage and impact an unbelieving world for Christ.

The Testimony of Witnesses

A man ill for thirty-eight years lay beside the Pool of Bethesda along with a multitude of crippled individuals. Suddenly an unknown stranger walks up and asks him a strange question. "Do you want to get well?" As the lame man begins to explain his situation, the stranger orders the man to "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!" Immediately, strength enters his legs and he rises and walks, carrying his mat as the stranger orders. Soon afterwards the Pharisees arrive and an examination ensues.

What should have been a moment of rejoicing turns into a serious interrogation. The Jewish leaders in John 5 confront Jesus seeking an opportunity and reason to kill Him. Instead of praising God in the healing of the lame man, the focus of the Jewish leaders is on the apparent violation of their Jewish tradition by Jesus.

Jesus responded saying, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working." (Jn. 5:17). The following verse states, "For this reason, the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." (Jn. 5:18). In this chapter Jesus performed some remarkable feats and made some extraordinary claims. When questioned, Jesus gave an answer or an *apologia*, a defense of His work and character. In His answer, we see that He was the greatest apologist and that apologetics was a key component in the ministry of Jesus.

In the passage that follows, Jesus presents one of the clearest and strongest cases regarding His nature as the divine Son of God. New Testament scholar Leon Morris states, "Nowhere in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find in this

discourse.”[\[1\]](#)

What was the apologetic method Jesus used in this instance? Jesus’ apologetic involved the testimony of witnesses. According to Jewish law, a testimony is valid only if there were at least two witnesses who could testify to the truth of an individual’s claims (Deut. 19:15). Jesus knew these men needed solid testimony to confirm His claims but also testimony that would convict them of their error regarding their understanding of His identity.

Jesus brings forth five witnesses that testify on His behalf; John the Baptist (5:32-35), His works (5:36), the Father (5:37), the Old Testament Scriptures (5:39-40), and Moses (5:41-46). There were no more authoritative witnesses than these. In a brilliant presentation, Jesus makes His case. The testimony of witnesses was part of the apologetics of Jesus.

Apologetics in the Parables

It is a well-known fact that Jesus was a great storyteller. His stories captivated the audience and taught a valuable lesson. The term “good Samaritan” and “the prodigal Son,” are recognized all over the world because of the unforgettable stories told by Jesus. One of the best ways to communicate truth is to illustrate it through stories which are also an effective way to penetrate into hardened hearts that would not be receptive to a direct gospel presentation. The parables of Christ are some of the most remarkable lessons ever taught. However, did you know that the parables of Christ were also powerful apologetic presentations of our Lord?

Through the use of these stories, Jesus makes a declaration and a defense of His ministry and claims. The images He selects are used in the Old Testament and later Jewish literature in reference to God. Jesus uses these images and applies them often to Himself. Philip Payne states, “Out of the fifty-two recorded narrative parables, twenty depict Him

in imagery which in the Old Testament typically referred to God. The frequency with which this occurs indicates that Jesus regularly depicted Himself in images which were particularly appropriate for depicting God.”{2}

By applying these images to Himself Jesus indicates his [self-understanding](#) as the divine Son of God and was communicating this truth to His audience. Payne identifies ten prominent images used in the parables in which images used in reference to God in the Old Testament Jesus applies to Himself.{3} Jesus’ repeated use of such images indicates He wanted His audience to recognize His divinity and that He was carrying out the very will of God in His ministry on earth.

Here are a few examples where Christ declares His divinity in the gospels. The image of the rock is used to describe God, especially in the Psalms (Ps. 19:14, 28:1, 42:9, 61:2, 62:2, 71:3, 78:35). In the parables of Jesus, He states that those who build their lives upon His teachings have built their lives upon “a rock” (Matt. 7:24-26 and Lk. 6:46-49). In Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, God is portrayed as a shepherd. In John 10 Jesus identifies Himself as the good shepherd. In another parable, Jesus uses the example of a bridegroom. In Isaiah 49, 54, Jeremiah 2, and Hosea, God is pictured as a bridegroom. In Mk. 2:19, Matt. 9:15, and Lk. 5:34-35, Jesus identifies Himself as the bridegroom. The parables were powerful stories Jesus used to communicate truth but they were also part of the apologetics of Jesus.

The Use of Reason

Jesus commanded us to “Love the Lord your God with all your . . . mind” (Mt. 22:37). Jesus exemplified what it meant to love God with “all your mind.” He was the greatest thinker who ever set foot upon the earth. Philosopher Dallas Willard states,

We need to understand that Jesus is a thinker, that this is

not a dirty word but an essential work, and that his other attributes do not preclude thought, but only insure that he is certainly the greatest thinker of the human race: 'the most intelligent person who ever lived on earth.' He constantly uses the power of logical insight to enable people to come to the truth about themselves and about God from the inside of their own heart and mind.{4}

Jesus understood that we are created in the image of God. Our creator is a reasonable and rational being. We are thus endowed with the capacity for reason and rationality. In Isaiah 1:18, God invited Israel saying, "Come now let us reason together." God wanted the people of Israel to use their ability to reason and consider the consequences of their behavior.

Jesus showed Himself to be a brilliant apologist who used the laws of logic to reveal truth, demolish arguments, and point out error. The communication of truth and discerning error requires the use of reason. Since our faith is a reasonable faith, reason was part of the apologetics of Jesus.

An example of the use of reason is found in Matthew 12:22-28. Here the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the Devil. Through the use of reason, Jesus showed their accusation to be false. The argument He used is the argument known as *reductio ad absurdum* [Latin for "reduction to the absurd"]. This is an argument that demonstrates if the primary premise is supposed to be true, then it leads to a contradiction that is absurd. One would then inevitably have to conclude that the original premise is false.

Jesus responded stating that "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?" Jesus points to the illogical nature of their

accusation and further points to the testimony of His miracles that confirm His authority being from God.

Apologetics of Miracles

Something had gone terribly wrong. The Messiah had arrived but the Kingdom, which would be characterized by liberty, freedom, and the just rule of God, had not arrived. Instead, John the Baptist found himself in prison awaiting execution. Confused and discouraged, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Lk. 7:20). Jesus responds by pointing to the testimony of His miracles: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Lk. 7:22-23). When asked by John if He was indeed the Messiah, Jesus defends His claim by pointing to the testimony of His miracles. Miracles represent another component in the apologetics of Jesus.

A miracle is a special act of God that interrupts the normal course of events. Natural laws describe what occurs regularly by natural causes, but miracles describe what happens rarely, by supernatural causes. A miracle is an act of God designed to confirm the word of God through a messenger of God. [\[5\]](#)

Throughout the Old Testament, God used miracles to confirm His message and His messenger. Christ's miracles demonstrated that what He claimed about Himself was true and that God's confirming hand was on the message He preached. Jesus performed a vast array of miraculous signs that demonstrated His divine authority over every realm of creation.

When friendly as well as hostile audiences questioned Jesus, He defended His claims with the testimony of miracles (Mk. 2:1-12, Jn. 2, and 10:22-42). Many who witnessed Christ's miracles made the connection. Nathaniel, witnessing the

omniscience of Christ, responded exclaiming, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” (Jn. 1:49). Nicodemus in his evening visit meets Jesus saying, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” (Jn. 3:2).

When Christ establishes His kingdom, all creation will be subject to Him. Sin, sickness, death, and disease will be overcome and the subjects of the kingdom will never be in want. The miracles of Christ reflect His divine character and demonstrate the King of the Kingdom has arrived.

Apologetics was an essential component of Christ’s ministry and should be an important part of any ministry looking to engage this lost world for Christ. The Bible commands us to defend our faith, and Christ set the supreme example for us to follow.

To learn more about the apologetics of Jesus and gain valuable practical lessons from His examples, check out the online store at Probe.org and [purchase a copy](#) of the in depth book, *The Apologetics of Jesus* written by Norman Geisler and myself.

Notes

1. Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 311.
2. Philip Payne, “Interpreting Jesus’ Parables,” (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1980), 263.
3. Ibid., 313-17.
4. Dallas Willard, “Jesus the Logician,” *Christian Scholars Review* (Summer 1999): 610.
5. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 201-2.

The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? – A Real Historical Event

Dr. Pat Zukeran presents strong evidence discounting the most common theories given against a historical resurrection. The biblical account and other evidence clearly discount these attempts to cast doubt on the resurrection. Any strong apologetic argument is anchored on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as an historical event.

Introduction

The most significant event in history is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the strongest evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. This event gives men and women the sure hope of eternal life a hope that not only gives us joy as we look to the future but also provides us with powerful reasons to live today.

Throughout the centuries, however, there have been scholars who have attempted to deny the account of the Resurrection. Our schools are filled with history books which give alternative explanations for the Resurrection or in some cases, fail even to mention this unique event.

In this essay we will take a look at the evidence for the Resurrection and see if this event is historical fact or fiction. But, first, we must establish the fact that Jesus Christ was a historical figure and not a legend. There are several highly accurate historical documents that attest to Jesus. First, let's look at the four Gospels themselves. The authors Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded very specific

facts of the events surrounding the life of Jesus, and archaeology has verified the accuracy of the New Testament. Hundreds of facts such as the names of officials, geographical sites, financial currencies, and times of events have been confirmed. Sir William Ramsay, one of the greatest geographers of the 19th century, became firmly convinced of the accuracy of the New Testament as a result of the overwhelming evidence he discovered during his research. As a result, he completely reversed his antagonism against Christianity.

The textual evidence decisively shows that the Gospels were written and circulated during the lifetime of those who witnessed the events. Since there are so many specific names and places mentioned, eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the writings. The New Testament would have never survived had the facts been inaccurate. These facts indicate that the Gospels are historically reliable and show Jesus to be a historical figure. For more information on the accuracy of the Bible, see the essay from Probe entitled [Authority of the Bible](#).

Another document that supports the historicity of Jesus is the work of Josephus, a potentially hostile Jewish historian. He recorded Antiquities, a history of the Jews, for the Romans during the lifetime of Jesus. He wrote, "Now there was about that time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man."⁽¹⁾ Josephus goes on to relate other specific details about Jesus' life and death that correspond with the New Testament. Roman historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger also refer to Jesus as a historically real individual.

Skeptics often challenge Christians to prove the Resurrection scientifically. We must understand, the scientific method is based on showing that something is fact by repeated observations of the object or event. Therefore, the method is limited to repeatable events or observable objects. Historical events cannot be repeated. For example, can we repeatedly

observe the creation of our solar system? The obvious answer is no, but that does not mean the creation of the solar system did not happen.

In proving a historical event like the Resurrection, we must look at the historical evidence. Thus far in our discussion we have shown that belief in the historical Jesus of the New Testament is certainly reasonable and that the scientific method cannot be applied to proving a historical event. For the remainder of this essay, we will examine the historical facts concerning the Resurrection and see what the evidence reveals.

Examining the Evidence

Three facts must be reckoned with when investigating the Resurrection: the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the preaching of the Resurrection originating in Jerusalem.

Let us first examine the case of the empty tomb. Jesus was a well-known figure in Israel. His burial site was known by many people. In fact Matthew records the exact location of Jesus' tomb. He states, "And Joseph of Arimathea took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb" (Matt. 27:59). Mark asserts that Joseph was "a prominent member of the Council" (Mark 15:43).

It would have been destructive for the writers to invent a man of such prominence, name him specifically, and designate the tomb site, since eyewitnesses would have easily discredited the author's fallacious claims.

Jewish and Roman sources both testify to an empty tomb. Matthew 28:12-13 specifically states that the chief priests invented the story that the disciples stole the body. There would be no need for this fabrication if the tomb had not been empty. Opponents of the Resurrection must account for this. If

the tomb had not been empty, the preaching of the Apostles would not have lasted one day. All the Jewish authorities needed to do to put an end to Christianity was to produce the body of Jesus.

Along with the empty tomb is the fact that the corpse of Jesus was never found. Not one historical record from the first or second century is written attacking the factuality of the empty tomb or claiming discovery of the corpse. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association states,

Let's assume that the written accounts of His appearances to hundreds of people are false. I want to pose a question. With an event so well publicized, don't you think that it's reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ's body? . . . The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.(2)

Second, we have the changed lives of the Apostles. It is recorded in the Gospels that while Jesus was on trial, the Apostles deserted Him in fear. Yet 10 out of the 11 Apostles died as martyrs believing Christ rose from the dead. What accounts for their transformation into men willing to die for their message? It must have been a very compelling event to account for this.

Third, the Apostles began preaching the Resurrection in Jerusalem. This is significant since this is the very city in which Jesus was crucified. This was the most hostile city in which to preach. Furthermore, all the evidence was there for everyone to investigate. Legends take root in foreign lands or centuries after the event. Discrediting such legends is difficult since the facts are hard to verify. However, in this case the preaching occurs in the city of the event immediately after it occurred. Every possible fact could have been investigated thoroughly.

Anyone studying the Resurrection must somehow explain these three facts.

Five Common Explanations

Over the years five explanations have been used to argue against the Resurrection. We will examine these explanations to see whether they are valid.

The Wrong Tomb Theory

Proponents of this first argument state that according to the Gospel accounts, the women visited the grave early in the morning while it was dark. Due to their emotional condition and the darkness, they visited the wrong tomb. Overjoyed to see that it was empty, they rushed back to tell the disciples Jesus had risen. The disciples in turn ran into Jerusalem to proclaim the Resurrection.

There are several major flaws with this explanation. First, it is extremely doubtful that the Apostles would not have corrected the women's error. The Gospel of John gives a very detailed account of them doing just that. Second, the tomb site was known not only by the followers of Christ but also by their opponents. The Gospels make it clear the body was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council. If the body still remained in the tomb while the Apostles began preaching, the authorities simply would have to go to the right tomb, produce the body, and march it down the streets. This would have ended the Christian faith once and for all. Remember, the preaching of the Resurrection began in Jerusalem, fifteen minutes away from the crucifixion site and the tomb. These factors make this theory extremely weak.

The Hallucination Theory

This second theory holds that the Resurrection of Christ just occurred in the minds' of the disciples. Dr. William McNeil articulates this position in his book, *A World History*. He

writes,

The Roman authorities in Jerusalem arrested and crucified Jesus. . . . But soon afterwards the dispirited Apostles gathered in an upstairs room' and suddenly felt again the heartwarming presence of their master. This seemed absolutely convincing evidence that Jesus' death on the cross had not been the end but the beginning. . . . The Apostles bubbled over with excitement and tried to explain to all who would listen all that had happened.(3)

This position is unrealistic for several reasons. In order for hallucinations of this type to occur, psychiatrists agree that several conditions must exist. However, this situation was not conducive for hallucinations. Here are several reasons. Hallucinations generally occur to people who are imaginative and of a nervous make up. However, the appearances of Jesus occurred to a variety of people. Hallucinations are subjective and individual. No two people have the same experience. In this case, over five hundred people (Corinthians 15) have the same account. Hallucinations occur only at particular times and places and are associated with the events. The Resurrection appearances occur in many different environments and at different times. Finally, hallucinations of this nature occur to those who intensely want to believe. However, several such as Thomas and James, the half brother of Jesus were hostile to the news of the Resurrection.

If some continue to argue for this position, they still must account for the empty tomb. If the Apostles dreamed up the Resurrection at their preaching, all the authorities needed to do was produce the body and that would have ended the Apostles' dream. These facts make these two theories extremely unlikely.

The Swoon Theory

A third theory espouses that Jesus never died on the cross but

merely passed out and was mistakenly considered dead. After three days He revived, exited the tomb, and appeared to His disciples who believed He had risen from the dead. This theory was developed in the early nineteenth century, but today it has been completely given up for several reasons.

First, it is a physical impossibility that Jesus could have survived the tortures of the crucifixion. Second, the soldiers who crucified Jesus were experts in executing this type of death penalty. Furthermore, they took several precautions to make sure He was actually dead. They thrust a spear in His side. When blood and water come out separately, this indicates the blood cells had begun to separate from the plasma which will only happen when the blood stops circulating. Upon deciding to break the legs of the criminals (in order to speed up the process of dying), they carefully examined the body of Jesus and found that He was already dead.

After being taken down from the cross, Jesus was covered with eighty pounds of spices and embalmed. It is unreasonable to believe that after three days with no food or water, Jesus would revive. Even harder to believe is that Jesus could roll a two-ton stone up an incline, overpower the guards, and then walk several miles to Emmaeus. Even if Jesus had done this, His appearing to the disciples half-dead and desperately in need of medical attention would not have prompted their worship of Him as God.

In the 19th century, David F. Strauss, an opponent of Christianity, put an end to any hope in this theory. Although he did not believe in the Resurrection, he concluded this to be a very outlandish theory. He stated,

It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given the disciples the impression

that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of life, an impression that would lay at the bottom of their future ministry.(4)

The Stolen Body Theory

This fourth argument holds that Jewish and Roman authorities stole the body or moved it for safekeeping. It is inconceivable to think this a possibility. If they had the body, why did they need to accuse the disciples of stealing it? (Matt. 28:11 15). In Acts 4, the Jewish authorities were angered and did everything they could to prevent the spread of Christianity. Why would the disciples deceive their own people into believing in a false Messiah when they knew that this deception would mean the deaths of hundreds of their believing friends? If they really knew where the body was, they could have exposed it and ended the faith that caused them so much trouble and embarrassment. Throughout the preaching of the Apostles, the authorities never attempted to refute the Resurrection by producing a body. This theory has little merit.

The Soldiers Fell Asleep Theory

Thus far we have been studying the evidence for the Resurrection. We examined four theories used in attempts to invalidate this miracle. Careful analysis revealed the theories were inadequate to refute the Resurrection. The fifth and most popular theory has existed since the day of the Resurrection and is still believed by many opponents of Christianity. Matthew 28:12 13 articulates this position.

When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money telling them, "You are to say, his disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"

Many have wondered why Matthew records this and then does not refute it. Perhaps it is because this explanation was so

preposterous, he did not see the need to do so.

This explanation remains an impossibility for several reasons. First, if the soldiers were sleeping, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body? Second, it seems physically impossible for the disciples to sneak past the soldiers and then move a two-ton stone up an incline in absolute silence. Certainly the guards would have heard something.

Third, the tomb was secured with a Roman seal. Anyone who moved the stone would break the seal, an offense punishable by death. The depression and cowardice of the disciples makes it difficult to believe that they would suddenly become so brave as to face a detachment of soldiers, steal the body, and then lie about the Resurrection when they would ultimately face a life of suffering and death for their contrived message.

Fourth, Roman guards were not likely to fall asleep with such an important duty. There were penalties for doing so. The disciples would have needed to overpower them. A very unlikely scenario.

Finally, in the Gospel of John the grave clothes were found "lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself separate from the linen" (20:6-7). There was not enough time for the disciples to sneak past the guards, roll away the stone, unwrap the body, rewrap it in their wrappings, and fold the head piece neatly next to the linen. In a robbery, the men would have flung the garments down in disorder and fled in fear of detection.

Conclusion: Monumental Implications

These five theories inadequately account for the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the birth of Christianity in the city of the crucifixion. The conclusion we must seriously consider is that Jesus rose from the grave. The

implications of this are monumental.

First, if Jesus rose from the dead, then what He said about Himself is true. He stated, "I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies" (John 11:25). He also stated, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the father , but through me" (John 14:6). Eternal life is found through Jesus Christ alone. Any religious belief that contradicts this must be false. Every religious leader has been buried in a grave. Their tombs have become places of worship. The location of Jesus' tomb is unknown because it was empty; his body is not there. There was no need to enshrine an empty tomb.

Second, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:54, "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Physical death is not the end; eternal life with our Lord awaits all who trust in Him because Jesus has conquered death.

Notes

1. Josephus, *Antiquities* xviii. 33. (Early second Century).
2. Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1981), p. 66.
3. William McNeil, *A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 163.
4. David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus for the People* , vol. 1, 2nd edition (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), p. 412.

For Further Reading

Craig, William Lane. *Apologetics: An Introduction*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1984.

Geisler, Norman. *When Skeptics Ask*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Press, 1989.

Greenleaf, Simon. *The Testimony of the Evangelists; The Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence*. Grand Rapids: Kregal Publications, 1995.

Little, Paul. *Know Why You Believe*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

McDowell, Josh. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1979.

_____. *The Resurrection Factor*. San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1981.

McNeill, William. *A World History*, Third Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Montgomery, John, ed. *Evidence for Faith*. Dallas: Probe Books, 1991.

Morison, Frank. *Who Moved the Stone?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1958.

Strauss, David. *The Life of Jesus for the People*. Volume 1, Second Edition. London: Williams and Norgate, 1879.

©1997 Probe Ministries.

Japan's Unknown Christian History: A Review of 'Silence'

Former Probe staffer Dr. Patrick Zukeran reviews *Silence*, the book by Shusaku Endo and the movie directed by Martin Scorsese, which look at the little-known Christian history of

Japan.

Introduction: Historical Background

The novel *Silence*, written by Shusaku Endo, has been made into a movie directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Liam Neeson and Andrew Garfield. This historical fiction provides a glimpse into the little known Christian history of Japan. Few are aware that Japan has a rich Christian history that dates back over four centuries.

The first Christian missionary from Europe was Francis Xavier, who arrived in Japan in 1549. The Japanese embraced the message of Christ and for half a century Christianity flourished in Japan. By 1587, it is estimated that there were nearly 200,000 Christians in Japan. In 1597, it is estimated that approximately 300,000 Japanese had become Christian, 1.6% of the population.[\[1\]](#)

The situation changed dramatically in 1587 under the rule of the Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. He grew concerned about the growing influence of Christianity and viewed it as a threat to his power. He gave an edict outlawing Christianity in Japan. In 1597 the first 26 Christians were arrested in Kyoto and marched 600 miles to Nagasaki, the center of Christianity in Japan. There they were tortured and later crucified. This began the Christian persecution in Japan.

Following Hideyoshi came the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), which lasted over 250 years. Under the Tokugawa rule one of the fiercest Christian persecutions occurred in Church history. Church historians estimate that between 300,000 and 500,000 Christians died during this time.

The Tokugawa Shoguns realized that killing the Christians did not diminish the growth of Christianity in Japan. The Shogun eventually devised a more sinister and effective way of thwarting the spread of Christianity. Instead of quickly executing Christians, it was more effective to torture the

Christians and coerce them to renounce their faith. After committing apostasy, the apostate would be paraded throughout Japan and have them persuade fellow Christians to abandon their faith. This proved more effective in discouraging people from becoming Christians. Christians who apostatized were known as "korobi" or fallen Christians. Priests who apostatized were the most valuable in this endeavor.

To induce Christians to renounce their faith, the Shogun devised some of the most heinous forms of torture that he unleashed on the Christians. Christian men, women, and children were slowly burned at the stake, boiled in hot springs, thrown into frozen lakes and brutalized in various ways. One of the most feared methods was the pit. In this technique, people were hung upside down and their head was placed in a covered pit filled with sewage. The torturers would cut a slit behind the ears or across the forehead so the blood rush would not kill the person but prolong the agony for days.

The persecution proved to be very effective. In 1612 there were an estimated 300,000 Christians. In 1625 it is estimated that there were less than half that number. For the next 250 years the Japanese Christians were forced to worship secretly and were known as the "kakure" or hidden Christians.

This is the historical setting for the movie *Silence* which takes place in 1639 during the height of the Christian persecution in Japan. Two Jesuit priests from Portugal, Father Sebastião Rodrigues and Father Francisco Garrpe, secretly enter Japan in search of their mentor Father Cristóvão Ferreira (Neeson) who is purported to have apostatized. Their goal is to find Ferreira and minister to the Japanese Christians who are without priests and thus without true spiritual guidance.

The priests arrive in Japan to find that the Christians live a

very arduous life. The movie does an excellent job in revealing the poverty of the Christian communities who are forced to retreat to remote areas. The audience also feels the anxiety and fear that constantly looms over the Christian villages. The priests spend their days in hiding and in the evenings they minister to the community. However, the priests are discovered and eventually captured.

Silence vividly portrays graphically the brutal torture the Japanese Christians suffered at the hands of the daimyos. There are heart-wrenching scenes that depict the way fathers, mothers, and children were inhumanely tortured before they were executed. In many church history books we read of the glorious death of the Christian martyrs. However, this is not the case in the novel or the movie. In the book *Silence*, Susaku Endo wrote,

I had long read about the martyrdom in the lives of the saints – how the souls of the martyrs had gone home to Heaven, how they had been filled with glory in Paradise, how the angels had blown trumpets. This was the splendid martyrdom I had often seen in my dreams. But the martyrdom of the Japanese Christians I now describe to you was no such glorious thing. What a miserable and painful business it was. {2}

Indeed, the horror of martyrdom is captured in the movie. The agonizing deaths of the Christians are not inspiring or glorious but dreadful to watch.

The priests are coerced to apostatize while in prison. The priests do not fear their own death but they cannot bear to watch the suffering of others. Father Garrpe dies attempting to rescue Christians tossed into the ocean. Rodrigues is now the last missionary in Japan. Finally, the dreaded but sought-for meeting occurs. He meets his mentor Father Ferreira who has apostatized and now goes by his Japanese name Sawano Chuan. He is married and spends his days translating European

writings for the Japanese and persuading Christians to abandon their faith in Christ. He encourages Rodrigues to save his life and his fellow believers by apostatizing. Rodrigues refuses and expresses his heartfelt disappointment at Ferreira. Rodrigues courageously resists but eventually he is unable to endure the suffering of his fellow Christians hanging in the pit. Worn down by the cruelty, he eventually steps on the portrait of Jesus, renouncing his faith in Christ. Knowing the Catholic Church cannot forgive him, Rodrigues wonders if Jesus will forgive him for what he has done. This becomes his agonizing struggle for the rest of his life.

The Silence of God

The main question that is asked throughout the movie is, Where is God? How can He let His people suffer and die like this? Why does He remain silent and not answer the cries of His people? The priests Garrpe and Rodrigues wrestle with that question throughout the movie and we are drawn into their struggle. This is the question people in every age ask in the midst of their suffering.

Each year I lead the Japan Christian Martyrs Tour where I take the group along the path of the Martyrs. We see the sites and hear the stories where thousands of Japanese Christians were brutally tortured and executed. At those times, even four centuries later, we still ask, "Where was God? Why was He silent? How could He allow the violent massacre of His people in Japan?"

In the final moments of the movie, Rodrigues, now known as the Apostate Paul wrestles with God on this lifelong struggle. He reflects on his act of apostasy, stepping on the image of Christ but instead of anger in the eyes of Christ, he saw eyes of understanding, grace and love. He states,

Even now that face is looking at me with eyes of pity from

the plaque rubbed by many feet. "Trample!" said those compassionate eyes. "Trample! Your foot suffers in pain; it must suffer like all the feet that have stepped on this plaque. But that pain alone is enough. I understand your pain and your suffering. It is for that reason I am here."

"Lord, I resented your silence," states Rodrigues. Jesus replies, "I was not silent. I suffered beside you."

Despite his act of apostasy, Rodrigues in the end finds forgiveness from a Christ who understands his situation and extends grace to him. He realizes Christ was not silent but with him through his suffering and remained with him even in his final days. He seems to realize the love of Christ is more powerful and faithful than he has ever known.

This is one of the unique aspects of *Silence*. Endo and Scorsese want us to see through the eyes of the "korobe" Christian. We applaud those who died never renouncing their faith in Christ and quickly condemn those who publicly renounced their faith in Christ. However, I believe Shusaku Endo through his novel tells us, "Not so fast!"

Those who apostatized struggled and suffered greatly too. I believe Endo wants us to see through the eyes of Rodrigues and ask ourselves the question, "Could we endure watching our wives, children and loved ones receiving such vicious treatment for days without end?" "Would we remain steadfast or would we renounce Christ to save our loved ones from such an unbearable fate?" "Would Christ condemn us for renouncing Him to save our loved ones or would he understand and extend grace in such a situation as the Japanese and other persecuted Christian face?"

I believe Endo wants us to understand the struggle of persecuted Christians and wants us to understand they wrestle with their guilt for the rest of their lives. If God's grace is indeed "greater than all my sin," should we consider

extending grace to our “fallen brethren” as well?

I believe another lesson Endo wants us to learn is that God is not silent but remains with His people in their suffering, never abandoning His people. Throughout church history, Christians have faced brutal persecutions. Even Christ the Son of God suffered the most dreadful death on the cross. Therefore, God understands the pain we experience, He grieves at the wickedness of men, and He promises to be with us always.

I agree with Endo that God is with us in our suffering. However, I feel his answer is incomplete. In a Christian's suffering, often a disciple feels the presence of Christ in an even greater way. In the writings of the persecuted saints and in the many interviews I have had with Christians who are suffering, many state they feel the presence of God in greater ways than they have ever known. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:10-11, “. . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” So many times in suffering Christians identify with the sufferings of Christ and sense His presence in greater ways.

What I found troubling about the novel and movie is the gloomy mood of the story. The movie emphasizes the brutal deaths of Christians, the struggles of a fallen priest, and what appears to be the demise and bleak future of Christianity in Japan. Indeed, the Christian history of Japan is sorrowful and the movie ends in the midst of Japan's persecution so I can understand Endo's ending. On this earth, life will not always have a happy ending. What I find missing in Endo's story is the message of hope that is found in Christ even in suffering. What compels Christians to surrender their life for Christ is the assured hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:2 states, “. . . looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the

cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

There is little joy when focusing primarily on the affairs and outcomes in this fallen world. If this is where the story ends, it is indeed dark and disheartening. However, through the darkness shines the hope that allowed Christ to have joy even when facing the agony of the cross. Believers can also have joy and hope if they look forward to the glory that awaits every believer in Christ. Despite the suffering believers face, it pales in comparison to the eternal glory that is to come. Persecution teaches Christians we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Christians can endure and remain joyful even in their suffering when focused on Christ and the glory of our true home. The end is not the cross of death, but the resurrection of Jesus and every disciple of Christ. This is important in any story of persecuted Christians. It is emphasized in the New Testament and is the story of Christ's and the believer's ultimate triumph. The New Testament prophesies the future persecution of all believers but ends with the triumphant resurrection and return of Christ. Through Christ's victory, the Christian story ends ultimately in triumph. The end is not the death of the Christians in Japan but the glory they received from Christ in heaven. Their courageous commitment should be an inspiration to believers around the world and an example of what it means to live not for this world, but the kingdom of heaven. Hebrews 11:35-40 states,

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though

commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The Japanese Christians were living for another kingdom and looking forward to the eternal glory of heaven. This message was not present in the novel or the film, which I believe made it a dark and gloomy story. Although Japan Christian history is discouraging, the end has not been written for the Christ's Church in Japan.

Can A Tree Grow in a Swamp?

One of the most significant dialogues in the movie occurs between Rodrigues and the Samurai Lord Inoue, also known as the Inquisitor. Inoue states,

A tree which flourishes in one kind of soil, may wither if the soil is changed. As for the tree of Christianity, in a foreign country its leaves may grow thick and the buds may be rich, while in Japan the leaves wither and no bud appears. Father, have you never thought of the difference in the soil, the difference in the water?

Inoue tells Rodrigues that a tree cannot grow in a swamp. Therefore, Christianity will not take root in Japan.

There is a famous saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." In other words, persecution strengthens the faith of Christians and the church grows when persecuted. This was not the case in Japan. The genocide that took place from 1600-1800 was devastating and Christianity has never regained a strong foothold in Japan. Another question Christians struggle with is, "Why has Christianity not taken root in Japan?" Today the largest growth of Christianity is occurring throughout Asia. Despite this, Christianity continues to struggle in Japan.

When Christianity first arrived in Japan in 1549, the

Japanese embraced the gospel of Christ. Xavier was so impressed with Japan that he called for only the missionaries of highest quality to be sent.^{3} Xavier wrote, "Japan is the only country yet discovered in these regions where there is hope of Christianity permanently taking root. . . . These are the best people so far discovered, and it seems to me that among the unbelievers, no people can be found to excel them."^{4} Father Organto, who followed Xavier, wrote that Japan would be Christianized in 30 years, expressing the optimism of missionaries that Christianity would thrive in Japan.^{5} The situation quickly changed and the two centuries of persecution that followed nearly eradicated Christianity in Japan.

Today there is a famous saying among missionaries: "Japan is where Christian missionaries go to die." Indeed, many return after years of labor discouraged and disillusioned by the little fruit they see in their years of labor in Japan. There are many reasons given why the gospel has not thrived in this country. Can the seed of the gospel penetrate the hard soil of Japanese culture?

As unbelievable as this may seem, I believe a spiritual revival for Japan. As the gospel flourished 400 years ago, spiritual awakening will come to this nation again. How it will come about only God knows. I believe the Japanese are realizing the emptiness of their secular outlook and lifestyle of materialism and consumerism. Their high suicide rate reflects the emptiness of these ideologies. Japanese Buddhism and Shinto fail to answer the great questions of life or fill the void in the heart of all people. These religions are also largely built on myths and so they are not based on reality.

Xavier realized the Japanese religions did not answer the big questions of life such as the origin of life and the universe, the nature of God, the origin of evil, the answer to the problem of evil, and what happens after death.^{6} The ideologies that dominate Japan still fail to adequately

answer these questions today. As Xavier demonstrated that Christianity provides the best answer to these questions, so the Church in Japan must do the same. Christianity has the evidence to uphold its claims to truth and life everlasting in Jesus. I believe that Christian apologetics would do well in this country that is very rational and well educated. The message of the gospel provides the true message of hope for this nation. I hope that the message and lives of the Japan Christian martyrs will one day be recognized and remembered by the people of Japan.

Conclusion

Scorsese's film is one of the few films about the little known Christian history of Japan. Even the Japanese are not aware of the tremendous Christian history of their nation. We should be thankful to Scorsese for showing the brutal persecution and the suffering endured by the Christians of Japan. Endo and Scorsese reveal to us the heinous tortures but they also take us into the mental torture that those suffering persecution go through. The struggles of the priests and the questions they ask are the same questions we all struggle with in our journey of faith. Endo and Scorsese present a unique perspective looking through the eyes of one who apostatizes and yet finds God's grace through it all.

It is my hope that Christians throughout the world gain a greater awareness of one of the greatest massacre of Christians that took place in Church history. I also hope that people will appreciate and admire the courage and commitment of the Japanese Christians who gave their lives for Christ. The Japanese unfortunately hide this part of their history. However, the Japanese and the world should recognize this facet of their history. The story of the men, women and children who gave their lives for Christ is moving and inspirational. They truly lived out the call of discipleship as Jesus commanded. In Matthew 10:37-39 Jesus said,

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Few have lived out the commands of Christ so faithfully and courageously as the Christians of Japan. I hope that more will recognize and remember the Christians of Japan who gave their lives for the Gospel.

Notes

1. Keith Webb, *Overcoming Spiritual Barriers in Japan*, (Nextchurch Resources, 2010), 15.
2. Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1969), 60.
3. John Dougill, *In Search of Japan's Hidden Christians* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 34.
4. Webb, 15.
5. Dougill, 51.
6. Henry Coleridge, *The Life and Letters of Francis Xavier* (London: Burns and Oates, 1881), 572.

© Probe Ministries 2017

Addendum 1/3/2022:

We received this inquiry to our website:

I was fascinated by this article on your site <https://probe.org/japans-unknown-christian-history-a-review-of-silence/> about unspeakable torture that rulers of Japan did. But it is said there is many reasons why Japanese people do not come to Christ in large numbers. So what are these reasons? Help me to understand, please. Also, I believe that the tortures that rulers of Japan performed could only take place because God granted them freedom, and there should be

sufficient moral reason why He permitted it. It is known that the blood of martyrs brings salvation to the land; maybe we just need to wait more and we'll see how their sacrifice will bring God's grace and Christ' salvation to people of Japan, especially now in the era of info technology.

Dr. Pat Zukeran, now leading his ministry Evidence and Answers from his Hawaii home, responded:

Aloha,

Thank you for reading the article on the movie *Silence* and your questions.

First, we do not know why God allows evil and suffering on some people and nations. God is in control of all things and has a plan for all that happens. Sometimes, only He knows the reason for the suffering of the Japanese Christians.

Today, less than 1% of Japanese are Christian. There are numerous reasons the nation of Japan is resistant to the Gospel message but no one really knows for sure. Here are some factors that contribute to their resistance to Christ.

First, the Japanese culture is a "group think" culture. Before a person makes a decision, he or she must consider how it will affect the family, clan and ancestors. Often they must consider how it affects their business partners, friends, etc... The group pressure is very high in Japan.

Second, Japan is a very materialistic culture and it places little importance on the spiritual life. As a result, there really is no Sabbath day or rest. Most people from students to business people work 6 to 7 days a week. This makes time for church or Bible study very difficult.

Third, Christianity is seen as a western religion. The Christian history of Japan is not usually portrayed in a positive way.

Fourth, the concept of sin is unclear in Japanese thinking. There is no accurate word for sin. The term used now, *shimi*, actually means “criminal.” They view human nature as good and most would not see themselves as criminal. So it is hard to receive the gospel if you do not understand sin and the need for a savior.

Ultimately, there is a dark spiritual stronghold on Japan. We hope one day, a spiritual awakening will occur in that land.

Thank you for your question, I hope this was helpful.

Blessings,

Patrick Zukeran

Evidence and Answers

The Pagan Connection: Did Christianity Borrow from the Mystery Religions?

Dr. Pat Zukeran examines the myths from mystery religions which are sometimes argued to be the source of our Gospel accounts of Jesus. He finds that any such connection is extremely weak and does not detract from the reliability of the gospel message.

One of the popular ideas being promoted today especially on the internet is the idea that the miracle stories of Jesus were borrowed from ancient pagan myths. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy write in their book *The Laughing Jesus*, “Each mystery religion taught its own version of the myth of the dying and resurrecting Godman, who was known by different

names in different places. In Egypt, where the mysteries began, he was Osiris. In Greece he became Dionysus, in Asia Minor he is known as Attis, in Syria he is Adonis, in Persia he is Mithras, in Alexandria he is Serapis, to name a few.”{1}

Proponents of this idea point out that there are several parallels between these pagan myths and the story of Jesus Christ. Parallels including a virgin birth, a divine Son of God, the god dying for mankind, resurrection from the dead, and others are cited. Skeptics allege that Christianity did not present any unique teaching, but borrowed the majority of its tenets from the mystery religions.



Indeed, some of the alleged parallels appear to be quite striking. One example is the god Mithras. This myth teaches that Mithras was born of a virgin in a cave, that he was a traveling teacher with twelve disciples, promised his disciples eternal life, and sacrificed himself for the world. The god Dionysius miraculously turns water into wine. The Egyptian god Osiris is killed and then resurrects from the dead.

This position was taught in the nineteenth century by the History of Religions School, but by the mid-twentieth century this view was shown to be false and it was abandoned even by those who believed Christianity was purely a natural religion.{2} Ron Nash wrote, “During a period of time running roughly from about 1890 to 1940, scholars often alleged that primitive Christianity had been heavily influenced by Platonism, Stoicism, the pagan religions, or other movements in the Hellenistic world. Largely as a result of a series of scholarly books and articles written in rebuttal, allegations of early Christianity’s dependence on its Hellenistic environment began to appear much less frequently in the publications of Bible scholars and classical scholars. Today most Bible scholars regard the question as a dead issue.”{3}

Despite the fact that many of the arguments were rejected, this theory has once again emerged through the popular writings of skeptics.

What makes Christianity unique among the world religions is that it is a historical faith based on the historical person of Christ who lived a miraculous life. In what follows, we will examine Christianity to see if it teaches a unique Savior or if it is simply a copy of these pagan myths.

Fallacies of the Theory

There are several flaws with the theory that Christianity isn't unique. New Testament scholars Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Dan Wallace point out several fallacies. The first is the *composite* fallacy. Proponents of this view lump together pagan religions as if they are one religion when making comparisons to Christianity. An attempt is made to show strong parallels by combining features from various religions.[{4}](#) However, when the individual myths themselves are studied, the reader soon finds major differences and very little commonality.

A second fallacy is a fallacy of *terminology*. Christian terms are used to describe pagan beliefs, and then it is concluded that there are parallel origins and meanings. Although the terms used are the same, however, there are big differences between Christian and pagan practices and definitions.[{5}](#)

A third fallacy is the *chronological* fallacy. Supporters of the theory incorrectly assume that Christianity borrowed many of its ideas from the mystery religions, but the evidence reveals it was actually the other way around. There is no archaeological evidence that mystery religions were in Palestine in the first century A.D. Jews and early Christians loathed syncretism with other religions. They were uncompromisingly monotheistic while Greeks were polytheistic.

Christians also strongly defended the uniqueness of Christ (Acts 4:12). Although Christians encountered pagan religions, they opposed any adopting of foreign beliefs.[{6}](#) Ron Nash stated, "The uncompromising monotheism and the exclusiveness that the early church preached and practiced make the possibility of any pagan inroads . . . unlikely if not impossible."[{7}](#)

Fourth is the *intentional* fallacy. Christianity has a linear view of history. History is moving in a purposeful direction. There is a purpose for mankind's existence; history is moving in a direction to fulfill God's plan for the ages. The mystery religions have a cyclical view of history. History continues in a never ending cycle or repetition often linked with the vegetation cycle.[{8}](#)

Christianity gains its source from Judaism, not Greek mythology. Jesus, Paul, and the apostles appeal to the Old Testament, and you find direct teachings and fulfillments in the New Testament. Teachings such as one God, blood atonement for sin, salvation by grace, sinfulness of mankind, bodily resurrection, are sourced in Judaism and foreign to Greek mythology. The idea of resurrection was not taught in any Greek mythological work prior to the late second century A.D.[{9}](#)

Legends of the Mystery Religions

As noted above, critics of Christianity point to several parallels between Christianity and the myths of the mystery religions. However, a brief study of the legends reveals that there are few if any parallels to the life of Jesus Christ. Historians acknowledge that there are several variations to many of these myths and that they also evolved and changed under the influence of Roman culture and, later, Christianity. Historical research indicates that it was not until the third century A.D. that Christianity and the mystery religions came

into real contact with one another.[{10}](#) A brief overview of some of the most popular myths reveals the lack of resemblance with Christianity.

In the matter of death and resurrection, major differences are seen between Christianity and pagan myths. First, none of the resurrections in these myths involve the God of the universe dying a voluntary death for His creation. Only Jesus died for sins; the death of other gods was due to hunting accidents, emasculation, and other calamities. The gods in these stories die by compulsion, not by choice, sometimes in bitterness and despair, never in self-giving love.[{11}](#)

Second, Jesus died once for all (Heb. 7:27, 9:25-28), while pagan gods repeat the death and rebirth cycle yearly with the seasons.

Third, Jesus' death was not a defeat but a triumph. The New Testament's mood of victory and joy (1 Cor. 15:50-57 and Col. 2:13-15) stands in contrast to the mood of pagan myths which is dark and sorrowful over the fate of their gods.

Finally, Jesus' death was an actual event in history. Christianity insists on and defends the historical credibility of the Gospel accounts while the pagan cults make no such attempt.[{12}](#)

A popular myth that some believe parallels the resurrection of Christ is the story of Osiris. The cult of the gods Osiris and his wife Isis originated in Egypt. According to the legend, Osiris' wicked brother Set murdered him and sank his coffin to the bottom of the Nile. Isis recovered the coffin and returned it to Egypt. However, Set discovered the body, cut it into fourteen pieces, and threw the pieces into the Nile. Isis collected thirteen of the body parts and bandaged the body, making the first mummy. Osiris was transformed and became the ruler of the underworld, and exists in a state of semi-consciousness.

This legend hardly parallels the resurrection of Christ. Osiris is not resurrected from death to life. Instead he is changed into another form and lives in the underworld in a zombie state. Christ rose physically from the grave, conquering sin and death. The body that was on the cross was raised in glory.

Resurrection Parallels

Two other popular myths compared to Christianity are those of Mithras and Attis.

There is a belief that the story of Mithras contains a death and resurrection. However, there is no teaching in early Mithraism of neither his death nor his resurrection. Ron Nash stated, "Mithraism had no concept of the death and resurrection of its god and no place for any concept of rebirth – at least during its early stages. . . . Moreover, Mithraism was basically a military cult. Therefore, one must be skeptical about suggestions that it appealed to nonmilitary people like the early Christians."[\[13\]](#)

Moreover, Mithraism flowered after Christianity, not before, so Christianity could not have copied from it. The timing is incorrect to have influenced the development of first-century Christianity. It is most likely the reverse: Christianity influenced Mithraism. Edwin Yamauchi, one of the foremost scholars on ancient Persia and Mithraism states, "The earnest mithraea are dated to the early second century. There are a handful of inscriptions that date to the early second century, but the vast majority of texts are dated after A.D. 140. Most of what we have as evidence of Mithraism comes in the second, third, and fourth centuries AD. That's basically what's wrong with the theories about Mithraism influencing the beginnings of Christianity."[\[14\]](#)

The legend of Attis was popular in the Hellenistic world.

According to this legend, Cybele, also known as the mother goddess, fell in love with a young Phrygian shepherd named Attis. However, he was unfaithful to her so she caused him to go mad. In his insanity, he castrated himself and died. Cybele mourned greatly (which caused death to enter into the world). She preserved Attis' dead body, allowing his hair to grow and little finger to move. In some versions, Attis returns to life in the form of an evergreen tree. However, there is no bodily resurrection to life. All versions teach that Attis remained dead. Any account of a resurrection of Attis does not appear till a hundred and fifty years after Christ.[\[15\]](#)

To sum up, the claim that Christianity adopted its resurrection account from the pagan mystery religions is false. There are very few parallels to the resurrection of Christ. The idea of a physical resurrection to glory is foreign to these religions, and the stories of dying a rising gods do not appear till well after Christianity.

Myths of a Virgin Birth

Let us now look-at the alleged parallels between virgin births in the mystery religions and the virgin birth of Christ. Parallels quickly break down when the facts are analyzed. In the pagan myths, the gods lust after women, take on human form, and enter into physical relationships. Also, the offspring that are produced are half human and half divine beings in contrast to Christ who is fully human and fully divine, the creator of the universe who existed from eternity past.

The alleged parallels to the virgin birth are found in the legends of Dionysus and Mithras. Dionysus is the god of wine. In this story, Zeus disguised as a man had relations with Semele and she became pregnant. In a jealous rage, Hera, Zeus' wife, attempted to burn Semele. Zeus rescued the fetus and sewed it into his thigh until the offspring, Dionysus, was

born. The birth of Dionysus was the result of a sexual union of Zeus, in the form of a man, and Semele. This cannot be considered a virgin birth.

One of the popular cults of the later Roman Empire was the cult of Mithra which originated in Persia. Mithra was supposedly born when he emerged from a rock; he was carrying a knife and torch and wearing a Phrygian cap. He battled first with the sun and then with a primeval bull, thought to be the first act of creation. Mithra slew the bull, which then became the ground of life for the human race.[\[16\]](#) The birth of Mithra from a rock, born fully grown, hardly parallels the virgin birth of Christ.

New Testament scholar. Raymond Brown states that alleged virgin parallels “consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* where a divine male, in human or other form, impregnates a woman, either through normal sexual intercourse or through some substitute form of penetration. They are not really similar to non-sexual virginal conception that is at the core of the infancy narratives, a conception where there is no male deity or element to impregnate Mary.”[\[17\]](#)

The Gospel of Luke teaches that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and through the power of the Most High she became pregnant. Mary had no physical relationship with a man or a deity who became a man.

Our study of the mystery religions reveals very few parallels with Christianity. For this reason, the theory that Christianity copied its major tenets from the mystery religions should be rejected.

Notes

1. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, *The Laughing Jesus* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 55-56.
2. Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Daniel Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications: 2006),

221.

3. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2007), 167.

4. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 223-4.

5. Ibid., 224-6.

6. Ibid., 231-234.

7. Ronald Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 168.

8. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, 221.

9. Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, MO.: College Press Publishing, 1997), 34.

10. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 129.

11. Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL :InterVarsity Press, 1984),53.

12. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 171-172.

13. Ibid., 144.

14. Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 169.

15. Ibid., 177.

16. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 144.

17. Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 182.

© 2008 Probe Ministries

Challenging the New Atheists

The new wave of bitterly anti-God, anti-Christian atheists offer arguments against God. Patrick Zukeran provides several good answers.

The New Atheist Agenda

Nearly thirty years ago John Lennon sang the song, "Imagine." The words went like this:



"Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today
Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too

Imagine all the people
Living life in peace
Imagine there's no heaven. . .
You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

In other words, the source of much evil in the world is religion: belief in God, life after death, and a universal moral code. Would the world be a better place if faith in God was eliminated? Many atheists now think so. Richard Dawkins states, "Imagine with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine, no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ killers', no Northern Ireland 'troubles', no honour killings', no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money ('God wants you to give till it hurts'). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers,

no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing one inch of it.”[\[1\]](#) The goal of the new atheists is to rid the world of belief in God or religion and replace it with reason and science. The new atheists believe that religions that embrace a belief in God, particularly Christianity, are not just irrational but dangerous and therefore must be extinguished.

The new atheists are not presenting new arguments but instead they are promoting their ideas very aggressively with strong, confrontational, and condemning language. They have gained a following amongst the young academic crowd, and they have been quite influential in public education. Some of the notable names who have written popular work include Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Dan Barker, and Christopher Hitchens.

In this work we will cover four popular arguments presented by the new atheists. The first is that belief in God is irrational. The second argument is that Christianity in particular is dangerous. Third, science has clearly proven God does not exist. Fourth, religion is the result of a natural man-made evolutionary process motivated by man’s need for a divine father figure and the need to find meaning in the universe.

In this series, we will examine these arguments and see whether belief in God is irrational or if there are good reasons for belief in a creator.

Belief in God is Irrational

The new atheists allege that faith in God is the result of irrational thinking and that a rational person would not believe in God. Sam Harris writes, “We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them ‘religious’; otherwise they are likely to be called ‘mad,’ ‘psychotic,’ or ‘delusional.’”[\[2\]](#)

Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, says that belief in God is the result of delusional thinking. He asserts that belief in God is a delusion built on empty assertions and not evidence. He states, "Faith is blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence."[{3}](#) His conclusion is that there is no evidence to support the existence of God; in fact, all the evidence goes against God.

The assertion that belief in God is irrational is not a new argument but a very old one. It is true that many who believe in God are not able to present reasons why they believe. However, Christianity is not founded on "blind faith" but faith built upon evidence, and there are good reasons that make belief in God a reasonable conclusion. One significant individual who has come to believe in the existence of God is Antony Flew. Flew was this generation's greatest atheist philosopher. However, Flew, through philosophical reasoning, came to believe in God.

Flew states that he wrestled with three key, major scientific questions. First, how did the laws of nature come to be? Second, how did life come from non-life? Third, how did the universe come into existence?[{4}](#) The naturalists' answers, which are heavily dependent on Darwin's theory, were unsatisfactory. Flew discovered that the classical theistic arguments provided the best answers in light of the evidence. The [cosmological argument](#), or argument from first cause, and the [teleological argument](#), or argument from design, provided a much more reasonable answer.[{5}](#)

For centuries, Christian apologists have presented these and several [other reasoned arguments](#) for the existence of God and many have come to a belief in God as Flew did. Antony Flew's conversion from atheism to theism deals a devastating blow to the arguments of the new atheists. Not only was he a titan among atheist philosophers, but he is another example that demonstrates belief in God is not irrational. Reasoning individuals who are willing to study the evidence and follow

it wherever it leads may find a strong case for a creator.

Is Science at War with God?

The new atheists allege that science and faith are at war. Therefore real scientists must be atheists, for science clearly proves God does not exist.

How do these atheists explain the display of design in the universe? Leading atheist spokesman Richard Dawkins believes Darwin's theory answers the design argument. However, recent discoveries reveal the shortcomings of Darwin's theory. Darwin's theory fails to explain the cause of the universe. It also fails to present evidence that that life came from non-life. There is also the lack of transitional forms in the fossil record, and there is no mechanism for macro-evolutionary change. Mutations and natural selection have failed to conclusively show they can produce macro-evolutionary change. In short, the new atheists have a lot of faith that Darwin's theory will answer these challenges.

Science and the Christian faith are not enemies. In fact, the more scientists study nature and the universe, they continue to discover complexity and design which make it highly improbable such complex systems could have come about by chance or natural forces. For this reason, the number of scientists who are acknowledging an intelligent creator continues to grow. This is a fact the new atheists neglect to acknowledge.

Francis Collins, the leader of the Human Genome project and author of *The Language of God*, tells how the order and precision in the DNA code led him from atheism to belief in God. Collins writes, "Many will be puzzled by these sentiments, assuming that a rigorous scientist could not also be a believer in a transcendent God. This book aims at dispelling that notion, by arguing that belief in God can be

an entirely rational choice, and that the principles of faith are in fact complimentary with the principles of science.”{6}

Physicist Stephen Hawking states that his study of the universe reveals that “The overwhelming impression is one of order. The more we discover about the universe, the more we find that it is governed by rational laws. . . . You still have to ask the question why does the universe bother to exist? If you like, you can define God to be the answer to the question.”{7}

Francis Collins and Stephen Hawking are just two examples of numerous award-winning scientists who acknowledge the scientific evidence points to a creator. The more we learn in the various fields of science such as biology, microbiology, astronomy, physics, etc., the evidence continues to point to design. The complexity of life and the order displayed in the universe make it more reasonable to conclude a God created it, and the greater leap of faith would be to conclude it all occurred by chance and natural forces.

Belief in God Is Dangerous

The new atheist movement asserts that religion is dangerous, for it is the source of much of the conflict in the world today. Many assert that religions, especially Christianity, teach intolerance and discrimination. To build their case, however, the new atheists unfortunately attack misrepresentations of religions, especially Christianity.

For example, in *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins states, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent

bully.”[{8}](#) What Dawkins displays is his superficial understanding of the Bible. Certainly no Christian believes in a God as described by Dawkins.

Another error is the misuse of labels. New atheists apply the term “fundamentalist” to Evangelical Christians as well as fundamentalist Muslims, creating the illusion the two are equivalent in their teachings. When Dawkins points to the example of the Islamic riots against the Danish cartoons, he equates this incident not with Islam but with religion, all religions.[{9}](#) However a careful study reveals that there is a huge difference between Jesus’ teachings and Muhammad’s teachings. This huge difference is also revealed in the lives they lived.[{10}](#) A careful reading of the New Testament quickly reveals that violence goes against the nature of Christ’s teachings who taught His disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Mt. 5:38-48). Application of the true teachings of Christ would lead to a peaceful society.

New atheists allege that religions promote division by the creation of in-groups and out-groups. Indeed, there are religions that discriminate, including some Christian groups, but in Christianity that is a perversion of the teachings of Christ. Jesus’ sacrifice and gift of salvation is offered to all (Jn. 3:16). Throughout His life Jesus reached out to those despised by the culture, and His disciples die—many in foreign fields—preaching salvation to all. Even in the Old Testament, the mission of Israel was to be a blessing to all the world (Gen. 12). Application of true biblical teachings would lead to non-discrimination.

A significant point that the new atheists do not mention is the destructive consequences of atheist philosophies. Nietzsche predicted that the death of God would lead to a moral relativism which would result in blood in the streets.[{11}](#) Communism has led to the death of millions in the twentieth century. Millions were put to death under the

regimes of Marx, Pol Pot, and Mao Tse Tung. Some religions are responsible for conflict, including Christians who have misused biblical teachings. However, atheism has shown to be dangerous as well.

Religion Is the Result of an Evolutionary Process

New atheists assert that religion was created out of a need for a father figure, or for comfort in a cruel world, or out of fear of the unknown. They rely on the work of James Frazer and his book the *Golden Bough*, written in the nineteenth century. Frazer taught that religion developed through a natural evolutionary process which began first with animism, a belief in spirits in nature. The worship of nature spirits eventually lead to polytheism. Eventually, amongst all the gods, one was viewed as the most dominant. Eventually this dominant god alone was worshipped and monotheism developed. This was known as the evolutionary theory of religion. New atheists believe eventually man's need for God will end and atheism will be the end of this evolutionary development. Unfortunately, the new atheists once again are not presenting a new theory but reiterating an old theory which has been shown to be flawed.

One of the flaws of this theory is that it was influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution and lacked serious empirical evidence and study.[\[12\]](#) One of the most significant and well-researched works was produced by anthropologist Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt in his four-thousand-page treatise, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*. His research of hundreds of cultures revealed that monotheism is the oldest of religions. The development of religion was discovered to have gone in the opposite direction of the evolutionary theory. All cultures began with a belief in a heavenly father, and this monotheistic faith eventually degenerates to polytheism and

then animism. This theory is called “original monotheism.”^{13} The evidence displayed by Schmidt, and later by anthropologist Don Richardson, is consistent with the progression of religion as revealed in Romans 1. Serious research and evidence appears to favor the biblical model.

The new atheists present few new arguments. What are new are not the arguments but the method and strategy of this group. How should we meet the challenge of the new atheists? 1 Peter 3:15 challenges us to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” We are called to love those who question or even attack the Christian faith. Christians must answer their challenges with humility and grace. As we present a well-reasoned case and the evidence, the Holy Spirit will use our apologetic defense and our unshaken but loving attitude to speak to their mind and heart.

Psalm 14:21 states, “The fool says in his heart there is no God.” Might it be the new atheists who are irrational?

Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 23-4.
2. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), 72, quoted in Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 113.
3. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 198.
4. Antony Flew, *There is a God* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 91.
5. Ibid., 89. For more on this, see Gene Herr, “[Case for a Creator](#),” www.probe.org.
6. Dr. Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (Free Press,

2006), 3.

7. Gregory Benford, "Leaping the Abyss: Stephen Hawking on Black Holes, Unified Field Theory and Marilyn Monroe," *Reason* 4.02 (April 2002): 29 quoted in Flew, *There is a God*, 97.

8. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

9. Ibid., 46-50.

10. See Patrick Zukeran, "[The Lives of Muhammad and Jesus](#)," at www.probe.org.

11. Amy Orr-Ewing, *Is Believing in God Irrational?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 208.

12. Alister McGrath and Joanna McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 60.

13. See Patrick Zukeran, "[The Origin of Man's Religions](#)," www.probe.org.

© 2010 Probe Ministries