“Is There a Second Chance to Believe After Death?”

Hi there Jim. We’ve spoken before and I found it quite helpful. Can I ask you a question on divine judgment? What about those who would come before God and who really weren’t HONESTLY sure about it all and didn’t become a Christian in life? When they stood in front of Him and God knew how they felt through life…would that be fair to send them to hell? Obviously they would have a sudden change of heart, right? Thanks, Jim.

If I understand you correctly, you are wondering if a person who is skeptical of the claims of Christ throughout life, didn’t CLEARLY understand the gospel but you imply if they had, they would have placed their faith in Christ. And then you wonder if once dead and seeing that His claims were genuine, God would be unfair in sending that person to hell. If I am not clear on your meaning here, please let me know.

First of all, the Bible says that “it is appointed unto man ONCE to die and afterwards comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).” This seems to rule out any idea of a second chance, and the concept of reincarnation as well.

Furthermore, we are told in John 16:8-11 that the Holy Spirit is constantly convicting the world (including your hypothetical person) of “sin, righteousness, and judgment.” What this means is that *no one* is left without an opportunity to respond to this prompting of the Spirit, repent, and place their faith in Christ.

And Romans 1:18-20 Paul tells us that God’s **wrath** has been revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness (as we see above in the John passage), and “because that which is **known** about God is **evident within** them. . .For since the creation of

the world, His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been **clearly seen**, being understood through what has been made, so they are **without excuse**."

Luke 17 also gives us some things which bear on your question. Read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (17:19-31). The crux of the story is that both of these men died. The rich man found himself in hell, and was able to see Lazarus (the poor beggar) in heaven (Abraham's Bosom). The rich man is in torment, and now, "knowing" the truth of things, asks if he could be sent back to earth to talk to his five brothers and warn them so they don't join him in hell. (This is analogous to the man in your hypothetical). Look carefully at the Lord's answer. He tells the man it wouldn't do any good. The Lord says they *have* a witness: Moses and the Prophets. The rich man says, yes, but they would *listen* if someone came back from the dead and *told* them!

Jesus responds by saying if they didn't believe/respond to the light they already had (through Moses and the Prophets), they wouldn't be persuaded even if someone came back from the dead to tell them! In short, the necessary information and guidance to enter the family of God is available to all during their lifetime. And faith must have an object worthy of its trust. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that "Without **faith** it is **impossible** to please God, for he who comes to God must **believe** that He is, and is a rewarder of those who **diligently seek** Him."

Now what would be fair about giving those who "sat" on the fence, ignored the evidence, and failed to **exercise faith** in Christ, and then, when dead, like the rich man, now **knowing** the truth, (no need to exercise faith) asking for another chance?

There are **no unbelievers** in heaven *or* hell. They are now **all** believers. They know the truth. Unfortunately, those who chose not to respond to all of the "signposts" God has given the world (which could be believed if any person desired), they

must face the consequences of their “non-actions.” It would not be fair of God to include the man you are suggesting along with those who pleased God by exercising their faith in Christ while faith was still the issue!

I hope this answers your question, _____.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

Are the Ideas of the Jesus Seminar Now Catholic Doctrine?

I am a philosophy major at Oregon State University where Marcus Borg is a professor. Many of the churches in our community ascribe to his teaching.

Here is my question…I have a dear friend that grew up in an evangelical Catholic home and knows Christ as her personal savior. She has been attending the local Catholic church here in Corvallis and recently has been strongly confronted by one of the deacons on issues surrounding the literalism of the Bible (i.e. the ideas of the Jesus Seminar, taught by Borg). The deacon has been telling her that Biblical non-literalism as Borg teaches is part of Catholic doctrine and part of the Catechism. Is this accurate? Is this indeed an international Catholic teaching or does it depend on the individual parish or person?

I would appreciate any wisdom you might have on this topic.

Honestly, it's been really heated here lately, as Borg's new book has just been released. We would love it if either of you (or other speakers from Probe) could come out and do a presentation for all of the confused Christians. There is a strong evangelical movement in Corvallis, but unfortunately, it tends to be strongly anti-intellectual and isn't well respected in the university community. As a student, I want to be able to better understand the critical issues at hand and be able to represent Christ in grace, truth, and love.

Send me whatever thoughts you have…I read article on the Jesus Seminar through Leadership University and that helped, but I really would love even more detailed information if you have any.

Thank you so much for serving as a resource for students of the Word!

Thank you for your recent e-mail concerning the Jesus Seminar. I can empathize with your "dilemma" under the shadow of Marcus Borg at your university.

I don't know if you have checked the Probe Website (www.probe.org) or not, but I would direct you to at least two essays: one that I wrote is called The Jesus Seminar, and a second was written by my colleague, Rick Wade, entitled The Historical Christ. You will find good bibliographical info for further study.

I would rather doubt that the tenets of the Jesus Seminar are now officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. I would recommend that your friend ask for official, written documentation from this priest for his assertion that this is true. I am 99% positive that no such position has been taken by the Catholic church and its biblical scholars. There is too much at stake for the church to take such a radical stand which undermines much of what

they have held to be true about Jesus Christ.

If you are looking for someone to come and debate Borg, I would suggest that you contact my good friend Dr. J. P. Moreland and/or Michael J. Wilkins at Talbot Seminary in southern California. They edited a book entitled *Jesus Under Fire* which was published by Zondervan in 1995. Each chapter is written by a evangelical scholar, each of which develops and refutes the major arguments of the Jesus Seminar position.

I have been studying this topic for several years, and following the literature, but these men, as New Testament Scholars, are current on this issue and have devoted the kind of study and depth necessary to give good account of themselves with a fine scholar like Borg.

I can appreciate your frustration with the general Christian community. Most are not "armed" for the battle of ideas which we face. That is why I left Campus Crusade in 1973 and began Probe Ministries. At the time I gave oversight to the Campuses in the Southwest U.S. The worldview America has come to embrace generally now once existed only on a few campuses: UC Berkeley, San Francisco State, U. of Wisconsin (Madison), Columbia U., and U. of Colorado.

I found myself hard pressed to respond to the questions of these students. So I decided the Lord was calling upon me not to "curse the darkness", but rather "light some lamps!" The early Christians, it is said, were effective because they OUT-THOUGHT and OUT-LOVED the ancient world! In fact, for 250 years after the apostles died off, the church did nothing but try to survive and answer/refute/respond to all the doctrinal challenges which came from the Jewish and Pagan communities without, and from sects and heresies within. They were so busy doing this, that it was not until 325 A.D. (Council of Nicea) that the addressed/clarified the doctrine of the Trinity! The FIRST theology of the early church was APOLOGETICAL theology, and we find ourselves facing the same kind of circumstances

and challenges today.

So you hang in there! And tell your friend to do the same. Challenge the priest and don't be bullied by him. If it IS an official position, tell her that I requested that it be documented so I will be able to confirm to others who ask that this is truly official. If I were a betting man (and I am ::::SMILE!::::), your friend will find that no such affirmation of this policy will be forthcoming.

With Warm Regards in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

"How Can a Just God Order the Slaughter of Men, Women and Children?"

I am a Christian and spend time talking with others often about God, but I have been speechless when they bring up the issue, for example, in I Samuel 15:1-3 where God tells His people to destroy the men and the women and children as well. This is difficult to see that as part of His character. Is that a just God? What was He thinking?? I understand that the Amalekites ambushed them when travelling from Egypt but why the women and children?? I would really appreciate your reply. Thank you.

This is indeed a question often asked by critics of the Bible. It is a legitimate question and one that deserves a comprehensive, complete and, hopefully, acceptable answer. So let me see if I can address it.

One of the most important rules of Hermeneutics (the task of interpretation, meaning of a verse or passage of Scripture) is to observe the *context* of what you are seeking to interpret correctly. This is crucial in seeking to answer this question you have raised. We need to see clearly the historical background and the situation which called for such severe measures to be taken.

Who were the Canaanites?

Canaan, the Bible tells us, was the fourth son of Ham, who was one of the three sons of Noah. The use of the word "Canaan" stems from the fact that Canaan's descendants populated the land which was later called Palestine, and now is called Israel. Modern Syria is also included and it is roughly the same land which God promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:18-21; Numbers 34:1-12).

The Amalekites which you mentioned were one of several tribes which are often referred to collectively as either Canaanites or Phoenicians. Their language was either Ugaritic or Phoenician, two Semitic dialects close to the Hebrew dialect. Other major "Canaanite" tribes included the Amorites, Jebusites, Hivites, Girgasites, Ammonites, Edomites, and Moabites. The Phoenicians were a sea-faring people who lived along the Mediterranean Coast. They also had colonies which included Cypress, Sardinia, and Carthage.

What were their Religious beliefs and practices?

Archaeology has given us substantial material about these people, and particularly from their capital city, Ugarit. Thousands of clay tablets have been recovered from Ras Shamra in northern Syria, including the libraries of two great

temples dating from the 15th-14th century B.C. Much of this epic literature has to do with their religious practices and their pantheon of gods. Merrilll F. Unger notes that Canaanite cultic practices were more base than any other place in the ancient Near East. (*Unger's Bible Dictionary,* p.172). Let me list some of the features of their religious beliefs and practices.

The Canaanite Pantheon (of gods)

A full description of the Canaanite gods has been provided by C. R. Driver, who translated the Ras Shamra tablets found in the ancient city of Ugarit.

El
The head of the Canaanite pantheon. El was generally a rather remote and shadowy figure, but sometimes stepped down from his eminence and became the hero of exceedingly "earthy" myths. He is described as living at a great distance ("a thousand plains, ten thousand fields,") from Canaan, and to this remote spot the gods invariably had to travel when they wished to consult him.

El was called the "father of years," the "father of man," and also the "father bull," i.e. the progenitor of all the gods. He is likened to a bull in the midst of a herd of cows and calves. According to the text, El had three wives: Astarte (goddess of the evening star), Asherah (goddess of the sea and consort to Baal), and Baaltis—all three his sisters. He is a brutal, bloody tyrant, whose acts caused all the gods to be terrified by his decisions. For example, he dethroned his own father ("Heaven, Uranus") and castrated him; he killed his own favorite son, "Iadid," and cut off his daughter's head. The tablets also portray El as seducing two women, whose names are not mentioned, and he allows them to be driven into the desert after the birth of two children, "Dawn" (shahru) and "Sunset" (shalmu). W. F. Albright in the *American Journal of Semitic Languages, XXXV,* comments that the description of the act of

seduction of these two women is one of the frankest and most sensuous in ancient Near-Eastern literature.

Baal and Mot

Baal is the great storm-god. He brings the rain, and announces his present with thunder and lightning and, most important of all, the needed rain which would insure a good harvest. He became the reigning king of the gods, and was enthroned on a lofty mountain in the far northern heavens, but faithfully reappears each year to sustain the people. Mot, whose name means "death," represents the god of "drought" and "sterility." In the myth, he is Baal's chief and continual antagonist. Even Baal must yield to Mot when his time (of the year) comes. When Mot comes, Baal's time is over and he is ordered to take everything connected with him down into the depths of the earth:

> "And you, take your clouds,
> Your wind, your storm, your rains!
> With you take Padriya daughter of the stream.
> With you take Tatalliya daughter of rain."(67:v:6-11)

The situation could hardly be more clearly described: the season of drought has come, the rain and the clouds have vanished; the streams have dried up and the vegetation languishes. But before Baal descends into the earth, however, he

> *"Makes love to a heifer in Debir,*
> *A young cow in the fields of Shimmt.*
> *He lies with her seventy-seven times—*
> *Yea, he copulates eighty-eight times—*
> *So she conceives and bears a child."(76:v;18-22)*

Anath

The goddess of fertility. She was considered a divine prostitute. She is represented as a naked woman in the prime of life, standing on a lion, with a lily in one hand and a

serpent or two in the other. Often two rams are present to portray her sexual vigor. The female organs are always accentuated.

It is important to bear in mind that these “myths” were ritualistically enacted. Therefore we can assume that ritual bestiality was practiced by the priesthood, and temple prostitution was practiced by the adherents (priestesses) of the Anath fertility cult. Cyrus Gordan has written “that it was no crime for men to copulate with animals in Ugarit is indicated by the fact that…Baal impregnated a heifer…a myth…enacted ritually by reputable priests… Moreover, the Bible tells us that the Hebrews’ pagan neighbors practiced bestiality (Lev. 18:24) as we now know to be literally true from the Ugaritic documents” (Ugaritic Literature, p. 8).

With Baal’s seasonal death, his father, El, the chief god, goes into mourning. El descends from his throne and sits in sackcloth and ashes on the ground. He lacerates himself, making cuts on his face, arms chest and back (cf. I Kings 18:28):

> “Dead is Baal, the Overcomer
> Absent is the Prince, Lord (Baal) of the Earth (67:VI:9,10)
> He pours the ashes of grief on his head.
> The dust of mourning on his pate;
> For clothing, he is covered with sackcloth,
> He roams the mountain in mourning:
> He mutilates his face and beard.
> He lacerates his forearms.
> He plows his chest like a garden.
> He lacerates his back like a valley
> He lifts his voice and shouts: ‘Baal is dead!’
> Woe to the people, Woe to the multitudes of Baal
> I shall go down into the earth.” (67:VI:15-24)

Anath, Baal’s consort, repeats this cry and copies El’s self-mutilation.

How does God, the Bible, portray the Canaanites? The clearest and most comprehensive biblical assessment of the Canaanites is found in Leviticus 18:1-5:

> "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do *what is done in the land of Canaan* where I am bringing you; *you shall not walk in their statutes* (ways). You are to perform My judgments and keep my statutes, to live in accord with them. I am the Lord your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord."

By inference, everything forbidden in this chapter is simply a description of what the Canaanites were doing. First on the list of forbidden practices is incest, sexual intercourse with blood relatives and in-laws: your father and mother (v.7,8), your sister (v. 9), your daughter (v. 10), your niece (v. 11), your aunt (v.12, 13), your uncle (v.15), your sister-in-law (v.16), any woman or her children (17), polygamy (two sisters-v.18), adultery (your neighbor's wife-v. 20), ritual child sacrifice (v.21), homosexuality, sodomy (v.22), bestiality (animals-v. 23). God summarizes these prohibitions with:

"Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. For the land has become defiled, therefore I have visited its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants. But as for you, you are to keep My statutes and my judgments, and shall not do any of these abominations, neither the native, nor the alien who sojourns among you; for the men of the land who have been before you have done ALL these abominations, and the land has become defiled; so that the land may not spew you out should you defile it, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you. For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do so shall be cut off from among their people.

Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them; I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 18:24-30).

God's Purpose and Intent

What we observe above is in stark contrast to the cultic practices of the Canaanites, the high standards and expectations of conduct laid out by the God of Israel for His people. Why is it so important that the Israelites shun these practices of the indigent population, the Canaanites?

Because God is doing something new, something important. He has redeemed his chosen people from Egyptian bondage and is in the process of fulfilling his ancient promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12. The larger plan involves an earlier promise (Genesis 3:15) that there would come a "Seed of the Woman" who would crush Satan and establish a means to undo the damage done in Eden through their disobedience. This plan of redemption is promised, and the remainder of the Old Testament is a working out in history the unfolding of that plan to provide a Savior, a Redeemer, a Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise.

And in Abraham God found a worthy servant who would become the patriarch, the father of a nation through whom Messiah would come, bringing untold blessing and deliverance through his life, death, and resurrection to all those who believe. Redemptive history is a long process. It began in Eden immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, and it will one day end in the New Jerusalem.

God's peculiar people begin with Abraham and his immediate descendants: first Isaac, then Jacob, and then Joseph. These four were the founders, the patriarchs of this new people God was shaping to be the vehicle through which Messiah would come. The Israelites then spent four hundred years in bondage

in Egypt until Moses was raised up to deliver them with "a strong hand." Pharaoh finally let them go. They traveled to Mt. Sinai and stayed there a full year. They arrived at Sinai a disorganized mob; they left there a year later an organized host. During that year God revealed to them the constitutional foundations of their heritage and their mission. He spelled out the rules of their conduct, their worship, and how they would live in community. At the end of this year, they were poised east of the Jordan and ready to go into Canaan and take it by force. But after spying out the land, the fear of the majority with respect to this campaign caused them to shrink back from their task, and God sent them into the wilderness to wander for forty years. The new generation that emerged at the close of this period of divine discipline was finally allowed to go into the Canaan and possess it.

As they prepared themselves for this task, Moses summarized for a second time (the book of Deuteronomy) just what it would take, and what they would have to do. Ironically, the issue of the Canaanites is first spoken of way back in Genesis 15! God is speaking to Abraham and He mentions the problem of the Canaanites. He first speaks of (predicts) the Egyptian bondage which would come, and then He speaks of the deliverance from Egypt, and then He promises the conquest and repossession of the Promised Land. He says:

> Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions… And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. Then, in the fourth generation they shall return here (Canaan) *for the iniquity of the Amorite (Canaanites) is not yet* ***complete*** (Gen. 15:12-16).

What is interesting about this is that the wickedness of the Canaanites is already recognized as a problem 400+ years

before God will give the command that the Canaanites are to be slaughtered—men, women, and children! At the time the Lord spoke these words to Abraham (c. 2,000 B.C.), the Canaanites were already corrupt, but they still had a way to go before God, who is a patient, merciful but Holy God, would finally bring judgment upon them. God gave them 400 years to "shape up," but we find them even more wicked than ever when the Israelites are about to invade (retake) their land!

What is also interesting is that when Jericho was about to be taken, Rahab the prostitute hid the two Israeli spies in her home, lied to the authorities about it, and then helped the spies escape over the wall. While the spies were in her home she said some remarkable things:

> "She came up to them on the roof and said to them, I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the Amorites whom you utterly destroyed beyond the Jordan… And when we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord, your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with me…and deliver our lives from death." (Joshua 2:8-13)

Not only Rahab knew of God's powerful deliverance; she tells us that everyone else knew about these events and were fearful for their lives! The difference between Rahab and the rest of the people of Jericho is that she saw in these mysterious workings none other than the hand of the true God Himself! She repented; she believed! Because of her faith, she is mentioned in Faith's Hall of Fame (Hebrews 11:31)! My point is that other Canaanites could have responded as she did. Unfortunately, they continued on in their wicked, rebellious

ways. The fullness of the “Amorites” is now complete. National judgment is at hand, with Israel as the instrument God will use to put an end to a totally depraved culture.

Why Such Excessive Slaughter? Why the Women? Why the Children?

God explains this to us in Romans 1:17-2:2:

> “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.
>
> For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.
>
> Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an *image* in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to *impurity*, that their bodies might be *dishonored* among them. For they exchanged the *truth of God* for a lie, and worshipped and served the *creature* rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.
>
> For this reason God *gave them over* to *degrading* passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is *unnatural*, and in the same way also the men *abandoned* the natural function of the woman and *burned in their desire* towards one another, *men with men* committing *indecent acts* and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.
>
> And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any

> longer, God *gave them over* to a *depraved mind*, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, malice; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, *haters of God*, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, with out understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and though they know the ordinance of God, that *those who practice such things are* ***worthy of death***, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.
>
> Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you…and we know that the judgment of God *rightfully falls upon those who practice such things.*"

The Romans passage above describes for us in vivid detail how this can happen to a culture. And this is exactly the kind of conditions existing in Canaan as the Israelites approached to conquer the land which had been promised them. God makes it very clear to them the reasons for what they must do and how they must do it:

> "Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you… Know therefore today that *it is the Lord your God who is crossing over* before you as a *consuming fire. He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you,* so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly, just as the Lord has spoken to you.
>
> Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of *my* righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' but *it is because of the wickedness of these nations* that the Lord is dispossessing them before you… It is not for *your* righteousness or for the uprightness of *your* heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the

> *wickedness of these nations* that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order *to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*
>
> Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn (stiff necked) people!" (Deuteronomy 9:1-6)

God makes it very clear that sometimes things deteriorate so far that a culture or a people reaches a "point of no return." The remedy is like trying to unscramble an egg. There is just no way back; things have gone too far. The story of the Genesis Flood is "Exhibit One"—a demonstration that He has already done this once on this planet. A good surgeon does not amputate a leg if someone has a severely stubbed toe. But a good surgeon will amputate if the infection is so massive that to refuse to do so would mean the loss of the whole body and person.

R.A. Torrey remarks: "It is appalling that any people should be utterly put to the sword, but it is even more appalling that a society of people should have become so corrupt and debased that such treatment is deemed necessary in the interest of humanity. The Canaanites were a moral cancer threatening the very life of the whole human race. The cancer had to be removed in order to save the body, just as a surgeon inflicts pain and suffering in order to remove a malignant growth in the body (*Difficulties in the Bible.* R.A. Torrey, p. 47).

This is exactly the dilemma God faced as the Israelites are brought back to possess their land. To settle them in the midst of these depraved people is asking for disaster. If the cancer remains, Israel will not survive. For Israel's survival, the Canaanites will have to go. Israel will be corrupted by their presence and their influence. She will fall

away from the Lord Who has loved her and delivered her. Ironically, this is exactly what happened, because while they disposed of most of the inhabitants of Canaan, *they did not remove all of them.* And Israel's incomplete obedience in this matter actually brought about future, periodic relapses when they *did* cease "following the Lord" and served other gods through the ongoing influence of these pagan tribes.

With respect to the women, the experience of Lot, his wife, and his two daughters dwelling in Sodom is instructive. We are told that if ten righteousness men could have been found in the city, God would spare it from judgment. Judgment fell on the city, indicating ten were not found. Lot was "courting disaster" to be a believer and live in such an environment. As the account indicates, Lot survived the judgment because God graciously warned him to flee the city (this was really based upon God's honoring Abraham's intercession on Lot's behalf), but his wife turned around and looked back toward Sodom. This was her home. She liked Sodom. The immorality didn't bother her. She was still yearning for Sodom when God turned her into a pillar of salt. In some instances, the women are the "prime-movers" in leading the men into sin. Torrey comments: "Though true women are nobler than true men, depraved women are more dangerous than depraved men" (p. 48).

The two daughters were also affected. They had sense enough not to turn around and look at the city, but we find in their immoral, incestuous behavior with their own father later that they were already "damaged goods." This is a good warning for Christian parents. We may choose to live in or near "Sodom" and we ourselves may survive, but it is more than likely our children will not come away unaffected by their exposure to such an unwholesome environment.

With respect to the command to dispose of the children, there is at least one bright spot, severe as it is. Those who adopt children want to do so at the earliest possible age. Why? Because evidence shows that children are early affected by

whatever their family system might be. The emotional and physical abuse and wounds inflicted upon them from birth to age five or six leave permanent scars which often cannot be healed. The scars remain, and even the best of environments cannot overcome the negative influences of those early years of development. Even these Canaanite children would have perpetuated the corrupt influence of the Canaanites among the Hebrew Community, had they been spared.

We have all observed or known of families which are so dysfunctional and corrupt we grieve for their unhappy, confused, and suffering children, and wish to God somehow they could be removed and placed in some loving, caring home where they could feel safe and not suffer at the hands of hostile and even deranged parents. Happily, there are no children in hell. Jesus loves the little children. The one bright spot in this sordid story is that God removed an entire generation of Canaanite children and took them to such a home . . . His home.

Those who struggle the most with the forceful elimination of the Canaanites in this biblical account have a very dim and truncated view of God. We have seen above that God has the right, because of His holiness and His righteousness, to visit judgment upon individuals and nations who have become corrupt and degenerate. The amazing thing is, like with the Canaanites, that He waits so long. Torrey remarks,

> "…Those who regard sin lightly and who have no adequate conception of God's holiness will always find insurmountable difficulty in this command of God, but those who have come to see the awfulness of sin and have learned to hate it with the infinite hate it deserves, and who have caught some glimpses of the infinite holiness of God and have been made in some measure partakers of that holiness, will, after mature reflection, have no difficulty whatever with this command. It is consciousness of sin in our own hearts and lives that makes us rebel against God's stern dealings with

sin (p. 50).”

I hope this in some way helps to address your question, _____.

God Bless.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

“I Fear I Have Committed the Unforgiveable Sin!”

I went through a very tough time about ten years ago. My best friend (besides my loving parents), my great-grandmother, died. I’ve never been closer to anyone before or since her, but I let her down on her death bed. I was bitter towards God for taking her, and upset my job was adding pressure to my life. One night at work, I blew up at God. I don’t remember all I said to Him, but it was really bad, and at that time I meant it.

Some time passed and I realized I was wrong. I asked God to forgive me, but I never had the feeling that I was forgiven. One day I was in a Christian bookstore and read about the “unpardonable sin.” Several articles I read afterwards seemed to say I hadn’t committed this horrible sin, but the seed of doubt was there. I have asked others about this, and have usually been “convinced” that I had not or could not have committed this sin, but after some time passes, the doubts come back in and it puts me back where I started.

I have asked Jesus to take control of my life since, but I just don’t feel his presence. I long to feel the presence of

God in my life, but I don't know what I should do. I am not sure of my original salvation. When I ask Jesus to come in and take control of my life, nothing happens.

Can you help me with these questions? Thanks for whatever help you can give me on this.

Thank you for your e-mail and your concerns about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Let me see if I can help you.

First, what is "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit"?

Most have taken the view that Jesus' statements in Matthew 12:31,32 must be interpreted in an *historical* context—that is, what was actually occurring at that time and place when the Pharisees accused Him of casting out demons in the power of Satan. They blasphemed God (the Holy Spirit) by attributing God's work and power to Satan. The purpose of the Holy Spirit was to authenticate the Messianic claims of Christ by demonstrating the presence of divine power through the various miracles recorded in the Gospels (see also Mark 3:28-30).

Part of Jesus "humbling Himself" involved the voluntary giving up, or emptying Himself of, the direct use of His divine attributes as the Second Person of the Trinity (cf. Phil.3:5-8). Rather, Jesus lived by faith, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit Who came to authenticate Christ's Messianic claims to that particular generation, and specifically, the Jews. Immanuel had come: "God with us."

The Pharisees chose to reject that conclusion. They could not deny the miracles; they only questioned the *source* of the power. In ascribing Christ's actions as something empowered by Satan, they were blaspheming the Holy Spirit's efforts to demonstrate that God Himself was in their presence!

One can only blaspheme God when God is present (Jesus). Lewis Sperry Chafer said,

> *"To say that attributing works that men may be doing in the power of the Spirit to Satan is the same offense as to go utterly beyond what is written. . . It is impossible for this particular sin to be committed today."*

In other words, to ascribe the healing ministry of Oral Roberts or Benny Hinn as Satan's work, for example, would *not* be blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, as neither of these men is claiming to be God or Messiah.

Furthermore, the many places in the Gospels where Jesus says, "Whosoever will, may come," are *without any other qualification.* And nowhere in Scripture is the gospel preached with the one caveat that "whosoever" means *everyone but those who have committed the "unpardonable sin."*

In that first century context, those actual Pharisees, and other unbelievers or scoffers, stood in the presence of God, robed in human flesh, as He performed miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit. But when they came to the conclusion that all of this was being done through satanic power, they blasphemed against God Himself—**an unpardonable sin!**

Could any human beings in history have more light and grace from God than to actually be in the *presence* of the Messiah while he healed people, and come up with such an abominable explanation or conclusion?

By way of application, however, each one of us since the time Jesus walked the roads of Palestine is in danger of committing an unpardonable sin. It is the sin of rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit upon our hearts Who testifies of Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf and gently nudges us to respond in faith to what He has done for us.

Jesus promised over and over that He would send the Holy Spirit to authenticate His Messianic claims. And Jesus said that "When He comes, He will convict the world of sin,

righteousness, and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father. . . and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged (John 16:8-11).” Clearly, here Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would continue to do through the centuries, all over the world, the same thing He was doing wherever Christ went during His three years of public ministry: testifying to the truth of Christ’s Messianic claims and calling for true repentance and the acknowledgement that we have sinned and are in need of a Savior, that our (human) righteousness is inadequate to make us presentable before a Holy God, and that judgment is sure: *There will be a “pay day” someday.*

We are accountable for our actions and our choices. And it is the task of the Holy Spirit (Jesus tells us in these verses) to convict men and women of sin, (lack of) righteousness, and judgment. Every person in history who has heard the gospel message is faced with the same choice that those Pharisees had who were eye-witnesses to His miracles: we can turn in repentance and faith to Christ, or we can reject the testimony of the Holy Spirit to our hearts, and, in so doing, we HAVE committed an unpardonable sin, because we have rejected the only provision God has made for our salvation—Christ Himself (John 3:18,36; Acts 4:12).

Therefore, getting angry at God, or making a swear word out of the Holy Spirit (although it is curious, and perhaps instructive, that in all the profanities of humankind, we never hear anyone using the third Person of the Trinity as a swear word!), is **not** committing blasphemy in the “unpardonable” sense implied in Matthew 12.

To blaspheme God, to take His Name in vain, whether Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, is sin, but it is not an unpardonable sin. When Paul speaks of the Law (the Ten Commandments), from which we are freed of condemnation through Christ’s death, he implies that Christ’s blood has covered ALL of the

commandments which we have broken, including taking God's name in vain.

"The doubts come back," you say. When doubts do come, particularly when they involve a questioning of the integrity of God's Word, that is, what He said, and whether He can be trusted, Christians must learn to recognize the presence of the enemy of our souls. In the Garden of Eden, Satan said, "Has God said? . . .If you eat . . .you will be like God." Or when Jesus was tempted: Satan quoted scripture three times *out of context* to serve his own ends—to destroy Jesus and keep Him from the Cross. We can expect our enemy will try to do the same with us. Ephesians 6 talks about taking upon us the whole armor of God so we are enabled to stand against him.

In light of your questions, most pertinent is Paul's exhortation "And above all, take up the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one (6:16)." When the flaming arrows, "darts of doubt," come, we hold up the shield of faith to stop them and to protect ourselves. We believe what *God* has said is true, not what our *feelings* say are true. We choose to believe Him regardless of how we feel.

The great majority of people who fear they have committed the "unpardonable sin" really have not. If anyone has a desire to repent and turn to Christ, that of itself is an indication (proof?) that he/she has *not* committed it. We have Jesus' own word for it that "anyone who will come to Me I will in no way cast out or away (John 6:37)."

You mention that you doubt your original salvation. Again, it is not based on how you feel, or whether you sense His presence. It is more like marriage. If someone were to ask me if I am married, I wouldn't say, "Well, I *feel* kind of married today." Or "I feel my wife's presence, therefore I must be married." No. My certainty about my marriage is based on a commitment I made to her many years ago, and I am still living

in the light of that commitment.

The very fact that you are concerned about your salvation and are anxious that you come to certainty about it is a *sign* of spiritual *life!* Non-believers aren't concerned about not going to heaven or having their sins forgiven. They do not reach out to Christ as you indicate you have. If I came to the door of your home and rang the doorbell, and you opened it, invited me in, sat me down in the living room and then excused yourself every few minutes, walked back to the front door and kept inviting me in, over and over again, when I was already inside and sitting on the couch, wouldn't that be rather foolish? Because I came in the first time you invited me to enter!

Perhaps this is your problem. You indicate you have reached out and accepted Christ as your Savior and you want to have Him direct your life. Perhaps you need to just stop going to the door and saying "please come in," but rather thank Him that He **has** come in because you asked Him and He promised! Faith is when you stop saying "please" to God and you start saying "Thank You."

You have concerns about "letting down your great-grandmother." It is obvious you loved this dear woman very much. Perhaps she was trying to share with you her love and concern for your life and desiring to help you see your need for Christ. If I am reading you correctly in what you are saying, because of your job and other things, along with the "unfairness" of God taking someone so dear to you, these event made you BITTER instead of BETTER. You railed at God. You got angry at Him. It might be encouraging for you to know that you're in good company. Moses got angry and frustrated with God. So did David. Read the Psalms. Here are real people struggling with the same kinds of questions and disappointments you have described. God is a big Boy. He laughs at the collective hatred and railing of the entire earth. (See Psalm 2: "Why do the heathen rage? He will have them in derision.")

If He can handle world-wide wrath, He can handle your episode with Him. He is a God of tender mercies. He "pitieth His children," the Bible says. Your anger made you feel guilty, and you felt that God pulled away from you. But this is not so. God remains the same. I read somewhere, "If God seems far away, guess who moved?" But you can go to Him and start anew. He holds no grudges. He readily forgives. He desires and is eager to walk more closely with you if only you would step toward Him and get better acquainted. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us come BOLDLY to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need."

You might begin in the Gospel of John. Just start reading it. Begin to grow in your faith and the doubts will not be as strong.

With regard to your great grandmother: From *your* vantage point you no doubt feel there is some unfinished business with her and you don't know what to do about it. You loved her and you disappointed her, and then she died. The Lord brings this verse to my mind: "I have no greater joy than to hear my children walk in truth." (3 John 4).

I believe our departed loved ones are conscious some way of what is taking place here on earth. I believe your great-grandmother is probably aware of your steps of growth toward a solid commitment to Christ, toward a life that is not "tossed about by every wind of doctrine," (Ephesians. 4:14; James 1:6), toward a life not focused upon the past with regret and failure which is "hanging you up" and sapping your days, but rather a life focused on Christ and His goodness, and His willingness to forgive, as I am sure your loved one has also already forgiven.

Now it is time for you to forgive yourself. Accept God's forgiveness. Know that you will be bringing joy to the Lord, and to your great-grandmother as well, by settling these issues we have discussed. Do *not* let the enemy rob you of the

sweet joy of feeling accepted and close to the Lord and to your great-grandmother as well!

I hope this helps.

Your Brother in Christ,
Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

"What Do We Do When Critics Point to the Atrocities of the Crusades?"

This is a great website. I have benefited from the strong biblical perspectives you provide here and on AFR Radio station KAMA in Sioux City, Iowa.

What I am looking for is accurate info regarding the Crusades. Everywhere I turn, some "bible basher" is criticizing Christianity for all the people it has murdered in the name of religion. . .the Crusades is ONE of those examples that is thrown in our faces. We want to know how to intelligently respond with FACTS.

What do you have that could help?

Dear _____:

Thank you for your recent e-mail regarding the Crusades. Let me see if I can give you some help on this.

To begin with, a Christian response to charges like this one must be honest with the facts of history. The truth of the

matter is that the historical, institutional Church and true, Biblical Christianity have not always been synonymous. There is no way that we should try to defend or excuse those times and incidents where the Church has erred from her calling and failed to emulate and model the teachings of its Founder. In short, the Christian Church, in all of its forms—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant—has a "checkered" past. Where the church has failed, we must agree with our critics. The Pope's recent apology in Jerusalem for the Church's failure to take the lead in preventing the Holocaust is a current example.

But we should also know our history, and the Crusades is a good case in point. Most critics of our faith make sweeping generalizations about the Church's failure in a certain issue or event (like the Crusades) and assign to her *all* the blame. Another tactic is to just ignore other factors which might interfere with the case they are trying to make against Christianity.

This is not a new problem. Tertullian, one of the early church fathers (c.200 A.D.) complained that whether the Tiber flooded, or there was an earthquake, or a famine, etc., Rome's answer was, "The Christians to the Lions!"

It is important for us in historical analysis to make a clear distinction between the ideals, teachings, and practices of Our Lord and the lives, and often questionable behavior, of all professing Christians—be they ecclesiastical bodies, "Christian" nations, or individuals. In short:

> Renaissance popes are **not** Christianity; St. Francis of Assisi **is.**
> Pizarro and Cortez are **not** Christianity; Bartolome de Las Casas **is.**
> Captain Ball, a Yankee Slaver, is **not** Christianity; William Wilberforce **is**.

And when we come to the Crusaders, we find we are faced with a "mixed multitude." First, we have the Pope, who, along with his colleagues, thought it shameful the Holy Land was possessed by the infidel. Secondly, we have genuine parishioners, from peasants to nobles, who sincerely desired to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. These tens of thousands went with a true spiritual purpose (many died on the way) and are not guilty of the charge above. And third, we have a large contingent of men who were motivated by two primary things: economic gain, and the automatic promise from the Church that they could "skip" Purgatory" and be assured of heaven if they "took up the Cross" and died fighting in their mission to reclaim the Holy Land for Christianity. This Christian "*Jihad*" could be said to have promised "All this, and heaven too!"

If you want a good book about this, I would recommend a readable volume simply entitled *The Crusades* by Zoe Oldenbourg. You should be able to get it in any library. It was published in 1966 by Pantheon Books. Oldenbourg is a Russian Jewess who lived much of her life in Paris.

This book almost reads like a novel and is fascinating.. Before she begins her account she gives a marvelous description of what western Europe was like at the time of the Crusades. Conditions were, at the time, just the opposite from what they are today. Now, the wealth and industry is in the West, while the Middle East is blighted and "third-worldish" (excepting huge wealth in the East held by the few who control vast oil holdings), then, it was the West that was blighted and primitive, while the Middle East possessed vast wealth and contained great, opulent cities.

Many of the Crusading Knights who joined the Crusades were second and third sons, who were not entitled to an inheritance because of the practice of *primogeniture*—the exclusive right of the first born to a Father's Estate. From the "get-go" these men demonstrated their prime motive for joining the Crusade: economic gain.

From beginning to end, the Crusades are truly a trail of tears. . .from the (1) pogroms in various cities where thousands of Jews died at the hands of the Crusaders as they journeyed East toward the Holy Land, to the (2) "peeling off" of many knights as the great cities of the Levant were reached [Edessa, Tarsus, Aleppo, Damascus, Antioch, Acre. Some of them never even got to Jerusalem! Greedily, they captured a city by force, put themselves in charge, and lived in new-found luxury], to (3) the capture of Jerusalem and the complete massacre of all its inhabitants—both Jews and Muslims, to the (4) other sorry Crusades that followed, the last of which, when the Crusaders found themselves at the gates of Constantinople, decided to just attack and sack *it* instead!

Other "black marks" which critics pounce on include: (1) virulent anti-Semitism, practiced by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and even Protestant (including Martin Luther himself), (2) the Inquisition, (3) the torture and burning of heretics and witches, (4) the practice of slavery, (5) the treatment and destruction of native populations [the Irish, the Indians of the Americas, the African Tribes, the island populations in both Oceans], (6) treatment of women, and (7) all "Religious" wars.

Here again we cannot defend the actions of "Christian" people. We must quickly agree with our critics. At the same time, we must press home the idea *that the Church is* ***not*** *our model. . .* ***Jesus*** *is.* Where His teachings and His personal example have been followed many positive things have helped to change society in such ways that much of the world is still benefiting from His impact. Even the critics have to recognize this.

I will close with these quotes written by three eminent historians, R.R. Palmer, Roland H. Bainton, and W.E.H Lecky:

> "It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the coming of Christianity. It brought with it, for one thing, an

altogether new sense of human life. For the Greeks had shown man his mind; but the Christians showed him his soul. They taught that in the sight of God, all souls were equal, that every human life was sacrosanct and inviolate. Where the Greeks had identified the beautiful and the good, had thought ugliness to be bad, had shrunk from disease and imperfection and from everything misshapen, horrible, and repulsive, the Christian sought out the diseased, the crippled, the mutilated, to give them help. Love for the ancient Greek, was never quite distinguished from Venus. For the Christians who held that God was love, it took on deep overtones of sacrifice and compassion." (Palmer)

"The history of Christianity is inseparable from the history of Western culture and of Western society. For almost a score of centuries Christian beliefs, principles, and ideals have colored the thoughts and feelings of Western man. The traditions and practices have left an indelible impression not only on developments of purely religious interest, but on virtually the total endeavor of man. This has been manifest in art and literature, science and law, politics and economics, and, as well, in love and war. Indeed, the indirect and unconscious influence Christianity has often exercised in avowedly secular matters—social, intellectual, and institutional—affords striking proof of the dynamic forces that have been generated by the faith over the millenniums. Even those who have contested its claims and rejected its tenets have been affected by what they opposed. Whatever our beliefs, all of us today are inevitable heirs to this abundant legacy; and it is impossible to understand the cultural heritage that sustains and conditions our lives without considering the contributions of Christianity.

"Since the death of Christ, his followers have known vicissitudes as well as glory and authority. The Christian religion has suffered periods of persecution and critical divisions within its own ranks. It has been the cause and

> the victim of war and strife. It has assumed forms of astonishing variety. It has been confronted by revolutionary changes in human and social outlooks and subjected to searching criticism. The culture of our own time, indeed has been termed the most completely secularized form of culture the world has ever known. We live in what some have called the post-Christian age. Yet wherever we turn to enrich our lives, we continue to encounter the lasting historical realities of Christian experience and tradition." (Bainton).
>
> ". . .[T]he greatest religious change in the history of mankind took place under the eyes of a brilliant galaxy of philosophers and historians who disregard as contemptible powerful moral lever that has ever been applied to the affairs of men." (Lecky, *History of European Morals*).

Hope this helps answer your question, _____.

Jimmy Williams
Founder, Probe Ministries

P.S. I'll have to dig out the reference sources for Palmer and Bainton, but wanted to get this to you now.

"Are the Ideas of the Jesus Seminar Now Catholic Doctrine?"

I am a philosophy major at Oregon State University where Marcus Borg is a professor. Many of the churches in our community ascribe to his teaching.

Here is my question…I have a dear friend that grew up in an

evangelical Catholic home and knows Christ as her personal savior. She has been attending the local Catholic church here in Corvallis and recently has been strongly confronted by one of the deacons on issues surrounding the literalism of the Bible (i.e. the ideas of the Jesus Seminar, taught by Borg). The deacon has been telling her that Biblical non-literalism as Borg teaches is part of Catholic doctrine and part of the Catechism. Is this accurate? Is this indeed an international Catholic teaching or does it depend on the individual parish or person?

I would appreciate any wisdom you might have on this topic. Honestly, it's been really heated here lately, as Borg's new book has just been released. We would love it if either of you (or other speakers from Probe) could come out and do a presentation for all of the confused Christians. There is a strong evangelical movement in Corvallis, but unfortunately, it tends to be strongly anti-intellectual and isn't well respected in the university community. As a student, I want to be able to better understand the critical issues at hand and be able to represent Christ in grace, truth, and love.

Send me whatever thoughts you have…I read article on the Jesus Seminar through Leadership University and that helped, but I really would love even more detailed information if you have any.

Thank you so much for serving as a resource for students of the Word!

Thank you for your recent e-mail concerning the Jesus Seminar. I can empathize with your "dilemma" under the shadow of Marcus Borg at your university.

I don't know if you have checked the Probe Website (www.probe.org) or not, but I would direct you to at least two essays: one that I wrote is called The Jesus Seminar, and a second was written by my colleague, Rick Wade, entitled The

Historical Christ. You will find good bibliographical info for further study.

I would rather doubt that the tenets of the Jesus Seminar are now officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. I would recommend that your friend ask for official, written documentation from this priest for his assertion that this is true. I am 99% positive that no such position has been taken by the Catholic church and its biblical scholars. There is too much at stake for the church to take such a radical stand which undermines much of what they have held to be true about Jesus Christ.

If you are looking for someone to come and debate Borg, I would suggest that you contact my good friend Dr. J. P. Moreland and/or Michael J. Wilkins at Talbot Seminary in southern California. They edited a book entitled *Jesus Under Fire* which was published by Zondervan in 1995. Each chapter is written by a evangelical scholar, each of which develops and refutes the major arguments of the Jesus Seminar position.

I have been studying this topic for several years, and following the literature, but these men, as New Testament Scholars, are current on this issue and have devoted the kind of study and depth necessary to give good account of themselves with a fine scholar like Borg.

I can appreciate your frustration with the general Christian community. Most are not "armed" for the battle of ideas which we face. That is why I left Campus Crusade in 1973 and began Probe Ministries. At the time I gave oversight to the Campuses in the Southwest U.S. The worldview America has come to embrace generally now once existed only on a few campuses: UC Berkeley, San Francisco State, U. of Wisconsin (Madison), Columbia U., and U. of Colorado.

I found myself hard pressed to respond to the questions of these students. So I decided the Lord was calling upon me not

to “curse the darkness”, but rather “light some lamps!” The early Christians, it is said, were effective because they OUT-THOUGHT and OUT-LOVED the ancient world! In fact, for 250 years after the apostles died off, the church did nothing but try to survive and answer/refute/respond to all the doctrinal challenges which came from the Jewish and Pagan communities without, and from sects and heresies within. They were so busy doing this, that it was not until 325 A.D. (Council of Nicea) that the addressed/clarified the doctrine of the Trinity! The FIRST theology of the early church was APOLOGETICAL theology, and we find ourselves facing the same kind of circumstances and challenges today.

So you hang in there! And tell your friend to do the same. Challenge the priest and don’t be bullied by him. If it IS an official position, tell her that I requested that it be documented so I will be able to confirm to others who ask that this is truly official. If I were a betting man (and I am ::::SMILE!::::), your friend will find that no such affirmation of this policy will be forthcoming.

With Warm Regards in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

“Isn’t the Old Testament Just a Rip-Off of Older Tales From Other Cultures?”

Dear Mr. Williams,

I’m curious on your thoughts toward the common charge that the Old Testament did nothing more than rip off older tales from other cultures. Have you read the *Genesis of Justice*? I’m very curious on your thoughts, Sir. . .

Thank you for your recent e-mail. Let me try to give you a little background on this question and then offer an explanation.

It is true that there are some documents relating to events recorded in Genesis which **predate** the projected time of the writing of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), commonly known among the Jews as the ***Torah.***

By way of background, first of all, we must acknowledge that the Hebrew Old Testament is an ancient Semitic book and bore a close relationship to the environment out of which it came. The setting for the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which record the primeval history of mankind, is laid in “the cradle of civilization,” the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley (part of the Fertile Crescent). Archaeologists and Anthropologists all agree that here we find the first and earliest major civilization.

The controversy surrounding the question you have asked came about with (1) the discovery and decipherment of the Babylonian- Assyrian cuneiform script in 1835, and (2) the subsequent excavations at Nineveh (the ancient capital) between 1848 and 1876, which yielded various clay tablets which made up the Library of Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.) Among them were seven tablets of the great Creation Epic known as “*Enuma Elish,*” or “When Above.” Although these tablets date to the 7th century B.C., they were composed much earlier in the days of Hammurabi (1728-1676 B.C.). Also found at the same site was *“The Epic of Gilgamesh”* which incorporates an account of the Flood. There are other resemblances to Genesis 1-11 as well, but these are the two main ones. And there is no question that these documents came **before** the writing of the

Semitic Pentateuch. There is also no question that there is a relationship between these two traditions, but there are both *similarities* and stark *differences*.

In the **creation story** they are similar in that both accounts (1) know a time when the earth was "waste and void", (2) have a similar *order* of *events* in creation, and (3) show a predilection for the number *seven*.

They are very *different*, however, in that one account is (1) intensely *polytheistic*, the other strictly *monotheistic*; (2) and one account confounds *spirit* and *matter*, while the other carefully *distinguishes* between these two concepts. Merrill Unger says,

> *As a result of this salient difference in the basic concept of deity, the religious ideas of the two accounts are completely divergent. The Babylonian story is on a low mythological plane with a sordid conception of deity. . .The great gods themselves plot and fight against one another.*
>
> *Genesis, in striking contrast, is lofty and sublime. The one God, supreme and omnipotent, is in superb control of all the creatures and elements of the universe. . . the crude polytheism of the Babylonian creation stories mars the record with successive generations of deities of both sexes. . .(producing) a confusing and contradictory plurality of creators. (Archaeology and the Old Testament, pp.32-33).*

I have just been reading Augustine's *City of God.* The first half of the book (about 300 pages) addresses this same difference: the many Graeco-Roman gods, and the One True God:

> *We, however, seek for a mind which, trusting to true religion, does not adore the world as its god, but for the sake of God praises the world as a work of God, and purified from mundane defilements, comes pure to God Himself Who founded the world. . . . But if any one insists that he*

> *worships the one true God—that is, the Creator of every soul and of every body—with stupid and monstrous idols, with human victims, with putting a wreath on the male organ, with wages of unchastity, with the cutting of limbs, with emasculation, with the consecration of the effeminates, with impure and obscene plays, such a one does not sin because he worships One Who ought not to be worshipped, but because he worships Him Who ought to be worshipped in a way in which He ought not to be worshipped. (VII., Chapters 26 & 27)*

Augustine goes on to say that there *was* ONE nation—among all of the other nations—which gave testimony of this God through unique religious thought and practice: the *Hebrews. (VII., Chapter 32).* This is truly remarkable, historically, and I believe is a strong argument in support of Genesis over the Sumerian/Assyrian/Babylonian tradition. I will give another reason shortly, but let me turn to the Flood Stories.

Like the Creation Accounts, the Biblical and Babylonian *Flood Accounts* contain similarities and differences. Both accounts:

• Hold that the deluge was divinely planned;
• Agree that the impending catastrophe was divinely revealed to the hero;
• Connect the reason for the deluge with the corruption of the human race;
• Say that the hero was divinely instructed to build a huge boat to preserve life;
• Tell of the deliverance of the hero and his family;
• Acknowledge the physical causes of the flood
• Mention the duration of the flood;
• Include similar, striking details,
• Describe acts of worship after deliverance and the bestowing of special blessings.

The contrasts, or differences, include: A radical contrast (1) in their *theological* conceptions (Genesis attributes the Flood

to an infinitely holy, wise and all-powerful God, while the Babylonian describes a multitude of disagreement—quarreling, self- accusing deities, who crouch in fear "like dogs"); (2) in their *moral* conceptions (Genesis presents the Flood as a divine, moral judgment, while the Babylonian account portrays mixed standards of conduct on the part of the deities, a hazy view of sin, and the result of the caprice of the gods; (3) and in their *philosophical* conceptions (one of speculation confusing spirit and matter, finite and infinite, and ignorance of the first principles of causation. The Genesis account has no such ambiguity).

Now what can we make of all this? First, it is extremely unlikely that the Babylonians borrowed from the Genesis account. The relative dating of historical events will not allow it. And so we must concede that the Hebrews (Moses) were aware of these events and **may** have incorporated them into the Genesis account, either through direct knowledge of the Babylonian literature, or through oral transmission. Which leads us to a third alternative, namely, **that both the Biblical and Babylonian accounts go back to a *common source of fact*, originating from actual, historical occurrences**!

If the Genesis account is recording actual, historical events, then we should find some evidence of that across the world. Do we? Yes. Cosmologies from primitive and distant parts of the globe (Micronesians, Eskimos, New World Indians, Scythians, Celts, Australian Aborigines) contain stories about Creation and the Deluge. There are some 150 flood accounts across the world recording many of the things mentioned above (notwithstanding that the accounts become more inaccurate the farther away they are geographically from the Fertile Crescent).

The Babylonian accounts may antedate the writing of Genesis, but there appears to have been a strong, world-wide oral tradition concerning these events which preceded even their accounts created at the time of Hammurabi early in the Second

Millenium B.C.

We also must focus on the entire question of inspiration of the Biblical documents. There is no question that these final, written records which now make up our Old and New Testaments were revealed, recorded (written down), and preserved by a Divine Hand. In answering the above question, we must come back to either deny or affirm that God, in His own time, and in His own way, made Himself and His redemptive plan known to us (Hebrews 1:1). The purpose of both testaments was to demonstrate His holiness and justice, as well as His love and grace, and how He brought about Reconciliation for those of us who believe and accept His provision by faith.

The startling thing to me is the absolute **uniqueness** of the Judeo-Christian God in comparison with all of the bizarre alternatives we still find throughout all the world and throughout all of history. That uniqueness helps me to make my decision to trust the Genesis account rather than some other:

> *What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; and He made from one every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should see God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being. . .(Acts 17:24-28).*

Hope this helps answer your question.

Jimmy Williams
Founder, Probe Ministries

Thank you, Sir. Well written. I really appreciate the response. I've read about the Flood stories that are prevalent throughout history which seems really interesting (obviously something happened). But how do we know there wasn't simply a great flood and these stories were made by common folk (or even the leaders of the time) and written down as their own interpretation? Curious, _____.

Glad you received the information. With respect to your question in this e-mail, I think the main issue is the widespread, global awareness of this event. Obviously the "tale was told" from generation to generation. The fact that it is present and widely-distributed among the folklore of so many cultures in describing their "distant past would argue for a real, historical basis. Sometimes this was handed down through oral tradition, and sometimes written. The fact that certain "particulars" vary in the accounts would indicate **some** interpretive innovations (this is to be expected) as the story moved on, but there is a basic "core" that seems to be consistently preserved, though some details are altered, or embellished.

There is no doubt that, sometime in the remote past, there was a gigantic flood. Theologians still argue as to whether it was global or local. What we **do** know, however, is that a very high percentage (I'm guessing at least 80%) of the earth's crust is *sedimentary* rock; that is, rock that was formed by the pressure and weight of *water*.

Warm Regards,

Jimmy

“I Find the Argument for a Wednesday Crucifixion Most Compelling”

I receive the Probe-Alert and read an interesting response to another email: “If Jesus Was Crucified on Friday, How Was He Dead for Three Nights?” I use a Dake’s Bible and although I try to keep an open mind when studying his (Finis Dake) interpretations, I thought his explanation of the Wednesday crucifixion was quite compelling. Dake refers to many verses in support of his interpretation. I will endeavor to include as many of the pertinent ones (admittedly my opinion) as possible. If you have access to a Dake’s Bible, the references are included beside each verse.

Matt. 27:63 – “…after three days I will rise again.”
This shows how the Jews understood the three days and three nights of Matt. 12:40

Lev. 23:7
This verse refers to the special Sabbath two days before the weekly Sabbath.

Mat. 12:40 “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

John 19:31 “…for that Sabbath day was an high day.”
This is another reference to the special Sabbath.

Luke 9:22
Although this verse merely says that He will be raised on the third day, Dake gives another perspective on the three full days and three full nights interpretation:

• When days and nights are both mentioned, then it cannot be parts of three days, but full days and nights (Ester 4:16 with 5:1; 1 Sam. 30:12 with 13; Jonah 1:17 with Mat. 12:40). See also Rev. 11:9-11.

• The Jews understood Christ to mean “after three days” or three full days and three full nights (Matt. 27:63), hence the soldiers had orders to guard the tomb at least that long.

• It was the custom to mourn for the dead three full days and nights, called “days of weeping,” which were followed by four “days of lamentation,” thus making seven days (Gen. 27:41; 50:10; 1 Sam. 31:13; Job 2:13). According to rabbinical notion the spirit wandered about the sepulchre for three days hoping to re-enter the body, but when corruption set in the spirit left. This was believed to be on the fourth day when the loud lamentations began. Hence, on the fourth day Lazarus was supposed to stink (John 11:39).

• Herodotus testifies that embalmment did not take place until after three days when the spirit was supposed to be gone (Herod. ii. 86-89). This is why the women were taking sweet spices to anoint Jesus (Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1)

• The Jews did not accept evidence as to the identification of a dead body after three days, for corruption took place quickly in the East. Hence, this period of three full days and three full nights was wanted by God, so as to preclude all doubt that death had actually taken place, and shut out all suggestion that Christ might have been in a trance. Jews would legally have to conclude His death, should He remain dead the full three days and three nights.

Thank you for your e-mail.

As you may know there is some controversy/discussion about Passover meal and whether it was celebrated Wednesday night,

or Thursday night, and some evidence which argues for both days.

I am inclined to agree with the full three days, and the Wednesday night theory.

I appreciate your sending this information (some of which I already have) and your nice summary.

If you go with Thursday, you just have to accept the fact that the Lord was in the tomb some PORTION of three days (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday).

As far as theology and/or interpretation is concerned, either (in my judgment) is acceptable since the rudimentary facts of the death, burial, and resurrection are not affected.

Warm Regards,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

"Did Stalin Have a Deathbed Conversion? What About Trotsky?"

I am trying to check the validity of the following material. I came across one of your articles on the Web and thought you may be able to comment. I am not expecting you to research this, but just if you happen to know would you mind responding? It would be a help.

Question 1. The statement "Religion is a crutch for the weak.

. .” and various variants of it I had heard attributed to Joseph Stalin. Do you know if this is correct. Or was it Marx? I know Marx penned the famous “Religion is the opiate of the masses,” but who is generally attributed as the author of the first quote. Possibly it was just a common atheist saying and thus picked up by most of the communists.

Question 2. I recall hearing it said that Stalin close to his death had said, “I cannot escape the overwhelming feeling that I am about to be cast into an ocean of the blood of the lives I have destroyed,” or words to this effect. Do you know whether this is correctly attributed to Stalin, or was it another?

Question 3. I also recall reading somewhere that one of the old communists (again I thought it was Stalin) was the son of a Jewish father who upon moving to a new city changed to attending the Lutheran church, telling his son it was better for business. This contributed to the son rejecting God and adopting a strongly atheistic world view.

I am afraid I can’t help you from my memory on these quotes. On #1, I know that Stalin attended an Orthodox Christian School for ten years. He was kicked out of seminary for his radical Marxist views. I checked the *Oxford Book of Quotations*, but found nothing there. I have heard the quote about religion being a “crutch” mentioned many times, but I have never related this to Stalin.

On Questions #2 let me offer the following: I am not inclined to think Stalin made this statement of regret. I found these words about Stalin’s deathbed scene, as described by his daughter, Svetlana, in Allen Bullock’s *Hitler and Stalin.* She says:

> *“The death agony was terrible. God grants an easy death only to the just. He literally choked to death as we watched. At*

> *what seemed like the very last moment he suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance, insane or perhaps angry and full of fear of death. . .Then something incomprehensible and terrible happened that to this day I can't forget. . .He suddenly lifted his left hand as though he were pointing to something up above and bring down a curse on us all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace. . .The next moment, after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free of the flesh."*

Bullock immediately adds,

> *"Like Hitler, Stalin preserved his image of himself intact to the end, without retraction or regret. Both men died defying their enemies." (pg. 968).*

With regard to #3, my first guess would be Trotsky. He was the son of a Russian Jew who settled in Ukraine, and there Trotsky was educated (Odessa on the Black Sea). His real name was Lev Bronstein. He took the name "Trotsky" at a time when he needed a forged passport to continue his underground activities undetected. I would start looking at his life first.

Hope this helps.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

"What Is the 'Sin Unto

Death’?” [Jimmy Williams]

I have always been puzzled with 1 John 5:16-17 and the meaning of the “sin unto death.” Can you explain exactly what John is referring to?

> *16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.*
> *17 All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.*

I would really appreciate any help you can give me on this.

Thank you for your e-mail and your concerns about “the sin unto death” mentioned in 1 John 5:16-17.

Let me see if I can give you an acceptable answer to your question. In doing so, we will first have to explore a number of factors which come from the Bible. Let me begin with a passage from Hebrews 12:

> *“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. . . Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet. . .” (Heb. 12:5-13).*

Whether we are reading the Old Testament or the New, we find that God is at work to create a family for His own pleasure, a

company of sons and daughters who will commune with and look to Him for love, provision, guidance, and consolation. In the Gospel of John, chapters 1 and 3 make it clear that when we place our faith in Jesus Christ to be our Savior Who, through His death, can make us presentable to God, we join the family of God through a new spiritual birth and thus embark upon our personal Christian pilgrimage which ends on the day we die.

As newborns in this family, we are admonished by the Word to "Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18), and "as newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may *grow* in respect to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2).

All children, physical and spiritual, undergo a process of development which involves time. The theological term for this process is "sanctification," which means the **Christian life.** Along the way, as we saw above in the Hebrews passage, we observe that God, like any good father, disciplines us appropriately when necessary. The goal is *training*, not *punishment*. This training process may occur through circumstances we encounter, and which God allows, or it can come through knowledge of the Bible:

> *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17).*

We have a vivid example of this process in the Apostle Paul's life. He describes it this way:

> *"And because of the surpassing abundance of (my) revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself…. Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for*

power is perfected in weakness'" (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

We don't have a clear picture what this "thorn" was. Most believe it was a physical ailment. There is some indication that it may have been an eye problem. But the point I make here is that God may allow all kinds of circumstances into our life which are designed for training purposes. This process is *the normal Christian Life.*

Another good example comes from 1 Corinthians 11:21-31. Paul writes this epistle to address several problems and/or abuses occurring among the church members there. One abuse was that when the believers came together to take communion, some of the members showed up to enjoy the food and some came *drunk!* Paul rebukes them saying, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry, and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. . . For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep."

This passage makes it clear to us that there are consequences to our disobedience. Some of these Corinthian believers evidently are disciplined by God through both illness and even death ("some of you sleep"). That is *not* to say that all illness and death are divine judgments, but some *are.*

In this particular instance, some of the disobedient Corinthians experienced the "sin unto death." (That is, some of them died).

With this background, we come to the heart of your question. The "sin unto death" is found throughout the Bible and seems to be connected to new eras of biblical history.

Here are some examples where people experienced death through disobedience:

- *Giving of the Law, Mount Sinai: Golden Calf (Exodus 32)*
- *Institution of Levitical Priesthood: "Strange Fire" (Leviticus 10)*
- *Conquest of the Land: Achan (Joshua 7)*
- *Beginning of the Church: Ananias & Sapphira (Acts 5)*
  (See also Samson and Saul—God was longsuffering with both)

Speaking of the incident in Leviticus 10 where Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered "strange fire" which "consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev. 10:2), Rev. Ray Stedman of Palo Alto Bible Church says:

> *This was a sin of presumption, not a sin of ignorance. They knew better and what incense they were supposed to burn. . . they had been told emphatically that God would be offended if they offered incense other than that which he had prescribed.* Second, it was a sin dealt with severely because it distorted God's revelation of Himself. All of these sacrifices and rituals were intended for us to learn what kind of God He is. Third, God used it to set an example. God is here teaching a lesson-to show how important it was for the priests at the beginning of their priesthood to follow explicitly what God commanded. And it only happened once. Similarly, though the sin of Ananias and Sapphira (deception, hypocrisy) was common among Christians of the early church and common ever since, God never visited death like that again. It is a manifestation of God's love and concern. At the outset, He is wanting to stop this kind of thing from happening again, and He is giving fair warning of the eventual consequences to anyone presumptuous enough to sin deliberately in this way." That is the way we human beings work. Unless an issue is vividly, dramatically, openly,*

> *symbolically made clear to us, we'll go right on and do the wrong thing. So God is stopping that, arresting it with his judgment at this point. But he really wants us to learn to refrain for the sake of his glory, not out of fear for our lives. *(Cf. elaborate instructions on incense, Exodus 30:34-38, particularly v. 38).*

Sin Unto Death (1 John 5)

Now let's look at the passage you have questioned. The first thing to note is the *context*. This major topic from 5:13-18 is prayer. We are given in verses 13-15 that God hears and responds to our prayers. The key word is "*anything*." Then John remembers there ***is*** an exception: praying for a disobedient, sinning brother or sister in Christ. What to do? How do we pray for that one? Here is the sequence we must keep in mind for such a one as we pray.

First of all, the Apostle John tells us that there is a sin **not** leading to death (physical). In verse 16, he tells us that it is possible for Christians to fall into this sin not leading to death. [See also 1 John 2:1,2—the ideal is to "sin not." But if anyone sins (*and we will*), we have an Advocate, a defense attorney.]

When Christians observe disobedience in brothers and sisters, they *are* to pray for him/her (16b); as a result of these prayers, God may choose to preserve, prolong, extend the person's physical life (not eternal life, since that life is determined by one's personal faith decision).

This intercession is effective only in the case of sin **not** leading to death (16c): that is, the person has not reached the end limits of God's patience and grace (His "last straw"). See also v. 17 where John says, "All unrighteousness is sin, but there is a sin which is not unto (physical) death."

Secondly, there **is** a sin which results in physical death—the

sin unto death (v. 16d): This is the death of a believer characterized by persistent, willful sinning in which "the flesh is destroyed [physical death—1 Cor. 5:1-5] so that the *spirit* might be saved."

John tells us that this is a sin ***not*** to be prayed for, because God's immutable law concerning this final, "last straw" disobedience is involved and will be unaltered by intercessory prayer (16e), and frankly, we do not know another's heart condition before the Lord. We are not encouraged to speculate about the cause of any believer's untimely death. In our prayer life, we can continue to intercede for a wayward brother or sister, but we are not to draw any conclusions about what may, should, or has happened in regard to a believer's death.

Thirdly, when some Christian we know dies, we might be inclined to ask the question of ourselves, "Was this the sin unto death or not?" John is telling us in this passage not to speculate, because we just don't know.

All through this Epistle (1 John) the Apostle has been addressing sin in the life of the believer—yours and every Christian you know. It is fitting that John portrays the remedy of *habitual* sin on the part of a believer in the context of the new birth. The "black and white" contrast all through 1 John concludes with the same idea, and one that is also expressed in the book of James:

> *"Even so, faith, if it has no works is dead, being by itself. But someone may say, 'You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' . . Are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." (James 2:17,18, 20, 26)*

The New Testament clearly teaches that "Faith alone saves

(Ephesians 2:8,9; Titus 3:5), but saving faith is never alone."

This leads us to a practical application in observing/evaluating another believer's life and imperfections. This verse comes to mind: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with *our* spirit that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16). What we learn from this verse is that we can know about *ourselves*, (i.e. that *we* have the Spirit, that *we* are born again), but ultimately we cannot know about *another*. In other words, I can know about *me,* but I can't know about *you.* You can know about *you,* but you can't know about *me.*

Practically speaking then, we should accept every person's testimony who claims to be a Christian. Actual Christian behavior is on a spectrum which John describes by saying, "all sin [big and little] is unrighteousness." Only God can rightly see the totality of a believer's obedience and disobedience over a lifetime, and rightly judge it. As a loving Father, He may bring discipline to get us "back on track." 1 John 1 and 2 speak to the way this may be accomplished—God's grace through the Blood of Christ providing daily cleansing through confession/acknowledgement (1 John 1:9) and thus, further potential opportunity to serve.

Since we cannot see the heart of another, we can only inspect the "fruit" (or lack thereof) we see in a life. The farther a believer appears to wander away from God, the more "bad fruit" we observe, and the more we wonder about the truthfulness of that believer's profession of faith. We cannot help being tempted to ask the question: "Is this person *really* a Christian?" We are to go no farther in our evaluation or conclusion; rather, we should *continue our intercession* for him or her.

> *John 21: 20-22: "And looking around, Peter saw the disciple whom Jesus loved (John the Apostle) following them. . .and therefore seeing him said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this*

> *man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? **You** follow me!” (Old Aramaic Expression: “Stick to your knitting!” <smile>).*

I hope this answers your question, _____.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries