

TJNPT

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1. God, the Word, and the World: Introducing the *JTNPT* Journal

Don McIntosh, M.S., M.Div., Dr. Apol.¹

TO EXPLAIN THE PURPOSES of the *Trinity Journal of Natural & Philosophical Theology*, I will need to share some personal experience. Almost since the day of my conversion to the Christian faith many years ago (1985), I have felt a need, indeed a calling, to share the truth of the gospel in a meaningful way to skeptically minded people. That sense of calling has come from God, I believe, but likely has something to do with my earliest experiences as a believer as well.

While as a new believer I was overjoyed to have been saved by God's grace, welcomed into a local church assembly, baptized, and taught the truths of Scripture, I was also haunted by doubts – doubts about other religions, about certain miracles in the Bible, and after completing coursework in astronomy and evolutionary biology at a major university, *big* doubts about whether God actually created the world and life within it.

¹ Don McIntosh is the Owner of Gerizim Publishing and Editor-in-Chief of the *TJNPT* journal.

My pastor at the time, though a great man in many ways, had little patience for my skepticism and wrote it off as rebellion, the mark of a proud “pseudo-intellectualism.” But I knew that my questions were sincere even if others did not. At some point I came across the work of C.S. Lewis, which was my introduction to Christian apologetics. I was greatly encouraged by reading Lewis, and over the intervening years I learned more about apologetics. I became fascinated especially with the related philosophical questions, which often arose in the course of informal debates (sometimes in person, usually online). I believed that by interacting with unbelievers and engaging directly with their best arguments, I could connect with people like me and to some degree influence the intellectual atmosphere of the world around us.

Influence

And that brings me to our main purpose. It could be said that *influencing the intellectual atmosphere of the world around us* is an apt summary of our overriding vision here at the *TJNTP* journal. To influence means more than simply adding to the existing body of scholarly information on a given subject – the basic purpose of an academic journal – but shaping opinions within the larger culture. Of course, some journals already do exist for such a purpose; *Faith & Philosophy* would be a shining example. But many of these journals are, or at least appear to be, almost com-

pletely inaccessible to contributors who lack certain academic credentials and attainments.² Here we seek to honor God by publishing insightful and compelling – and yes, *scholarly* – material, but under the operating assumption that such material sometimes comes from unexpected sources. We would note that while Jesus was unsurpassably knowledgeable and rhetorically skilled, “The common people heard Him gladly” (Mark 12:37).

In short, we seek to pursue excellence while avoiding snobbery. By enlisting the talents of “ordinary” but highly thoughtful and insightful contributors along with accomplished scholars, we hope to tear down what seems to be an invisible barrier between a certain set of highbrow intellectuals who roam the halls of academia and, well, the rest of us. I won’t identify them by name, but numerous well-known and well-meaning apologetics ministries have as part of their mission something like the following: “To equip ordinary believers to effectively defend the Christian faith.” Yet it’s curious to me that when those ordinary believers, now equipped, rise up and do just that, often the same people whose stated purpose was to equip them refuse to take their work seriously – precisely because they

² This appears to be symptomatic of a growing *credentialism* in our culture, “a tendency to treat credentials as the source of empirical and philosophical authority.” – Matthew Kirtley, “The crisis of credentialism,” *Bournbrook*, Dec. 21, 2020. <https://www.bournbrookmag.com/home/the-crisis-of-credentialism>.

are ordinary believers (not highly recognized or credentialed). This seems to be an inconsistency, if not altogether self-defeating, and arguably at variance with the spirit and testimony of Jesus.

Influence in the kingdom of God is not always visible, let alone widely celebrated in traditional, measurable, or worldly terms. Jesus told the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven in part to underscore that very truth. The disciples of Jesus, we do well to recall, were unlettered tradesmen, while arguably the greatest theologian of the early church and author of a majority of New Testament writings positively refused employment by the church, choosing instead to mix it up with the common folk by working as a tentmaker.

There are good practical reasons for emphasizing all this. Prolonged immersion in the academy can easily lead to myopia, that is, loss of vision. Believers living in such a bubble may find themselves spending excessive amounts of time and energy rebutting “scholarly” arguments that almost no one in the world is actually making, for example. On the other hand, sometimes powerful new ideas fall outside the existing scope of scholarly opinion. History suggests that once in a while a completely novel idea or argument turns out to be highly impactful. Most readers today are familiar with the example of the obscure Swiss patent clerk (Albert Einstein) whose series of submissions to the German physics journal *Annalen der Physik* in 1905 started a revolution in physics and cosmology.

The point here is *not* to undermine credentials, which are generally well-deserved and a reliable indicator of knowledge and proficiency. Rather it's to emphasize the value of *ideas themselves*, over and above the academic or social status of those who promote them.

Engagement

In a well-known passage about spiritual conflict in Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul mentioned the task of “casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself above the knowledge of God...” (2 Cor. 10:5). So it is that we also seek to overcome opposition to the faith, not with insults or obfuscation, but with prayer, patience, respect and reason. We believe that in a fair exchange of ideas, the truth of the Christian faith will always, eventually, emerge victorious. That said, in days to come we intend to publish submissions from atheists, humanists, secularists, and adherents of non-Christian religions, in the confidence that their best arguments can be addressed honestly and effectively from a Christian perspective.

The issues of natural and philosophical theology are clearly and closely related to the ministry of apologetics. Whenever I think of the need for genuinely effective apologetic ministry – beyond simply parroting the words of a noted apologist, say William Lane Craig – I am reminded of the Battle of Britain in the late summer months of 1940. Day after day, as massive clouds of German bombers and

their fighter escorts roared across the English Channel, the weary, outnumbered and outgunned British Royal Air Force fighters would dutifully rise up to meet them and defend their island. The courage and tenacity of the RAF pilots, known as “The Few,” paid off in the long run as Hitler at last gave up the invasion effort.

“It had been a heroic episode,” says John Keegan. “‘The Few’ deserved their epitaph: some 2500 young pilots had alone been responsible for preserving Britain from invasion.”³ So similarly, influential voices in the unbelieving world, at one time content to keep a polite distance from God and the faith, these days seem bolder than ever to openly challenge God’s rule and reign. At times we as his followers are called to rise up to defend his truth and his kingdom – to engage in apologetics.

Now I realize that it may seem a bit of a stretch to compare British air force pilots defending their homeland in life-and-death dogfights over the English Channel with Christian apologists arguing on the Internet about the Resurrection or the origin of the universe. But if Paul, following Jesus, was correct to maintain that “spiritual warfare” is rooted in spiritual *reality*, then we are involved in a real war. Indeed, the spiritual warfare in which believers find themselves is closely related to *ideological* or *psychological* warfare, very real and powerful forms of conflict.

³ John Keegan, *The Second World War*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 102.

Most readers are keenly aware that ours is the “age of information.” Included in the seemingly endless torrent of information that floods our inboxes and social media feeds are all kinds of mis- and disinformation. The practice of spreading misinformation – along with the arguably more insidious practice of tagging *legitimate* information as misinformation or “fake news” – has become a powerful political weapon, and one signal that segments of American culture are actually engaged in the sorts of ideological skirmishes that tend to produce open conflict. Indeed, the persistent use of propaganda is one early sign of a society in deep conflict and heading for war, civil or otherwise.⁴

The same kind of mis/disinformation that can weaken and destabilize a political system (whether issuing from a left- or right-wing source) can also wreak havoc on the spiritual lives of societies and individuals. We take it, then, that along with faith, prayer and fasting, words spoken with the authority of truth can be powerful weapons against “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (see Ephesians 6:10-18). Speaking such truth in the face of widespread skepticism, worldliness and hostility often requires boldness that only the Holy Spirit can give us.

That brings us to content. Like most other areas of study, natural theology and philosophical theology are not

⁴ Taylor Sinclair Goethe, “War, Propaganda and Misinformation: The Evolution of Fake News.” *Reporter* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2019). URL= <https://reporter.rit.edu/features/war-propaganda-and-misinformation-evolution-fake-news>.

consistently or precisely defined. According to philosopher Charles Taliaferro, “Natural theology is the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divine revelation or scripture.”⁵ Probably the best examples of issues in natural theology would be the traditional “proofs” (and “dis-proofs”) of the existence of God: the cosmological argument, the teleological (design) argument, the moral argument, and the argument from evil. Related issues would include the conflict over evolution and creation/intelligent design, and arguments for and against miracles in Scripture, especially the resurrection of Jesus.

As Yang and Davis (also philosophers) have it, philosophical theology “attempts to use the methodologies and conceptual resources of philosophers and apply them to theological issues.”⁶ Philosophical theology involves the critical analysis of matters such as the Triunity of God, the Incarnation of Christ, the process of resurrection and characteristics of a resurrected body, and heaven and hell. The basic idea is *making sense* of the truths of Scripture and the doctrines of the Christian faith when they appear ill-defined or logically inconsistent.

Occasionally natural and philosophical theology inter-

⁵ Charles Taliaferro, “The Project of Natural Theology,” in W. L. Craig & J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, Blackwell Publishing, 2012, p. 1.

⁶ Stephen T. Davis & Eric T. Yang, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophical Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020, p. 23.

sect. Thus the ontological argument, originally devised by the medieval theologian St. Anselm and revisited by modern philosophers like Norman Malcom, Alvin Plantinga and Charles Hartshorne, has been located at various times within both natural and philosophical theology. Possibly the best way to distinguish the two would be in terms of *coherence*, as natural theology is concerned with the consistency of Christian beliefs with the external data of the world, while philosophical theology concerns more the internal coherence of the beliefs themselves. Natural and philosophical theology also overlap somewhat with related areas like metaphysics, systematic theology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, and as mentioned previously, Christian apologetics.

Edification

Finally, by respectfully inviting contributions from thinkers on all sides of various theological issues, searching out the truth, and promoting the glory of God above all else, we hope to edify the church. Edification is the “building up” of the church as a collective. Paul the Apostle described the purpose of leadership in terms of “edifying of the body of Christ:”

that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of de-

ceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (Ephesians 4:13-16).

Edification essentially means the whole body recognizing the value of each part, even as each part contributes to the larger vision of the whole. Given that the church today is embedded within a culture largely defined by social media, self-promotion, personal brand-building and so forth, edification can be hard to come by – because often each part can see only its *own* value.

Of course, self-promotion and even personality cults in the church are nothing new. The Corinthians had a bad habit of elevating certain leaders, for example, as Paul observed: “Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas [Peter],’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ (1 Cor. 1:12). While encouraging members of the church to pursue excellence as individuals with individual gifts, Paul therefore reminded them: “...Since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel” (1 Cor. 14:12).

To promote edification above self-centeredness in the church, Paul counsels “speaking the truth in love.” Much like God himself, truth is “no respecter of persons.” The

truth of the gospel calls out to everyone – rich and poor, famous and anonymous, highly educated scholars and high school dropouts. Likewise, reason cuts through dishonesty and deception much like the Word of God itself, a “two-edged sword.” This “leveling” function of reason is especially important these days – as truth is becoming largely a function of *power* rather than of logic or evidence. Even as I write this, powerful corporations and institutions have redefined basic concepts like gender, freedom, justice and history for the sake of a political ideology. Worse, they are using any means necessary to enforce speech that reflects the new definitions.⁷

By contrast Christians are called to courageously, compassionately and patiently declare the truth – in this case to explain why the new definitions are destructive and incoherent. But precisely because we live in such a contentious time in history, we must be careful to speak such truth in a spirit of love. For apologists like me that means remembering our mission:

There comes a point in every apologetic encounter when the argument either makes its mark or becomes unfruitful. As Paul suggested in various places, the tendency beyond that point is to wrangle: to argue about the meanings of words, the strength or validity of the

⁷ See John Bennett, “The Totalitarian Ideological Origins of Hate Speech Regulation,” *Capital University Law Review*, Vol. 46, Issue 1, 2018.

arguments themselves, even the sincerity and motives of our “opponents” – the very people we have been called to reach. The gospel quickly gets lost in the exchange, and Christians, if we are not careful, can begin to see people as enemies to be defeated rather than precious souls to be won.⁸

In a society increasingly rife with cutthroat politics, racial strife, sexual confusion, and even violence in the streets, truth and love shine brightly. Edification is the natural consequence of both. Here we are reminded of the call of Jesus to his disciples: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). One of the many paradoxes of our age is that great darkness provides us a great opportunity to demonstrate the reality of God. By graciously, patiently affirming the eternal truth of God above charismatic personalities, destructive cultural trends and radical political movements – by “speaking the truth in love” – we both edify the church and offer hope to the world.

⁸ Don McIntosh, *Mission-Centered Apologetics: Demolishing Intellectual Stumbling Blocks and Declaring the Truth of the Gospel*, San Antonio: Gerizim, 2020, p. 17.

2. Historical Evidence for the Resurrection: A Comparative Argument

*Goose McPherson*¹

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT critical arguments against the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus are made on historical grounds. Critics assert that the evidence is anonymous, biased, contradictory, and written decades after the purported event.² It is, they say, little more than religious propaganda coming down to us from second-hand sources. It is filled with references to the supernatural and notoriously difficult-to-interpret imagery. These, and others, are common arguments made by critics against the evidence – the implication being that the evidence for the Resurrection is poor, even by ancient historical standards.

¹ Goose McPherson (not his real name) has been active in online apologetics for many years, and won the “Best Debater” award at the popular *Debating Christianity and Religion* site in 2019 and 2020. He lives in Canada where he runs his own business in the financial industry. Goose is married and has two children.

² See for example Bart Ehrman's opening remarks in his debate with William Lane Craig where Ehrman argues along these lines. “Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus?” College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass., March 28, 2006. URL=<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman>.

Made in a vacuum, these arguments and historical reasonings would seem to carry considerable weight since they are, by and large, accurate assessments of the state of the evidence. What the proponents of these arguments may not realize or may fail to mention, however, is that these are accurate assessments of the state of the evidence for virtually *all of ancient history*, including the Resurrection. Left unchecked, such reasoning might leave one with an incorrect perspective on how good the evidence for the Resurrection actually is by ancient standards. Further, this kind of historical reasoning, when applied across the spectrum of ancient history, would lead to potentially absurd conclusions which would leave historians faced with the uncomfortable position of having to discard volumes of history.

Thus the present argument intends to address this kind of reasoning by measuring the evidence for the Resurrection against other well known, well documented ancient events to observe how well the evidence for the Resurrection measures up. By doing so we will see the evidence for the Resurrection is good by ancient standards, in that it is comparable to other events typically considered well supported. By approaching the issue this way we can see that the historical arguments against the evidence for the Resurrection begin to dissolve. Critics who employ these arguments are forced to move down the absurd path of denying that well documented events are supported with good evidence in order to maintain the position that

the evidence for the Resurrection is not good. Or they are forced to abandon historical arguments altogether, which are then relegated to philosophical arguments against the supernatural – arguments that often presuppose naturalism or betray a bias against supernatural claims.

There are many ways to frame the comparative-evidential kind of argument that I propose. Here the argument will compare the evidence between the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC and the Resurrection of Jesus. The former triggered the rise of the Roman Empire and the latter was the catalyst for the rise of the Christian religion. Both events are well known, well documented, and hugely pivotal in history.

The main argument:

- 1. The historical evidence supporting the assassination of Julius Caesar is good.³*
- 2. The historical evidence supporting the Resurrection of Jesus is as good as the historical evidence supporting the assassination of Julius Caesar.*
- 3. Therefore, the historical evidence supporting the Resurrection of Jesus is good.*

³ Though I will expand on this later, here “good” should be taken to describe evidence that is likely to be based on reliable history.

The argument is simple and the logic valid. The remaining question is whether it is sound. It should be noted that the argument does not intend to *prove* the Resurrection as an historical fact. The historical truth of the Resurrection does not follow from the truth of the assassination. Nor does the argument necessarily imply an intellectual obligation to believe the Resurrection if one believes the assassination. However, if the argument holds, the question remains why one does not believe the former if one believes the latter.

One objection might be that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” This popular mantra implies that to *believe* a supernatural event requires some arbitrary level of special evidence. The objection itself is a tacit admission that there is, at least, ordinary evidence. For if there were not even ordinary evidence, there would be no need to raise the bar and demand extraordinary evidence, whatever that may mean. Further, the objection incorrectly conflates *extraordinary* events with *supernatural* events, as though only supernatural events are extraordinary. An assassination itself is, by definition, an extraordinary event since it is a highly unusual way for any person to die, even for a head of state. Though assassinations of heads of state have certainly happened, these murders are statistically unlikely even when measured against the more relevant populations of heads of state or Roman consuls. Thus, if the objection holds, the assassination *itself* demands extraordinary evidence. If one holds that Caesar

was indeed assassinated and one also holds that extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence, then it follows one must hold the assassination is supported by extraordinary evidence. In short, the objection may inadvertently establish a baseline for what constitutes the otherwise nebulous *extraordinary* evidence, at least as far as ancient history is concerned.

The purpose of my argument is not so much to convince anyone that the Resurrection, or an assassination for that matter, occurred. Any objection revolving around burdens of proof to establish supernatural claims and so on misses the mark since the argument itself says nothing about belief. The purpose of my argument is to *compare the evidence*. If the evidence for the Resurrection is roughly comparable to the assassination, then whatever one says about the evidence for the assassination one can say about the evidence for the Resurrection.

When attempting to reconstruct history, professional historians ideally use sources that meet rigorous criteria. It has been suggested that historians should prefer numerous sources which are contemporary or at least early, as well as independent, largely in agreement with one another, internally consistent, and impartial.⁴ Of course, the more broadly one reads ancient accounts, the more one realizes

⁴ Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction To The Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 185-186.

that few sources meet all of these criteria. One approach to the argument, then, would be to weigh each respective event's evidence against such a method to determine if the evidence is *good* or not. Thus, it's the historical methodology that sets the standard for what constitutes *good* evidence. But framing the argument in such a way does not require a comparison. We could simply see if the evidence for the Resurrection passes such a methodology.

However, the argument has been framed such that it is asserted as a matter of fact that the evidence for the assassination of Caesar *is* good. In other words, the argument allows the evidence for the assassination to set the standard for what constitutes, by ancient standards, *good* historical evidence. If the evidence for the Resurrection, or any other ancient event for that matter, meets or exceeds that standard then it is at least as good as the evidence for the assassination, and therefore *good* historical evidence. If it fails to meet that standard it is not as good, in which case the second premise is effectively shown to be false, thereby rendering the argument unsound.

The idea of evidence being *good* invariably entails a comparison of both *quality* and *quantity*. Qualitative arguments, however, tend to involve a certain degree of subjectivity. One might argue, for example, that a particular writer is unreliable because he has made mistakes. But virtually all ancient writers, indeed even modern ones, have made at least some mistakes. There is no objective way to establish how many mistakes a writer is allowed to make

before she is considered wholly unreliable. One might argue that a particular author is unreliable because he references the supernatural. But virtually every ancient author makes at least some references to the supernatural. Again, there is no objective threshold one crosses for being too supernatural to be reliable. We could say the same for accounts that are in conflict on the secondary details.

One way of mitigating this subjectivity is to narrow the argument and focus on quantitative comparisons that have objective thresholds – for instance, the number of sources attesting to an event in a given period of time, or the number of eyewitness or contemporary accounts. It has been suggested by professional historians that when assessing the reliability of historical sources, preference ought to be given to those sources which are written within one hundred years of the event, since material produced much after this time frame is far more likely to be based on hearsay and legend as opposed to reliable history.⁵ This gives us an objective measure to evaluate the second premise. If the Resurrection has at least as many sources written within one hundred years as the assassination, the second premise is objectively established.

One could, of course, simply deny the first premise and argue that the evidence for the assassination is not good. But such a denial is highly problematic. Firstly, the evidence for the assassination easily passes any reasonable

⁵ Ehrman, p. 186.

historical method. There are contemporaries who report it, along with several later writers who either mention it or provide a narrative within two hundred years. Secondly, it is so well supported that one would be hard pressed to find a better documented event from the period. If the evidence for the assassination is not good by ancient standards, then the evidence for so much of ancient history is likewise not good. By denying the first premise, then, one begins to move down a path to absurdity.

The First Premise

The assassination of Caesar was arguably one of the most notorious events in Roman history. In a letter to Brutus, Cicero remarked, “Wherefore you require no encouragement, since in the execution of that great deed – surely the greatest known to history – you required none.”⁶ As would be expected of such a noteworthy and memorable event, the evidence for the assassination is by ancient standards extensive, though much of what has survived is rather late. Given that the era in which this event took place is one of three with relatively rich pockets of sources⁷ we might further expect an abundance of evidence. Moreover, the event

⁶ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 11.5.

⁷ Naphtali Lewis, *The Ides Of March*, (Sanibel & Toronto: Samuel Stevens & Company, 1985), preface IX.

allegedly involved more than sixty conspirators.⁸ It took place while the senate was in session with at least two hundred senators present at a time in history when Caesar had expanded it to nine hundred members.⁹ The stage is set, then, for an expectation of an overwhelming amount of evidence from eyewitness accounts.

Contrary to our expectations given the above background knowledge, there are no surviving eyewitness accounts with the possible exception of Cicero (106 BC-43 BC). However, there were apparently several contemporaries who mentioned or alluded to the assassination. Some notable examples are Asinius Pollio (76 BC - 4 AD), Livy (59 BC - 17AD), and Strabo (64 BC - 24 AD). Plutarch tells us that Empylus, a friend of Brutus, wrote an account of the assassination.¹⁰ Unfortunately, if these contemporaries, and possibly others, did write about Caesar's death the works in which they wrote have all been lost.¹¹ Livy's words on the assassination, in particular, have not survived. Rather they have been preserved in a brief fourth century summary of his work known as the *Periochae*.¹² In

⁸ Nicolaus says more than eighty – *Life of Augustus*, 19; Suetonius says more than sixty – *Life of Caesar*, 80.

⁹ Barry Strauss, *The Death of Caesar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), p. 128

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Life of Brutus*, 2.

¹¹ Barry Strauss, *The Death of Caesar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), pp. 68-69.

¹² Livy, *Periochae*, 116.5.

the end, there are only two surviving contemporary accounts from Cicero and Nicolaus of Damascus.¹³

Later writers such as Valerius Maximus¹⁴ and Velleius Paterculus (20/19 BC - 31 AD),¹⁵ neither of whom were contemporaries, briefly mention the assassination, probably around the early first century. Paterculus, a former soldier and politician, provides more material than Maximus. We can infer from Paterculus' own writings that he composed his work around 30 AD.¹⁶ Detailed narratives come well over a century after the death of Caesar from Plutarch (c. 46 AD - after 119 AD)¹⁷ and Suetonius (c. 69 AD - after 122 AD).¹⁸ Nearly two centuries after the event had passed before the historian Appian (c. 95 - 165 AD) wrote his narrative.¹⁹ Appian was followed by the Roman historian Cassius Dio (c. 155 - 235 AD) who, over two and a half centuries after Caesar had been murdered, provided yet another narrative account.²⁰ Despite the majority of the more detailed accounts being rather late, it is still a very well attested event from the era. Indeed, the evidential bar has been set high with Caesar's assassination.

¹³ Barry Strauss, *The Death of Caesar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 69.

¹⁴ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, 4.5.6

¹⁵ Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome*, 2.56.3

¹⁶ Paterculus, *History of Rome*, 2.36.1

¹⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 66; *Life of Brutus*, 17; *Life of Antony* 13

¹⁸ Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*, 82

¹⁹ Appian, *Civil Wars*, 2.117.

²⁰ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 44.19.

For the purpose of establishing the first premise of my central argument, we will look mainly at the contemporary sources of Cicero and Nicolaus of Damascus. By the standards of ancient history two contemporary sources ought to be sufficient to establish the first premise.

The Evidence from Cicero

As one of Rome's greatest orators and a key political player at the time, Cicero is an invaluable source of information on Roman life and politics of the day. As a source he is remarkably early; some of the evidence from him dates to within just months of Caesar's assassination. Further, he was very close to the events, having corresponded with some of the conspirators. For example, in a letter to Cassius in May of 44 BC Cicero alludes to Caesar's murder when he says "...though the tyrant has been killed."²¹ Again in correspondence with the conspirator Cassius, Cicero mentions Caesar's "assassination,"²² "the most glorious deed of yours...the death of Caesar,"²³ and the "banquet of the Ides of March."²⁴ Cicero displays what seems to be a congratulatory tone when he writes to another conspirator, Brutus, in July of 43 BC, "After the death of Caesar and your ever memorable Ides of March, Brutus...

²¹ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 7.1.

²² Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 12.2.

²³ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 12.3.

²⁴ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 12.4.

A great pest had been removed by your means...”²⁵ Some of Cicero's mentions seem incidental, simply referring to Caesar's death²⁶ or cryptic references to a “banquet” on the Ides of March²⁷ or a “great deed.”²⁸ If Cicero had knowledge of a grand conspiracy involving dozens of senators he seems reluctant to reveal it. In Cicero's speeches, too, he briefly speaks of the assassination, most notably his second *Philippic* when he is arguing against the accusation that he was involved in the conspiracy: “This charge, however, is quite a modern one, that Caesar was slain by my contrivance.”²⁹

The brief, often cryptic, mentions of Caesar's death in Cicero's letters and speeches seem devoid of meaningful details. Cicero gives his most detailed account in his work *On Divination*. It is roughly about a paragraph in length and written shortly after the assassination:

Or what do we think of Caesar? Had he foreseen that in the Senate, chosen in most part by himself, in Pompey's hall, aye, before Pompey's very statue, and in the presence of many of his own centurions, he would be put to death by most noble citizens, some of whom owed all that they had to him, and that he

²⁵ Cicero, *Letters to Brutus* 1.15.

²⁶ E.g. *Letters to Friends*, 11.27, 11.29.

²⁷ E.g. *Letters to Friends*, 12.4, 10.28.

²⁸ E.g. *Letters to Friends*, 11.5.

²⁹ Cicero, 2 *Philippic*, 12.28.

would fall to so low an estate that no friend – no, not even a slave – would approach his dead body, in what agony of soul would he have spent his life!³⁰

In summary, if Cicero is not an eyewitness he is at the very least early, close to the events, an enemy source,³¹ and thus very good historical evidence. A source such as Cicero would be sufficient evidence, by historical standards, to establish most events from the distance past.

The Evidence from Nicolaus of Damascus

Nicolaus (c. 64 BC - died after 4 AD) wrote a *Universal History* which is now lost. A Greek from Syria, he was also friend and historian of Herod the Great. He was a contemporary to Caesar in as much as he was alive, probably around the age of twenty, when Caesar was assassinated -- though not in Rome at the time. He was tutor to the children of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, which might betray a motive to be biased against the conspirators.

³⁰ Cicero, *On Divination*, 2.23.

³¹ According to Gary Habermas, “The criterion of enemy attestation is satisfied when an antagonistic source expresses agreement regarding a person or event when it is contrary to their best interests to do so.” – “Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels,” *LBTB Faculty Publications and Presentations*, 106, 2005, p. 4. Also see Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2004, pp. 36-38.

Nicolaus' entire narrative account of the assassination found in his biography of Augustus is too lengthy to quote in full. However, he does provide a brief summary at the outset as he transitions into the assassination narrative:

From this point my narrative will investigate the manner in which the assassins formed their conspiracy against Caesar and how they worked out the whole affair, and what happened afterward when the whole state was shaken. Accordingly, I shall in the first place rehearse the circumstances of the plot itself, its reasons, and its final momentous outcome. In the next place I shall speak of Octavian on whose account this narrative was undertaken; how he came into power, and how, after he had taken his predecessor's place, he employed himself in deeds of peace and war.³²

Nicolaus' account is far more detailed and lengthy than anything by Cicero on the assassination. Sadly, his narrative of the events surrounding the murder of Caesar is not extant, having been preserved as an excerpt in the *Constantian Excerpts* commissioned in the tenth century. Nicolaus wrote his work several decades after the assassination. Composition dates have been suggested between 20 BC and 14 AD.

³² Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*, 19.

In summary, the evidence overall for Caesar's assassination is quite good by ancient standards. Barry Strauss, Professor of History and Classics at Cornell University, after outlining the main sources Cicero, Nicolaus of Damascus, Plutarch, Appian, and Cassio Dio in his book *The Death of Caesar* says, "By the standards of ancient history it's not a bad line up, but by modern measures it's thin gruel."³³ Indeed, historians must see these sources as at least good enough to reconstruct a history of the event. Though they may be less certain about the details, there seems to be little doubt concerning the core event of a senatorial plot which resulted in the murder of Caesar. Ultimately, by ancient standards, it must be good evidence since it so well attested to by both contemporaries and later writers. If it is not good, then very little history from the ancient world can be said to be supported by good evidence.

The Second Premise

The first premise ought to be relatively uncontroversial for anyone without an ax to grind. The argument will undoubtedly hinge on the second premise, however. By this point those who are familiar with the evidence for the Resurrection may have recognized that we have more surviving evidence for the Resurrection within one hundred

³³ Barry Strauss, *The Death of Caesar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 71.

years than we do for the assassination. In support of the second premise one could point to Paul's letters, Peter's first letter, and the four Gospels. On the traditional view there would be two surviving eyewitness accounts in the Gospels of John and Matthew and one affirmation from an eyewitness source in 1 Peter (1:21). Moreover, on the traditional view the Gospels of Mark and Luke include material taken directly from eyewitness sources, all having been produced within sixty to sixty-five years of the event.

One could further point to extrabiblical sources such as Clement of Rome (c. 35 AD-99 AD),³⁴ Polycarp (65 AD-155 AD),³⁵ and Ignatius (died 108/140 AD).³⁶ All these sources affirm the Resurrection within about one hundred years; and each, the evidence suggests, had connections to the disciples. Irenaeus says Clement had seen and conversed with apostles.³⁷ Tertullian says Clement was ordained by Peter.³⁸ Irenaeus says that in his youth he had met Polycarp, who had conversed not only with apostles but also many who had seen Christ.³⁹ Tertullian says John had placed Polycarp in the church at Smyrna.⁴⁰ Ignatius

³⁴ 1 Clement 24, 42.

³⁵ *Letter to the Philippians* 1, 2.

³⁶ *Letter to the Romans* 4; *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 1, 3.

³⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.3.

³⁸ Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 32.

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4.

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 32.

was a disciple of the apostle John.⁴¹

That would be at least nine surviving sources, three of which are eyewitness accounts, affirming the Resurrection – compared to four or maybe five, one of which might be an eyewitness account, for the assassination – within roughly one hundred years of each respective event. It seems the second premise is easily established on the traditional view of the evidence.

Even if one does not accept the traditional view of the authorship of the Gospels, there is still the evidence from writers such as Papias and Irenaeus suggesting that the disciples Matthew and John wrote *something* concerning the life of Jesus.⁴² This evidence would be roughly analogous to Plutarch's assertion, for example, that the contemporary Empylus wrote *something* about Caesar's death. One cannot point to the latter as a contemporary who wrote about the assassination and hand waive the former as contemporaries who wrote about the Resurrection without employing a blatant double standard.

To further demonstrate the evidence for the Resurrection is as good *Table 1* summarizes the breakdown of evidence granting the traditional authorship and literary in-

⁴¹ Ignatius states it; Eusebius implies it – *Church History*, 3.22-3.23.1.

⁴² Papias says Matthew “Wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language,” recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.16. Irenaeus says John “Did himself publish during his residence at Ephesus in Asia” – *Against Heresies* 3.1.1. – *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

dependence of all the surviving sources for the assassination. It further grants many of the positions critical scholars hold regarding the evidence for the Resurrection, such as: that the Gospels are anonymous, that they are written by non-contemporaries somewhere between 70 and 100 AD, and that Luke and Matthew are not independent.

| Table 1 | Assassination | Resurrection |
|---|---|--|
| <i>1. Eyewitness sources</i> | Possibly 1 – Cicero | None |
| <i>2. Contemporary sources</i> | 2 – Cicero, Nicolaus | 1 – Paul |
| <i>3. Surviving sources within 100 years</i> | 4 – Cicero, Nicolaus, Maximus, Paterculus | At least 9 – Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, 1 Peter, 1 Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp |
| <i>4. Independent surviving sources within 60 years</i> | 2 – Cicero, Nicolaus | 3 – Paul, Mark, John |

It should be noted that even granting critical arguments disputing Pauline authorship of some of the letters attributed to him gives at least one more source attesting to the Resurrection within one hundred years⁴³ – albeit an

⁴³ E.g. Ephesians 1:20.

anonymous, or rather a pseudonymous, source. A similar argument could be made for the Book of Revelation if one does not accept the traditional view that it was authored by the same author as the Gospel of John.⁴⁴

Thus, even when many of the critical arguments against the evidence for the Resurrection are granted, the evidence still seems to fare very well when compared to the assassination. In some measures, the Resurrection would fall short, such as on the number of contemporary accounts. In other measures, the evidence for the Resurrection is clearly better, such as the number of surviving accounts within the first sixty or one hundred years.

Another approach to establishing the second premise is to demonstrate that the evidence for the assassination is just as bad, that it suffers many of the same problems as the Resurrection evidence. In short, we may ask, “How does the evidence for the assassination fare when we apply many of the same critical arguments and hyper-skeptical reasoning to it that are levied against the evidence for the Resurrection?” What happens, for instance, when we do not simply assume the traditional attribution of authorship for the assassination sources?

On the topic of authorship of the sources affirming the assassination it seems to beg the question to simply assume these works were in fact written by the authors to whom they are attributed. We might discover the external

⁴⁴ See Revelation 1:5.

evidence for the Gospels, for example, is likewise just as good as, or better than, that for Roman sources. Perhaps one might point to internal clues that are consistent with the attribution to a particular author, allowing us to cobble together an argument that suggests that Cicero was, for example, the author of *On Divination*. This methodology, of course, is perfectly acceptable. But such arguments do not advance the case for the assassination much beyond the Resurrection, as similar kinds of internal arguments can be made which are consistent with the traditional authorship of the Gospels. It could be further added that, formally, much of the evidence is anonymous if the criterion for anonymity is that there is no claim to authorship in the text - the criterion critics levy against the Gospels rendering them anonymous.⁴⁵

Unless one counts titles or greetings as claims to authorship, Cicero's letters are, strictly speaking, anonymous if the criterion for establishing authorship is an explicit claim in the text. So, too, are his *Philippics* and *On Divination* by this standard. But if we count titles as claims to authorship that should also be sufficient to establish the Gospels' authorship, as the manuscript evidence is unanimous in attributing authorship to the traditional authors. In contrast to Cicero's letters, the letters traditionally attributed to Paul make explicit claims to Pauline author-

⁴⁵ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, p. 49; see also Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 235.

ship. Granted a number of these are disputed by many scholars but there are at least seven which are generally accepted as genuine.⁴⁶

Paul vs. Cicero

As a contemporary letter writer, Paul serves to be roughly analogous to Cicero. Similar to Cicero's close proximity to Caesar's conspirators, Paul was likewise close to the events in Jerusalem and the disciples of Jesus. Moreover, both would constitute at least neutral testimony if not enemy attestation to the respective events. Although Cicero admired Caesar, he was a political enemy siding with Pompey against Caesar in the civil wars. Although Paul writes as a converted Christian, he had by his own admission formerly persecuted the church. In this respect both Cicero and Paul are very strong sources. Neutral or enemy contemporary attestation is very good evidence by ancient standards.

Although Paul claims to be an eyewitness to the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor. 15:8) it is not necessary, for the purpose of establishing the second premise, to argue he was. Paul tells us that three years after his conversion, he went to Jerusalem and spent two weeks with Peter, also meeting James, the Lord's brother, while there (Gal. 1:18-19). On a later visit to Jerusalem Paul met James, Peter, and John

⁴⁶ Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 1&2 Corinthians, Romans, Philip-
pians, Philemon.

(Gal. 2:9). Certainly the topic of the life of Jesus and his Resurrection would have come up on these visits. It would be odd, to say the least, if it had not. Perhaps these visits are where Paul received some of the traditions he passed on.⁴⁷ That brings us to one of the more noteworthy mentions of the Resurrection by Paul found in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

Here Paul relays the basic outline of death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Christ which

⁴⁷ E.g. the last supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23 and a passage that many scholars think is an early creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

we see fleshed out in more detail in the Gospel accounts. Of course the Resurrection is mentioned or alluded to throughout Paul's undisputed letters, with the exception of Philemon.⁴⁸ And because Paul was writing letters to audiences who would have been familiar with the Resurrection, we see in Paul's letters, like in Cicero's, a lack of explicit details.

It might be argued that Cicero is better evidence than Paul because Cicero may have been an eyewitness. Though it's not unreasonable to infer that Cicero was an eyewitness to the assassination it is worth noting that, as has been mentioned earlier, there would have been around two hundred senators – of a possible nine hundred – present to witness the murder.⁴⁹ This gives a prior probability of around .22 (twenty two percent) that Cicero was present. Without some rather weighty evidence, such as an explicit claim by Cicero to be an eyewitness or a contemporary making the claim of him, the laws of probability suggest he was not present to witness Caesar's demise. Moreover, Cicero seems eager to distance himself from the accusation that he was involved in the conspiracy in his second *Philippic* when he asked, “For who ever heard my name mentioned as an accomplice in that most glorious action?”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Galatians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 4:14; 1 Corinthians 15:4, 12-17, 20; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Romans 1:4, 4:24, 6:9, 7:4; Philippians 3:10.

⁴⁹ Barry Straus, *The Death of Caesar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 128.

⁵⁰ Cicero, 2 *Philippics*, 11.25.

Perhaps Cicero is admitting he was not present when, in a letter to Cassius, he says, “I could wish that you had invited me to the banquet of the Ides of March: there would have been nothing left over!”⁵¹ Lastly, Cicero makes what seems to be at least two factual errors one might not expect from an eyewitness; either that or later writers were incorrect. For instance, Cicero claims Caesar was slain in the presence of many of his own centurions. But Appian says, “There had been no military guard around Caesar, for he did not like guards.”⁵² Cassius Dio confirms this when he says that Caesar “no longer had any guard.”⁵³ Cicero further asserts that not even a slave would approach Caesar's dead body. But both Nicolaus⁵⁴ and Appian⁵⁵ explicitly say three slaves placed Caesar's body on a litter. Cicero's strength, then, as historical evidence rests in his close proximity to the conspirators, some of whom, such as Brutus and Cassius, he had corresponded with after the assassination.

One final note regarding Paul's comparison to Cicero: it could be argued that Cicero is a better source than Paul because Cicero's accounts are written much earlier. Cicero wrote his accounts within a few months, if not weeks or days; whereas our earliest letters from Paul attesting to the

⁵¹ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 12.4.

⁵² Appian, *Civil Wars*, 2.118.

⁵³ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 44.15; also see 44.7.

⁵⁴ Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*, 26.

⁵⁵ Appian, *Civil Wars*, 2.118.

Resurrection were probably written around 50 AD – somewhere between roughly fifteen and seventeen years after assuming Jesus died around 33 AD.⁵⁶ This seems to be splitting hairs, however. The strength of a contemporary source is not the specific time in which they wrote but the fact that they lived during the time of the event being reported. At any rate, the argument cuts both ways. The same reasoning then implies that Paul is a better source than Nicolaus of Damascus, since Paul wrote much closer to the event than Nicolaus: Paul within fifteen to seventeen years, Nicolaus not until several decades later.

The Gospel of John vs. Nicolaus of Damascus

We could compare any one of the four Gospel accounts against Nicolaus's *Life of Augustus* but for the sake of the argument the Gospel of John will be used. The composition of the Gospel of John has been placed around 90-95 AD by most scholars.⁵⁷ Unlike Nicolaus' account the Gospel of John internally claims to be an eyewitness account (John 1:14; 19:35; 21:24). The early external sources suggesting the author was none other than John the son of Zebedee, the disciple of Jesus are plentiful and virtually

⁵⁶ Galatians is generally regarded as the earliest, dated to around 48 AD, and 1 Thessalonians the second earliest at around 50 AD.

⁵⁷ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, p. 40. See also Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1989), 123.

unanimous.⁵⁸ It is worth mentioning that Nicolaus' *Life of Augustus* is formally anonymous in the same way as John's Gospel. Nowhere in the body of text itself does Nicolaus explicitly claim authorship. One wonders how such a document came to be attributed to Nicolaus so many centuries later.

Working for Augustus would have given Nicolaus motive to be biased against the assassins. Nicolaus' seems to appeal to hearsay as he reports that his source of information on at least three occasions was "they say,"⁵⁹ two occasions "some said,"⁶⁰ and once "others said."⁶¹ Moreover Nicolaus' account places the mythological figure Romulus in an historical context.⁶² His account is also replete with references to omens and the gods.⁶³

It could be argued that John is not independent because he may have been familiar with the synoptic Gospels. The arguments are beyond the scope of this paper but

⁵⁸ Sources that attribute authorship to John are the Anti-Marcionite Prologues; Muratorian fragment; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus* 2.22; Clement of Alexandria, as recorded by Eusebius, *Church History* 6.14.5-7; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.2, 4.5; Origen, as recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.25.4-7.

⁵⁹ Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*, 19, 25, 26.

⁶⁰ Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*, 20, 25.

⁶¹ Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus*, 20.

⁶² Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus* 19.

⁶³ Nicolaus of Damascus, *Life of Augustus* 23, 24, 28.

suffice to say this not a majority position among scholars: While noting that “a number of scholars” have argued for John’s familiarity with the Synoptics, Carson and Moo state nonetheless that “the majority of contemporary scholars side with the magisterial work of Dodd, who argues that there is no good evidence for any literary dependence of John on any of the synoptic Gospels.”⁶⁴

Even the critical scholar Bart Ehrman agrees that John is independent. Also Ehrman nicely summarizes the general reasoning for establishing literary dependence and independence:

One perennial question is whether John had access to and made use of the Synoptic Gospels... I will simply indicate why many scholars continue to be persuaded that he did not utilize the Synoptics. As we have seen, the principal grounds for assuming that one document served as the source for another is their wide-ranging similarities; when they tell the same stories and so in the same way they must be literarily related to one another. Thus Matthew, Mark, and Luke must have sources in common because they agree with one another on a number of occasions, often word for word. This is not the case for the fourth Gospel. Most of John's stories outside of the Passion narrative are

⁶⁴ D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An introduction To The New Testament*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), p. 259.

found only in John, whereas most of the stories in the Synoptics are not found in John. If this author had used the Synoptics as sources, why would he have omitted so many of their stories? Or “to put the burden of proof in its proper place” why should someone think that John used the Synoptics as sources when they do not have extensive verbatim agreements, even in the stories that they happen to share?⁶⁵

This reasoning will be relevant later in the discussion regarding the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and their independent resurrection accounts.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke vs. Plutarch and Suetonius

For the purposes of this argument it is not necessary to expand upon Appian's or Cassius Dio's accounts even though they may have drawn upon early material. They are both simply too late, falling well beyond the one hundred year mark. If we are to allow works this late, it likewise opens a floodgate to evidence for the Resurrection, not only from writers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp but also Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD), Irenaeus (c. 130-202 AD), Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD), and Origen (c. 185 - 253 AD). That's not to mention second century apocryphal works such as the Gospel of Peter.⁶⁶ In

⁶⁵ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, p. 142.

⁶⁶ The *Gospel of Peter* provides a resurrection narrative, 35-42.

fact, if we allow as evidence for the assassination works as late as Cassius Dio, who wrote nearly three hundred years later, there seems to be no reason to not allow the writings of church historian, Eusebius (c. 260/265-339 AD), as evidence for the Resurrection. Eusebius, like Plutarch and Suetonius, drew upon earlier works as well.

Moreover, Plutarch and Suetonius wrote well past the timeline of even the latest Gospel. Many scholars place John around 90-95 AD, which puts all four Gospels no later than roughly sixty to sixty-five years after the Resurrection, well inside the one hundred year mark. By comparison Plutarch and Suetonius are well over one hundred fifty years after the assassination.

It may be counterargued that although Plutarch and Suetonius are later than the Gospels, they are still better because they drew on earlier material and named their sources in their respective biographies. For example, Plutarch referenced the contemporary of Caesar Asinius Pollio at least once⁶⁷ and Suetonius referenced him at least three times.⁶⁸ It is perhaps suggestive, however, that in three lengthy letters from Asinius Pollio to Cicero, Pollio says nothing at all about the assassination.⁶⁹ We have to trust that if Plutarch and Suetonius did have Pollio's work to reference, it really was Pollio's work and it really did give an account of the assassination. One wonders how

⁶⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 46.2.

⁶⁸ Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*, 30.4, 55.4, 56.4.

⁶⁹ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 10.31; 10.33; 10.32.

they would know it was Pollio's work, when by Plutarch and Suetonius's time there was dispute over the authorship of some works from that era. For example, of some works attributed to Caesar, Suetonius says, "for the author of the Alexandrian, African, and Spanish Wars is unknown; some think it was Oppius, others Hirtius."⁷⁰ Thus the assumption that the works Plutarch and Suetonius used were correctly attributed by their time, whereas the Gospels circulated anonymously having titles arbitrarily added many decades later, seems somewhat dubious (if not a question begging fallacy). Moreover, we must keep in mind that Plutarch and Suetonius are roughly analogous to Irenaeus, for example, in terms of temporal proximity. Since we also have evidence that Irenaeus was connected to the disciples there seems little reason to not see Irenaeus as just as good evidence as Plutarch and Suetonius when he draws on source material from the Gospels.⁷¹

But the point on sources is moot in regards to Plutarch and Suetonius anyway. In the middle of the assassination narrative when making the point that Caesar defended himself, Plutarch says simply, "it is said by some writers."⁷² In his other assassination narrative found in *Brutus* he says, "Cassius is said to have."⁷³ Suetonius like-

⁷⁰ Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*, 56.1.

⁷¹ e.g. Irenaeus draws on the Gospel of John attributing it to John, *Against Heresies*, 3:11; 4:7.1.

⁷² Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 66.12.

⁷³ Plutarch, *Life of Brutus*, 17.

wise says in the middle of his assassination narrative, “though some have written.”⁷⁴ Both Plutarch and Suetonius fail to explicitly name the sources for their assassination narratives. We simply do not know if they are drawing on contemporary sources or second-hand hearsay written decades later.

By comparison we have numerous external sources that all affirm Mark was a companion of Peter and that his Gospel was based on, at least in part, Peter's preaching.⁷⁵ The opening of the Gospel of Luke explicitly reveals his sources to be handed down from eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-3). Additionally, it is generally accepted among scholars that the book of Acts is a second volume from the same author of the Gospel of Luke.⁷⁶ The “we” passages of Acts suggest the author was a travel companion of Paul (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). Further, the author of Acts places himself in the presence of James and the elders in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18). There is ample external evidence that the Gospel of Matthew was based on eyewitness testimony. For instance, Irenaeus, who personally

⁷⁴ Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*, 82.2.

⁷⁵ Papias, as recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.15; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1; Clement of Alexandria, as recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 2.15.1, 6.14.5-7; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.5; Origen, as recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.25.4-7.

⁷⁶ Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament*, p. 115; Carson & Moo, p. 202.

knew Polycarp (who in turn knew the apostles including John) wrote:

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.⁷⁷

So we have an unbroken line coming down to us from around one hundred years after the last Gospel was probably written. It's not clear that we can say the same for the later assassination sources.

If we are willing to accept that Plutarch and Suetonius used contemporary sources such as Asinius Pollio, there seems to be no reason we cannot accept Peter's preaching as recorded in the book of Acts. As mentioned, the author of Acts implies he was a companion of Paul, who in turn knew Peter. This gives the Resurrection eyewitness testimony from Peter. Consider Peter's preaching in Acts:

⁷⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know – this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death (Acts 2:22-24).

And again:

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses (Acts 3:13-15).

As noted above, Ehrman has argued that Matthew and Luke are not independent, as they either borrow from Mark or from a common source used by Mark. But the argument fails in relation to the resurrection narratives since both Matthew and Luke present differing accounts drawing from unique material. If Matthew and Luke are dependent on Mark at the points where they borrow from

him then they are independent when they present their own unique material on the Resurrection. Luke relays the unique stories of the appearance of Jesus to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-17),⁷⁸ Jesus appearing to the disciples (Luke 24:36-49), and Jesus' ascension (Luke 24: 50-53). Matthew's unique resurrection material encompasses the opening of the tombs of the saints (Matt. 27:52-53), the guarding of Jesus' tomb (Matt. 27:62-66), bribing the guard to lie that Jesus' body had been stolen (Matt. 28:11-15), and the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20). Indeed some critics argue that the resurrection accounts between Matthew and Luke are so unique they are contradictory.

If it's further argued that John and other writers are not independent because they may have had knowledge of previous writers, then it follows Plutarch is not independent of Cicero, Nicolaus, or Valerius Maximus, since he explicitly references all three authors' writings.⁷⁹ Further, Plutarch may have used Nicolaus' account. Plutarch adds the detail in *Life of Brutus* that Brutus was wounded on the hand in the attack on Caesar – a curious detail mentioned by Nicolaus but omitted by Suetonius, Appian, and Cassius Dio. Additionally, the detail that Casca called to his brother in Greek is mentioned by Nicolaus.⁸⁰ Plutarch

⁷⁸ Note that the possible parallel in Mark 16:12-13 does not appear in the earliest manuscripts.

⁷⁹ Plutarch, *Life of Brutus*, 53.5.

⁸⁰ Nicolaus, *Life of Augustus*, 24.

adds that Casca cried out to his brother in Greek, “Brother, help!”⁸¹ But the detail of Casca calling to his brother is again absent in the accounts by Suetonius, Appian, and Cassius Dio. For some reason Plutarch disagrees with Nicolaus on the number of stab wounds. Perhaps Plutarch took his information from Valerius Maximus, who said Caesar was stabbed twenty-three times.⁸² Thus, by this reasoning, Plutarch cannot be said to be independent of Cicero, Nicolaus, or Valerius Maximus.

As for Suetonius’ independence, he doesn’t fare much better than Plutarch on the premise that familiarity entails dependence. In his *Life of Caesar*, Suetonius quotes from or mentions Cicero’s letters and writings no less than seven times.⁸³ Granted, while Suetonius refers to other earlier sources such as Asinius Pollio and Hirtius, he is still rendered dependent on Cicero by this reasoning. Thus no source that shows familiarity with an earlier source can be said to be independent of it, thereby making virtually every source dependent. In the end, with this kind of reasoning we may say there are only two independent sources for the assassination, Cicero and Nicolaus of Damascus. And even Nicolaus may not be independent if he was aware of Cicero’s letters. Everything would hinge on Cicero.

On the issue of conflicting sources, it should be noted that the assassination narratives are in wide disagreement.

⁸¹ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 66.8. See also *Life of Brutus*, 17.5.

⁸² Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, book 4:5.6.

⁸³ Suetonius, *Life of Caesar*, 9.2, 30.5, 42.3, 49.3, 55.1, 56.1, 56.6.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION

Once again if one were to read, for example, the accounts of Nicolaus, Plutarch and Suetonius side by side it would become self-evident that there are numerous discrepancies in the details. In some cases they are outright contradictory. *Table 2* provides a sampling of the numerous discrepancies in these accounts.

| Table 2 | Nicolaus | Plutarch | Suetonius |
|--|--------------------------------|---|--|
| How many senators were involved? | < 80 | No mention | < 60 |
| What did Caesar say when Casca grabbed his toga? | No mention | No mention | "Why, this is violence!" |
| Did Caesar speak at the first blow? | No mention | Yes: "Accursed Casca, what does thou?" | No: "he uttered not a word...at the first stroke" |
| How many times was Caesar stabbed? | 35 | 23 | 23 |
| What did Caesar say to Brutus? | No mention | No mention | "You too, my child?" |
| Was Caesar able to stand and defend himself? | Yes | Yes | No |
| Where did Caesar finally die? | At the foot of Pompey's statue | At the foot of Pompey's statue | In his seat |

The issue of discrepancies is brought forward to demonstrate that this is not unique to the Gospel accounts. Discrepancies may present a challenge to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. But as the basis of an argument against the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts they carry little weight. If these sorts of arguments did carry much weight, historians would scarcely be able to do history at all, since so many ancient accounts conflict with one another on secondary details.

Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp vs. Paterculus and Maximus

None of these authors are likely to significantly tip the scale in either direction. Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp all mention the Resurrection within one hundred years. All have external evidence connecting them directly to apostles. None of them are contemporaries although they are near to it. They do not shed much light on the events that can't be found in other more detailed narratives. They serve as additional affirmations of the events.

In summary, there are about four surviving sources that either briefly mention the assassination or narrate the events which were produced probably within roughly one hundred years. Those sources are Cicero, Nicolaus of Damascus, Valerius Maximus, and Velleius Paterculus. It is interesting for comparative purposes to note that if we were to restrict the evidence for the assassination to extant sources within roughly sixty years of the event, the rough

time frame of the last Gospel, we would be left with one, Cicero – perhaps two depending how one dates Valerius Maximus. Characterizing the main sources of evidence for the assassination, Barry Strauss says it is “...based almost entirely on secondhand accounts and most of it is late.” Strauss further notes that, “None of it is impartial...,” and that while the five main accounts “are in basic agreement” about the assassination they “disagree about certain important details.”⁸⁴

Although the argument has mainly focused on documentary evidence thus far, as it’s documentary evidence which is typically explicit, a word should be said about archaeological evidence. Surely there are artefacts such as coins which one could point to as circumstantial evidence supporting the inference of Caesar’s assassination. For example, Marcus Brutus minted a coin soon after the assassination of Caesar. It carries the inscription *Eid Mar* along with two daggers and the liberty cap, a symbol of freedom. But one could object that the Ides of March had previous religious significance among Romans, so a coin bearing a reference to it could have multiple meanings. It’s because of the documentary evidence one can quite confidently infer that these coins, for example, referenced the assassination. One must further consider the implication of placing too much weight on archaeological evidence. If such

⁸⁴ Barry Strauss, *The Death of Caesar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 71.

discoveries as coins are what sets the evidence for the assassination apart as good, that seems to have problematic implications for the plethora of historical events which have no archaeological support whatsoever.

As for archaeological evidence for the Resurrection: it's difficult to imagine what kind of artefacts one might even expect for the resurrection of a first century Jew – certainly not coins minted by the Romans. Perhaps one could point to the so-called Nazareth Inscription as evidence of the Roman reaction to the claim of an empty tomb,⁸⁵ thereby supporting the resurrection accounts found in the Gospels.

The Conclusion

My argument to this point has attempted to establish that the evidence for the assassination is good and that the evidence for the Resurrection is as good as the evidence for

⁸⁵ A 2020 study found that the marble for the inscription originated on the island of Kos – Kyle Harper, et al, “Establishing the provenance of the Nazareth Inscription: Using stable isotopes to resolve a historic controversy and trace ancient marble production,” *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, Vol. 30, April 2020. URL=<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2020.102228>. Establishing the provenance of the marble does not *ipso facto* refute the interpretation that this inscription is in some way linked to Jesus' resurrection. It should come as no surprise the marble was not from the region, as the study itself concedes marble in Palestine would have been imported due to lack of local sources.

the assassination. It seems that regardless of whether we look at the evidence for the Resurrection through the lens of the traditional view, the critical view, or the view that the evidence for the assassination suffers many of the same problems, the first two premises seem to be established. Thus the conclusion follows, that the historical evidence supporting the Resurrection of Jesus is good.

What if the second premise can be shown false. though? What if the evidence for the Resurrection is not as good as the evidence for the assassination? What if, for example, it can be shown there are more eyewitness accounts for the assassination or more mentions of the event from earlier reliable sources? In such a case one may be forced to concede that broadly the evidence for the assassination is indeed better. Of course in the event of such a scenario the argument would not be, strictly speaking, sound.

But the utility of framing the argument this way is that it does not need to be sound in order to be effective at demonstrating that the evidence for the Resurrection is still quite good by comparison, that many of the arguments levied against the Resurrection evidence are unreasonably skeptical – since they have a devastating impact on the rest of ancient history. The evidence is still quite good by comparison even if it is not as good as that for the assassination. It would not reflect poorly on the evidence for the Resurrection if it did not quite measure up to one of the most well known and pivotal events in Roman history. We probably should not even expect it to. In short,

the evidence for the Resurrection need not be as good as the evidence for the assassination. The fact that it may just be, is a testimony to how remarkable and impactful the life of Jesus was on his followers.

In the end the evidence for the Resurrection is good by ancient standards. When one considers that Jesus was a Jew who died a humiliating death at the hands of the Romans in the backwater Roman region of Judea, it is remarkable we have the quantity and quality of evidence that has come down to us. We might dare go so far as to say the evidence is extraordinary.

3. Revelation Outside the Bible: An Evaluation of Presumed Extrabiblical Revelation

Dr. Johnson C. Philip, M.Sc., Ph.D.

& Dr. Saneesh Cherian, M.Div., Ph.D.¹

MANY INDIAN CHRISTIANS and Indophile non-Indian Christians have been claiming that there is Holy Spirit inspired divine revelation in all religious books. They lay a great emphasis on identifying the Hindu god Prajapati (actually the god Brahma of the Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh triad) with Christ. They offer countless quotations from the Hindu scriptures to support their claims. This has created much curiosity as well as confusion on the subject. This article is the first of what is expected to be a long series of proposed papers to examine these claims. The present article gives a historical overview coupled with a bib-

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lical background of the subject. The actual claims made by the proponents will be the subject of future examination.

History

Many German Indophiles started suggesting in the 1700's and 1800's that non-Christian religious books might contain Holy Spirit inspired revelation². This suggestion did not become popular at that time due to the influence of Evangelical Christians worldwide.

In the 1960's the idea was revived via one Indian publishing house and several popular speakers and writers. The tract whose main idea they promoted was published in the 1950's by GLS in India³. The first person in modern times to take this idea widely to Christian pulpits was Paul Sudhakar Menon⁴. He traveled widely in India and abroad to popularize his Christian-Hindu Theory.

The seeds sown this way bore fruit when Dr. Joseph Padinjarekara, an Indian, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation in

² Krishna Mohan Banerjea, *Arian Witness: The Testimony of Arian Scriptures in Corroboration of Biblical History and the Rudiments.*, Calcutta, India: 1875.

³ Sarma Kesava Mandapaka, "Sacrifice," Mumbai, India: Gospel Literature Service, ca. 1950.

⁴ Paul Menon Sudhakar, *Seeking God, Seeking Moksha: The Teachings of Shri Krishna and Jesus Christ*, UK: Pippa Rann Books & Media, 2021.

Canada on this topic⁵. Padinjarekara's mission distributed countless copies of this group in India. He also distributed them widely in the west among Indians. This, plus the works of the earlier writers and speakers gave rise to an aggressive movement that proclaimed boldly that the Hindu god Prajapathi is indeed Christ. These include Aravindaksha Menon and Dr. Koshy Abraham⁶.

Koshy Abraham then put together a group of sympathetic people from various churches and formed what was known (now defunct) as Christava Vedanta Vedi (Platform to Unify Christianity with Hindu Vedanta). The claims of this movement were based upon misquotations and misinterpretations of the Hindu Scriptures. Finally, the Hindus had to formally condemn the misinterpretation of their literature⁷. Meanwhile others became so bold that they started proclaiming that Hinduism is an offshoot of the

⁵ Joseph Padinjarekara, *Christ in Ancient Vedas (An Exciting, Surprising and Edifying Discovery From The Ancient Vedas, The Sacred Books Of The Hindus, Written Between The Period 2000 and 1200 BC)*. Published in India/ Canada in 1991 by India Mukta Mission/ Welch Publishing.

⁶ Menon Aravindaksha, *Divine Harmony* (India: Divine Printers and Publishers); and Dr. Koshy Abraham, *Prajapathi the Cosmic Christ*, India: ISPCK, 1997. Dr. Abraham authored a total of sixty-five self-published books and booklets on this subject, and almost all of them are in the Malayalam language.

⁷ Dr. Krishna Rao, *Hindu Vishawa*, 9, Issue 3, Ernakulam, India, 1996. This work is in the Malayalam language, the language in which the majority writings were propagated by Christians.

Christian faith⁸. They totally ignored the fact that Hinduism predates the Christian faith by a minimum of one millennium.

Response from the Christian Community

This whole concept of divine revelation in Hindu Vedas revolved around a Hindu god known as Prajapati. The Prajapati-Christ theory received a warm welcome from the already compromised Indian Christians⁹. However, as the teaching spread, the Prajapati proponents started proposing unheard of doctrines in the name of the Bible. For example, their most prominent spokesman propounded that men are not born with a sin nature, and that the unregenerate man is essentially righteous.

Once such deviation from the Scripture was exposed by Prajapati-Christ proponents, when the Christian community in India was alerted to the fact that this movement is basically a cult, camouflaged as an evangelical Christian movement. A U.S.-based Indian pastor was the first to sound the alarm.¹⁰ In India many Christians

⁸ Prof. M.M. Ninan, *Emergence of Hinduism from Christianity*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 2018.

⁹ “Jesus as Fulfiller and Christ as Prajapati- Introduction to Christian Theologies in India (ICTI),” *Christology in Indian Traditional Approach*, 2019. URL= <https://instagos.blogspot.com/2019/03/jesus-as-fulfiller-and-christ-as.html>.

¹⁰ Pastor A. M. Mathew, “Jesus is not a Hindu God,” n.d. URL= <http://home.ica.net/~bicq/wrpf/Jesus-is-not-a-hindu-god.htm>.

came out with substantial publications to address the issue. Noticeable among them are Pastor TS Balan¹¹ and Johnson C. Philip.¹² Others who opposed this doctrine include Dr. Anand Choudhari, Dr. Robert Reid, Dr. Saneesh Cherian, and others.

The debate between the advocates and opponents came to an end with the publication of a massive 470-page thesis by Johnson C. Philip.¹³ This publication went into every aspect of their doctrine, and revealed that their theology is totally pagan and not Christian.

With that the revelation outside the Bible movement seems to have come to a halt, but the idea has not died completely. It seems that there is some kind of joy in many Christian hearts when discussing possible common links with the Bible and non-Christian religious books.

A Bible-Based Analysis of the Issue

Since divine revelation or Holy Spirit-inspired Scriptures is a doctrinal subject, the ultimate proclamation on this subject should come from the Scripture itself. With that in mind, we need to examine a few key passages. These include Psalms 147:19, 20; Romans 3:1,2; Hebrews 1:1;

¹¹ T. S. Balan, *Prajapathi is Not Christ*, Self-published in the Malayalam language, 1996.

¹² Dr. Johnson C. Philip, "The Prajapati Christ Is Here" (Eight Articles), *Suvishesbadhwani Weekly*, India: 1995.

¹³ Dr. Johnson C. Philip, *Kristhuvum Prajapathiyum*, India: Sathyam Publications, 1999.

Deuteronomy 4:7,8; Romans 9:4; Ezekiel 20:11-12. Of these the first two give the most detailed introduction to this subject.

Psalms 147:19, 20: “He sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the Lord.”

These two verses clearly set the sociological and geographical boundaries of Holy Spirit inspired revelation. This includes:

- *Recipients:* Jacob and Israel (only Jews)
- *Other nations:* He hath not dealt so with any nation (non-Jews were not given Holy Spirit-inspired revelation)
- *Exclusion:* “They have not known them” (non-Jews have not obtained the Scripture even via hearsay)

Obviously, divine revelation is restricted sociologically to the Jews and Jews alone. People outside the Jewish nation were not given this revelation. What is more, their Scriptures or oral communication do not contain divine revelation. They have not known them.

This is why the Assyrians needed Jonah, a Jew, to personally visit and declare the divine message to them. It is always Jews who carry God’s word to the Gentiles. This verse sets the boundaries clearly: Holy Spirit-inspired revelation was given in Old Testament times only to Jews, and

the gentiles had no clue about it unless a Jew went and declared this message to them.

Romans 3:1, 2 “What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.”

The following can be gleaned straightaway without the need for any complex analysis:

- *Recipients*: the Jew, of circumcision (this passage is speaking strictly about Jews of the Old Testament, and Jews alone)
- *Boundaries*: unto them were committed the oracles of God (the Scripture was not committed to non-Jews in the Old Testament period)

Hebrews 1:1: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets...”

- *Time Frame*: Spake in time past (this verse is talking about revelation during the Old Testament period)
- *Agency of Communication*: By the prophets (divine revelation came only through people who were prophets, that is, only Jews)
- *Recipients of Communication*: the fathers (Holy Spirit-inspired revelation was given only to the Jewish leaders, not to gentiles. The Jewish leaders then

made the oral and written communication to the people)

A summary of the straightforward deductions listed above makes the following very clear:

- God used only Jewish Prophets for communicating His word
- These Jewish prophets give the Holy Spirit-inspired Scriptures only to the Jewish nation
- People of other nations were not given the divine revelation, and they could not understand it
- Therefore, non-Christian religious books do not contain even a copy of the divine revelation that was available to the Jews
- During the Old Testament times the gospel was preached by the Jewish prophets, and this was the only way the non-Jews heard the gospel, the history of Jonah being an example

Conclusion

The concept of revelation outside the Bible appears very attractive. It helps one to minimize divisions and boundaries, and avoid the stigma of being exclusive.¹⁴ Inclusivism,

¹⁴ Gnana Robinson, "Dialogue with People of Other Faiths and the Question of the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, Vol. 16, January 2006.

universalism, and pluralism are all the rage these days. Thus, any philosophy that minimizes differences tends to be welcome. Revelation outside the Bible is a philosophy like this.

Our historical analysis, focused on presumed extrabiblical revelation promoted in India, demonstrates that this philosophy stands upon totally faulty grounds. It uses arbitrary and inconsistent hermeneutics to arrive at unsound conclusions. On the other hand, the Scripture negates the idea of revelation outside the Bible. We hope to explore other aspects of this philosophy in future papers.

4. The Problem of Prayer: Does John 14:14 Require God to Answer?

Bill Kesatie, J.D.¹

*We owe it to our children and our teachers to keep them safe
in schools. Prayers won't do this: action will.*

~ Kim Kardashian

*I was watching the news that day when the bulletin came
on that my father had been shot. I prayed. I asked God,*

“Please don't let my daddy die.”

~ Yolanda King

FOLLOWING THE PARKLAND school shooting in February 2018, many concerned people, including some of the leaders in the United States, expressed their deep sadness over the death of so many children by sending their “thoughts and prayers.” But to many others, these phrases were merely an excuse for inaction. Kim Kardashian was

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not the only one to state what seemed obvious: prayers don't work. We need to do something to stop the killings.

Yolanda King was only twelve years old when she learned that her father, Martin Luther King, Jr., had been shot in April 1968. Along with many others, she prayed to God that her beloved father wouldn't die. But, of course, MLK died that day, and so 12-year-old Yolanda's prayers seemingly went unanswered.

It is hard to imagine anything sadder than a child dying – whether it be from a madman's bullet or the slow, agonizing decay of cancer. In the words of Theoden from *Lord of the Rings*, “No parent should have to bury their child.” Likewise, a child hearing that her father had died suddenly and unnecessarily also strikes us as contrary to the way things ought to be. The way that such events violate our sense of “what should be” is evidence of the brokenness of our world. One would think that a loving, omnipotent God would have mercy on the parent or the innocent child and answer their prayers. But, in the case of the Parkland shooting and the death of MLK, prayers for help seemingly went unanswered.

God's seeming unwillingness to answer prayers – even prayers that we think a loving God would be happy to answer with a miracle – has led to a cultural backlash against the practice of prayer. While many Christians have responded to the pain and suffering by earnestly saying that they would pray for the families and an end to the violence or a cure for cancer, others dismiss these prayers and

demand action – not worthless prayers. Understandably, to those outside the Christian faith, prayer is a funny thing; laughable, really. These skeptics see prayer as the act of people who cannot deal with reality on their own instead of asking their sugar daddy in the sky to give them things and take care of their problems. The skeptic's proof that prayer is an empty gesture is the fact that prayer doesn't seem to work. People pray regularly for healing of an endless variety of health problems, financial issues and relationship issues, yet the illnesses remain or even progress, that new job doesn't come and the marriage ends in divorce. "Where's this God of yours?" they mock.

Even more heartbreaking is the Christian who begins to doubt her faith when an earnestly prayed prayer goes unanswered. Like the skeptic, they ask "What happened, God? Why don't you answer me? Don't you care?" However, that plea is not mocking, but the plea of the heartbroken. Who can blame the Christian struggling to maintain her faith in the thundering silence of a God who does not appear to answer?

A couple of initial points: first, when we speak about unanswered prayer, usually it is tied in with miracles. We usually don't pray about things that can happen on their own. I don't pray, for example, that the water will come to a boil when I turn up the heat on my teapot. I don't pray that my car makes it to the next gas station if I have a full tank. We notice that prayer is unanswered when we pray for something miraculous. We pray that the child with

cancer is healed. We pray that money will arrive out of nowhere. We pray for a gas station when we are out of gas and there isn't anything around. So, the problem of unanswered prayer is tied to the miracles.

Second, the problem of unanswered prayer is related to the problem of evil and suffering. Responding to those two issues is beyond the scope of this writing, and I refer the readers to other excellent resources such as C.S. Lewis' excellent treatment of the subject in his book, *The Problem of Pain*. However, unanswered prayers – especially when it seems like the prayer is one that a loving God would answer – presents its own problem. If God is both truly loving and omnipotent why doesn't he answer the prayers of a parent praying for his dying child or a sex slave who seeks release from her torment? A loving God should want these things, shouldn't He?

The problem is compounded by Bible verses that seem to suggest that God has guaranteed that if a Christian prays for something, God will hear it and answer the prayer. Exhibit A would be John 14:14 where Jesus says, "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it." (NASB) This appears to be an unqualified statement that Jesus will grant *anything* a Christian asks in His name. This isn't some "gab-it and grab-it" prosperity Gospel preacher saying this; these are the words of Jesus to his disciples in the upper room on the night of the Last Supper. He says, "ask Me for anything in My name" and the result is straightforward: "I will do it." And so there is no mistake he says it

twice – first in verse 13 and again in verse 14. He will do it if we ask in His name. Yet, prayers in the name of Jesus remain unanswered as if God doesn't hear or doesn't care. What is going on? Did Jesus lie? Was he mistaken?

So, why is it that God doesn't answer our prayers in light of His seemingly clear assertion in John 14:14? My purpose for writing is to contend that John 14:14 is not as literal as it seems, and therefore should not be so understood. I will show that the verse does not teach that God is obligated to answer every prayer made in the name of Jesus and that the early church did not understand it that way. Then, I will provide three additional reasons why some prayers may remain unanswered.

Understanding of John 14:14 in Context

Some people see John 14:14 as obligating God to respond to every prayer in much the same way they see a drive-thru window at a fast-food restaurant. You make your selection, pay your money (i.e. pray in the name of Jesus), then you drive up to pick up your order. Somewhere in the popular mind, this verse has made God a genie in a bottle. Rub the bottle and God is obligated to answer the wishes of his master. But such an approach to prayer puts us in the wrong place. When we go before God, we are not the master – God is. God does not want you to “have it your way,” but He wants us all to surrender ourselves to His will and have it *His way*. Petitionary prayer is still, at its base, asking

God for something, and God, as a being with thoughts (Isaiah 55:8) and desires (Psalm 51:6), still has the right to say no.

This idea that God would grant every whim brought before Him in prayer is not in line with the way that the earliest Christians lived. The Bible itself reveals that these early Christians had no expectation that God would grant each and every prayer made in Jesus' name. They had the example of Christ Himself, who asked God three times in prayer to take away the cup of crucifixion from him, but God did not do so (Matthew 26:36-44). They had the example of Paul having the "thorn" in his side, praying three times to have the thorn taken away, but God did not do so (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Certainly, as 1 Corinthians 15 twice alludes, there were Christians who had died ("fallen asleep") who, if they were like most of us, prayed that God would heal them (1 Corinthians 15:6, 18).

So, what about John 14:14? How should we interpret it? Greg Koukl, founder of the Christian apologetics organization *Stand to Reason*, pithily says, "Never read a Bible verse, always read a chapter." In this case, reading John 14:10-15 adds some subtlety to the otherwise clear statement of 14:14:

¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own, but the Father, as He remains in Me, does His works. ¹¹ Believe Me that I am in the Fa-

ther and the Father is in Me; *otherwise believe because of the works themselves.* ¹² Truly, truly I say to you, the one who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, *so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* ¹⁴ If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. ¹⁵ “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. (John 14:10-15, NASB; emphasis added.)

Note that these verses speak of the disciples performing works – effectively miraculous signs that have a purpose: to bring others to a knowledge of Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. So, when Jesus is speaking about doing whatever the person prays, it is in the context of doing God’s work – not asking for a bicycle or praying for financial security.

In verse eleven, Jesus asserts that the works that Jesus did testify to who He is. That is the central point that ties the verses together. Verse twelve adds that the disciples should be able to do even greater works, but for what purpose? It would be for the same purpose. And because Jesus is going to the Father, Jesus will assure that whatever is asked in His name “so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” will be done (verse 13). So, ultimately, John 14:14 says that when we pray for something which glorifies God, that’s when God will grant the request.

But what is it that glorifies God? Jesus showed in the Garden of Eden that even prayers that would have seemed to be a good thing at the time – Jesus not dying on the cross – are not answered if God has in mind a greater thing than brings Him glory. This is consistent with John’s later writing where he says,

¹⁴ This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, *if we ask anything according to His will*, He hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. (1 John 5:14-15, NASB; emphasis added.)

John addresses prayer and God’s willingness to grant what His followers seek, but such asking is not an open-ended asking for riches or a new car, but asking “according to His will.” And His will is spelled out throughout the Bible – that His people would come to know and love Him, to become more like Him, to grow closer to Him and through Him to receive eternal life.

The point is this: Jesus does not promise in verse fourteen to be a genie in a bottle, granting us whatever three wishes may be presented through rubbing the bottle of prayer. Rather, Jesus says that when you are asking for something that will glorify God, then there is nothing that God, who is all-powerful, will not grant.

What about Prayers in Line with the Will of God?

Perhaps, someone reading this is thinking, “While this all sounds good, doesn’t it seem apparent that asking for a miraculous healing of a dying son, daughter, father or mother would be something that would glorify God? After all, God is loving, and God is all-powerful. If so, He should grieve as much as we do over unnecessary death when he can step in to heal it. So, why isn’t that prayer answered?”

While there are books and sermons that have been written about the subject of unanswered prayer which have given various and detailed reasons why prayers are not answered despite Jesus’ words, again, this writing is of more limited scope. The reader is invited to review any number of excellent resources on why prayers remain unanswered such as Peter Krieg’s highly recommended book, *God on Mute: Engaging the Silence of Unanswered Prayer*. For present purposes, I will raise three separate reasons to think that requests in prayers that would seem to be consistent with the will of God may still not be granted.

Recognizing What We Don’t Know

The odd thing about many of our prayed requests is that they come to God from such a limited perspective. The stories of genies granting wishes are the very best example of what happens when we finite humans with our finite IQ’s try to decide for ourselves what is good for us. Almost always, the request of the genie goes too far, and results

in the person making the wish ending up in a worse position than before. As 1 Cor. 11:31 points out, if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under judgement, but also, we would pray smarter prayers.

Certainly, if God is loving, he will want to give us those things which are good. As Jesus says at the tail-end of the Parable of the Persistent Widow:

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13)

The problem is that we don't see the whole picture. When we see the dying child or dying parent, we mourn for our loss, but God's perspective is larger than ours.

Imagine a puzzle that is extremely large – perhaps when the puzzle is put together it would be the size of the state of Wyoming. Each person has a part in putting together the puzzle. None of us know what the puzzle will look like at the end, but we all have a few typically-sized puzzle pieces in our hands. We can look at those pieces and some will be dark and ugly while others will be colorful and pretty. The mix you get is not dependent on you; it is just what you have been handed. Based on the puzzle

pieces you have been given, you may try to figure out the puzzle.

A person handed a lot of dark, ugly pieces might conclude that the puzzle is some monstrosity. But that person needs to remember that they are seeing only part of the puzzle, and the gray and black pieces are necessary to add definition to the puzzle. The person handed a lot of colorful pieces might think the puzzle is totally beautiful. But that person also needs to recognize that they have only been given part of the puzzle and others will have much darker pieces. Regardless, neither is seeing the whole puzzle and neither knows what the final puzzle will look like. For that, you need to get a perspective from someone who can see the whole puzzle.

Like a puzzle, our personal experiences and actions are interconnected with others you know. Pain, struggles, anguish: these are all things that help people mature. We learn from our pain. Others learn from us in how we handle struggles. We learn from the struggles of others. We really are very interconnected. Something you heard from someone thirty years ago may only now be understood through the passage of time. That's where wisdom often comes from: as time passes and we experience new things (many struggles and many heartbreaks), we grow and mature. For some, they allow the ugliness of life to tear them down. Others grow and become more than they were before.

In this case, we do not see the entire perspective the

same way God does. We only see our little pieces of the puzzle and whatever pieces others have chosen to share with us. But none of us sees the whole puzzle the way God sees it. So, when we ask for things, too often we ask for that which is not good for us. Perhaps it is the prayer for financial security. But God knows that financial security is not necessarily what is good for us. God wants us to rely upon Him and His provision. This is part of what God asked us to seek in the Lord's prayer – "Give us this day our daily food" – not financial security so that we can rely upon *ourselves* for food. That doesn't bring God the glory He deserves.

Paul learned that the thorn in his side would not be removed because God was using Paul to make it clear that God's power is made clear through Paul's weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Certainly, Paul would not have thought that the "thorn" was a good thing, but God, who sees the entire puzzle, did.

Still, when we ask for the good things that glorify God, God gives in abundance. Consider the account of Solomon who had God ask him what Solomon would seek from Him. Solomon could have chosen wealth or good health, but instead he chose wisdom so he could be a good ruler of God's people. God's response was to give him what he wanted but other things besides:

¹¹ Then God said to Solomon, "Because this was in your heart, and you did not ask for riches, wealth, or

honor, or the life of those who hate you, nor did you even ask for long life, but you asked for yourself wisdom and knowledge so that you may rule My people over whom I have made you king, ¹² wisdom and knowledge have been granted to you. I will also give you riches, wealth, and honor, such as none of the kings who were before you has possessed, nor will those who will come after you” (2 Chronicles 1:11-12, NASB).

God gives graciously to those who seek after the right things, and even the things that they did not ask for, God will give in abundance to those who follow His heart.

So, here’s a qualification: God generally gives us the good things when we ask for the good things, but still, He reserves the right and discretion to say no.

God can grant prayers, but even if He doesn’t...

One of the most puzzling lines in the Bible can be found in the account in Daniel Three of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace. Before they are thrown into the furnace, King Nebuchadnezzar gives them one last chance to bow down before the golden idol he has made for the people to worship. The three refuse, but then give one of the strongest commitments to God’s providence found in the Bible.

“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16b-18, NASB)

So, we have what begins as a statement of faith: (1) God *can* save us, and (2) God *will* save us. But then, the three young men seem to hedge their bets: (3) “But even if he doesn’t....” So, is this waffling by the young men?

No, it is much like the understanding of the early church that God is not a genie who is obligated to provide a miracle just because His people pray. They don’t get to simply rub the bottle, make a wish and watch God save them. Can he save them? Of course – God is omnipotent. Will he save them? The young men are convinced that He will, but they also recognize that God is under no obligation to save them, and so they make a profession of faith that even if they are wrong about the second proposition, God is still God and alone is worthy to be worshipped.

And you know what? That is what makes God happy because that is a statement of faith. They are willing to accept God’s answer – which could be no – and that pleased God, who granted them safety in the furnace.

We Aren't the Center of the Universe

I often hear Christians misuse Romans 8:28. They assert that God will work everything for their good. If they lost a job, that's because God has a better one coming. If their girlfriend leaves them, that means God has a better match for them coming down the road. Unfortunately, this is a wrong interpretation of Romans 8:28. While God loves and cherishes all of His children, what is good in the *ultimate* sense is what God wants. And sometimes what is good for us in our little temporal reality is not what God says is ultimately good.

For example, as mentioned before, in 2 Corinthians 12 Paul prays for God to take away the thorn in his side. God says no because, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Sometimes we need to accept that God is using the time of suffering as a time of growth. The suffering may end, but here on earth it may not. But God is using it all the same because good comes out of the suffering. It does not mean that the cancer will be cured, but that we get the greater good of growing closer to God.

Moreover, sometimes the lesson is not for us. My friend, Angie (not her real name), has been declining for several years with Alzheimer's Disease. While I haven't seen her in about three years due to COVID, when I last saw her she had gotten to the point where she had no recollection of who I was despite the fact that we were in a

group Bible study every other Friday night for most of ten years. She doesn't remember any of us in that Study. She doesn't remember our church. She spends her time obsessing over people that are no longer alive or responsibilities she no longer has (or never had at all).

If Romans 8:28 means that everything works together for her good, where is the good from her suffering? If she learns something, she will forget it within fifteen minutes. What is the point of her suffering? What lesson does she learn?

Quite simply, the lesson of her suffering was not for her. The lesson of her suffering was for others in the church and for those who saw how the church responded to her illness. For some of us, it took a lot of prayer and time to get her in a position where she could receive the help she needed because, like many who suffer from Alzheimer's, at the early stages she was very good at covering up her memory loss and confusion by using the excuse that her lapses were her just "kidding." But as the church worked with her, we were able to get her into a place where she would no longer be a danger to herself as she had been when living alone.

But more importantly, the work that the church did was a witness to those in the assisted living home. When they found out that those of us who worked to get her situated in a safer place where she could receive appropriate care weren't Angie's relatives, the staff at the care home was amazed at everything that the church did to help her –

more than her own relatives did to help her. Ultimately, one of the staff asked why we did all we did, and that was the opportunity to share the glory and grace of God with this woman.

Did Angie get miraculously cured by our prayers? Well, we believed God had the power to do it, but we also understood that God is under no obligation to do it, and that her illness ultimately led another to learn about the love of the church for those in need, which may later sprout faith. And Angie is shortly heading to be with God. There, she will be fine.

The Lack of Faith

One final, little-mentioned issue is our lack of faith. This is not to say that the failure to have prayers answered is solely based on our faith. A Christian woman I know whose son has been crippled with cerebral palsy since birth was recently told by some well-meaning evangelists who had prayed over her son that the reason her son wasn't healed was her lack of faith. That's not what I am saying at all.

Rather, the simple fact is that those of us living in the West (mostly Europe and America) do not see many miracles occurring in answer to prayer. Yet, reports of dramatic miracles happen a lot more in the East and African countries than in America. Why is it that God seems to grant more prayers in the East than in the West?

I would argue that, put simply, the faith of those of us in the West is small compared to the faith of those in the East and Africa. This is true, in part, because the people in these other parts of the world have seen miracles and seeing a miracle quite often results in stronger belief that God is real and miracles happen. And faith is an essential element to prayers being miraculously granted.

So, for example, when Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth in Matthew 13, the Bible reports that the people of that town took offense at him, and so Jesus did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith. Now, some believe that this is a statement on the limits of God's power. But that's not the case. It is a statement that God chooses to not perform miracles where the people will not give appropriate credit to God.

In America, where I live, secularism is part and parcel of day-to-day life. We have seen the evidence of the power of science to accomplish things that may in the past have been identified as miraculous. As such, many in the West have become embarrassed about the Supernatural worldview of Christianity. We have already committed demons to the dustbin of pre-modern understandings of medical conditions, and so we reason that what the Bible describes as demon possession was actually seizures or manifestations of Terret's Syndrome.

As Christian Philosopher J.P. Moreland points out in his book, *A Simple Guide to Experience Miracles*:

While most Bible-believing Christians retain a mild doctrinal belief in the supernatural and miracles, they live as practical atheists, with very little expectation of seeing the miraculous.... As the late Dallas Willard observed, “The crushing weight of the secular outlook...permeates or pressures every thought we have today. Sometimes it even forces those who self-identify as Christian teachers to set aside Jesus’ plain statements about the reality and total relevance of the kingdom of God and replace them with philosophical speculations...[because] something has been found out that renders a spiritual understanding of reality in the manner of Jesus simply foolish to those who are ‘in the know.’”²

One of the purposes of miracles is to glorify God, but if we lack faith then we will discount the miracles. More importantly, if we don’t believe that God actually has the power to heal, then why should God heal in the first place? The miraculous answer to prayer starts with the belief that God will actually do it. And that sort of belief is in short supply in a culture that values science (the study of the created) more than God (the creator behind science).

² J. P. Moreland, *A Simple Guide to Experience Miracles*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021, pp. 16-17.

So, What Do I Say?

When you have someone challenge why God does not answer prayer, the best approach depends on the person asking the question. Of course, there is no perfect answer for every situation and each person is different, but for most skeptics who are trying to dismiss the power of God and prayer, this would be an approach to take: walk away and pray for them. God can change hearts through the power of prayer, and for a person who has hardened their heart against God, there is no answer which they will accept.

But if you must respond to the hardened skeptic or if you are responding to the honest seeker, I suggest the following: Ask them whether they think God is a genie. Ask them what magic has imprisoned God in a bottle that requires Him to answer the wishes of anyone who rubs the bottle. Note that in the genie tales, the person who rubs the bottle is the genie's master, but the person calling on God will never get a response without first recognizing that God is the master. When you start with recognizing who is in charge, then the genie fallacy vanishes.

If the person is someone of faith who knows that God is the master and we are His bondservants who is seeking an intellectual defense of the faith, then the best approach is to point out that the earliest Christians did not understand God to be a wish-granter. Rather, they understood that having your prayers answered depended on the depth of your faith, the thing that you asked for, and God's

greater plan.

Finally, if the person asking is someone who is presently experiencing pain or suffering either due to a debilitating illness or the death of a loved one seeking an answer to the question of why God is not or did not answer their prayers, the approach isn't intellectual at all. The answer is to be God's physical body on Earth and extend love to that person. Hold their hand. Pray with them. Stay up all night just being with them. That's the best answer for the person who is still in the midst of suffering.

The Gospels, Josephus, and the Place of Precision in Ancient Historical Accounts

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THAT THERE ARE DIFFERENCES between the Gospels is common knowledge. For large sections of the Gospels, it is not much of a concern as the evangelists were free to arrange their material in whatever framework suited their purpose. Where things become a little more challenging is when one comes to the passion and resurrection narratives. Suddenly chronology becomes more important and the Gospels converge on the pivotal events of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Unfortunately, there are some differences in the accounts that are disturbing to some readers. Who were the people that Peter denied Jesus to? What were the words on the sign on the cross? Who showed up at the empty tomb? Sometimes popular critics point out these differences as a

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reason to discount the Gospels as historical sources. Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide, addressing the resurrection narratives, notes that “in no other area of the New Testament narrative are the contradictions so glaring.”² Stephen Patterson has stated: “On the particular matter of the resurrection, the four gospels agree on almost nothing....Historical critical scholars of the Bible have maintained for more than a century that the gospels are not history, and in fact were never intended to be read as such.”³ Robert Price comments: “All of the resurrection appearance stories are attempts to improve the ending of the Markan original by contradicting it.”⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, while more confident in the accounts of Jesus than Price, gives this warning about the differences between Mark (since Matthew and Luke depend on Mark) and John: “These witnesses disagree on the most basic points: the length of Jesus’ ministry, the main location where it took place, the sequence of critical events—quite apart from differences in specific deeds and modes of speech that are impossible simply to harmonize.”⁵ Johnson goes on to speak of “a

² Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), p. 34.

³ Stephen J. Patterson, *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1998), p. 214.

⁴ Robert C. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 343.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Learning the Human Jesus” in James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (eds.), *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, pp. 165-66.

narrative that is not responsibly history.”⁶ Aside from questions of historical accuracy, there is also the theological question of how this works for Christians. Craig Allert notes: “The passion narratives of the Synoptic Gospels, while conforming fairly closely in sequence, contain many differences in detail and wording. Which form then is to be seen as inspired if they differ in any way?”⁷

Bios and History

The Gospels have been identified by many as the genre of ancient *bios*.⁸ The comparisons to Greco-Roman biographies have been invaluable to New Testament studies. However, the classification of the Gospels as *bioi* does not negate the presence of historiography. It has been said that the issue of the relationship of history to other genres is about what is placed in the foreground and what is placed in the background.⁹ The beginnings of *bioi* reveal a debt to

⁶ Johnson, p. 167.

⁷ Craig D. Allert, “Is a Translation Inspired?” in Stanley E. Porter and Richard S. Hess (eds.) *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects* (London: T & T Clark, 1999) p 103.

⁸ One of the best treatments of this is Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). Not everyone accepts this conclusion. Some see the Gospels as more in line with OT historical narrative. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 107-11.

⁹ G.E. Sterling, “Historians, Greco-Roman” in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (eds.) *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 500.

both philosophy and historiography, and Plutarch would later fuse biographical, rhetorical and philosophical traditions in his *Parallel Lives*.¹⁰ Richard Burrige explains: “The picture has now emerged of the genre of *bios* nestling between history, encomium and moral philosophy, with overlaps and relationships in all directions.”¹¹ Eddy and Boyd provide this very important corrective:

It can be argued that, in their search for a definable genre for the Gospels, some scholars have contrasted the ancient genres of *bios* and history to an unfortunate degree. Instead, the ancient sources themselves suggest that the distinction between these two genres was often quite vague, at least with regard to form and function.... However effective or ineffective any historical or biographical author may have been in achieving it, it seems that authors in *both* genres were to a significant degree concerned to report the past *as it actually took place*.¹²

It is in the passion and resurrection passages that chronology increases in importance and there is greater interac-

¹⁰ Richard Burrige, “Biography” in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 375-76.

¹¹ Burrige, *What Are the Gospels?*, p. 65.

¹² Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), pp. 324-25.

tion with other historical figures. If history can be found throughout the Gospels, it is in the passion and resurrection narratives that the evangelists are most like ancient historiography.

Differences Among the Gospels

It is expected that there would be some differences in wording and style, but especially among the Synoptics one would expect a general agreement in content. However an examination of the four Gospels reveals a number of differences.¹³ Matthew and Mark are the closest when it comes to the passion narrative. Still there are some minor differences.¹⁴ Matthew has the cock crow once while Mark has twice (Matt 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72). They also have their unique stories with Matthew recording the death of Judas (Matthew 27:3-10),¹⁵ while Mark reports the escape of the naked young man (Mark 14:51-52). The sign on the cross is somewhat different with Matthew recording “This is Jesus, King of the Jews” (Matt 27:37) and Mark “The King of the Jews” (Mark 15:26). Matthew has Jesus tasting the wine mixed with gall (Matt 27:34), while Mark says he

¹³ Michael Licona provides a good summary of the differences in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity. 2010), pp. 594-98.

¹⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New Haven: Yale, 1998), pp. 28-29.

¹⁵ This account is somewhat different than what Luke records (Acts 1:18-19).

did not have any of the wine mixed with myrrh (Mark 15:23). Where Mark and Matthew overlap in the resurrection narrative, they agree significantly with slight differences in the description of the angel, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Mark 16:1-5, Matthew 28:1-3). Mark has a generally bare report of the events and then expands the scene of the accusation.

Luke has a number of differences from Mark and Matthew.¹⁶ Luke has Jesus praying and finding his disciples asleep only once (Luke 22:40-46). Luke is also the only one to include Herod in the trial scene (Luke 23:6-13). Luke has his own take on the sign on the cross (one close to Mark's), "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke has the repentance of the thief (Luke 23:39-43) and the last words of Jesus as "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46). Luke also has the centurion at Jesus' death comment on his innocence/righteousness (Luke 23:47), rather than his divine sonship (Mark 15:39, Matt 27:54). Regarding the resurrection, Luke adds Joanna to the two Marys (Luke 24:10), has two angels rather than one (Luke 24:4) and includes an appearance on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33).

As one would expect with John being different right from the beginning, the fourth Gospel has some differences. Perhaps the surprise is that at the passion, John

¹⁶ Brown discusses the differences between Luke and Mark in *Death*, pp. 68-75.

comes closer to the Synoptics while retaining its uniqueness. It is in John that the person who cuts off the servant's ear is identified as Peter (John 18:10). John has a slightly different description of the people Peter denied Jesus to (John 18:15-27). John includes his own version of the sign on the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).¹⁷ It is only John who has Jesus arranging for someone to care for his mother (John 19:26-27). John has Jesus give a different last word, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The resurrection narrative continues to deviate from the synoptics. John has only Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb and an extended conversation (John 20:1-18). John also has very different post-resurrection appearances (John 20:19-21:25).

A good case study is the denial by Peter. Peter's denial of Jesus leaves us with remarkable differences, even though all four Gospels describe the same events. Each Gospel describes Peter's denial in a distinct way:

"I do not know or understand what you are talking about." (Mark 14:68 NRSV)

"I do not know what you are talking about."
(Matthew 26:70 NRSV)

"Woman, I do not know him." (Luke 22:57
NRSV)

¹⁷ *Gospel of Peter* 4:11 has "This is the King of Israel" and *Acts of Pilate* 10:1 has "He is the King of the Jews."

“I am not.” (John 18:17 NRSV)

With regard to the second denial, there are differences as to the location. Raymond Brown observes: “Luke and John place it in the *aulē*; Mark places it in the *proaulion* (forecourt) into which Peter has gone outside from the *aulē*; Matt places it in the *pylōn* (entranceway) into which Peter has gone out from the *aulē*.”¹⁸ Regarding the last words of Jesus, Brown notes: “If we treat Mark/Matt as a unity, no saying in one of the three Gospel records is found in another. Even the very last word of Jesus uttered just before he dies is not the same in Mark/Matt, in Luke, and in John – functionally we have three different attempts to have a saying capture Jesus’ final outlook on his role in God’s plan.”¹⁹

A popular way of dealing with these differences is to attempt to harmonize the accounts. Raymond Brown, critical of harmonizers, makes this observation about the differences in the passion narratives:

I would argue that although the individual Gospels often do preserve memories of what happened, changes and adaptations that occurred in the course of preaching and writing about the passion usually mean that the end products are not simply historical and that

¹⁸ Brown, *Death*, p. 601.

¹⁹ Brown, *Death*, p. 971.

harmonizing them can produce a distortion. For instance, after the arrest of Jesus, John has an interrogation by the high priest Annas alone, Mark/Matt have a whole Sanhedrin trial at night (Matt: involving Caiaphas), and Luke has a Sanhedrin trial by night (Matt: involving Caiaphas), and Luke has a Sanhedrin trial/interrogation in the morning – none shows clear awareness of the other two portrayals.²⁰

Even if one was not as skeptical about the continuity between the four Gospels, an attempt to harmonize the differences would rob each evangelist of their individual voices.

When one looks at the differences between the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection in the context of modern history there can be some serious problems. If someone was reading multiple accounts of the D-Day invasion and there were differences in how many beaches had landings, what countries were involved and on what day the fighting took place, there would be some concerns regarding the historical value of the accounts. A certain level of precision is expected in modern historiography.

Historical Precision in Josephus

To hold the Gospels to twenty-first century standards of historiography is not appropriate. They were written in the

²⁰ Brown, *Death*, p. 23.

first century Mediterranean world. If the history found within the Gospels is not up to the standards of *ancient* historiography, however, then it is appropriate to question their value.²¹ The best place to start as a point of comparison is Josephus. Josephus has a number of similarities to the Gospels. Not only is Josephus a first century Jewish historian, but there is a Synoptic aspect to his writings as well. While the overall focus of *War* is different from *Antiquities/Life*, there is a certain period of time in which they deal with the same events. There is an overlap between *War* 1.31-2.279 and *Antiquities* 12.237-20.258 for the years 175 BC and 66 AD and between *War* 2.430-3.114 and *Life* 20-411 for the years 66 and 67 AD.²²

That it is acceptable to compare the Gospels to Josephus is seen in Steve Mason's comments: "Josephus's work is of the same broad literary type or genre as Luke-Acts: they are both histories, written in Greek according to the conventions of their period, which we may loosely call Hellenistic."²³ While Mason draws a sharp distinction between Luke and the other Gospels, with only Luke claiming to

²¹ I. Howard Marshall is not convinced that a context even for Luke can be found among ancient historians including Josephus. I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Downers Grove: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 57.

²² Crossan describes a number of these parallels, see John Dominic Crossan, *Historical Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), pp. 168-206.

²³ Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009), p. 252.

write history,²⁴ it has been argued here that when it comes to the passion and resurrection narratives, all four are attempting to write history.

There are definitely stylistic differences between *War* and *Antiquities*.²⁵ However, there are more substantial differences as well. Shaye Cohen summarizes some of differences between *War* and the *Life*:

Was Soemus, the relative of Varus/Noarus, a tetrarch of the Lebanon (V 52) or a king (BJ 481)? How much profit did John make from his sale of Jewish oil (V 75//BJ 592)? Was the oil for the Jews of Syria or of Caesarea Philippi? Did the brigands of Dabaritta attack Ptolemy (BJ 595) or Ptolemy's wife (V 126)? In V 137 the sole bodyguard who remains with Josephus counsels him to commit suicide. In BJ 600-601, however, four bodyguards remain who counsel Josephus to flee. After the Dabaritta affair did Josephus whip many (BJ 612) or only one (V 147) of the ring-leaders?²⁶

²⁴ Mason, *Josephus*, p. 252.

²⁵ William Campbell notes that *Antiquities* never refers to Josephus by name or in third person. William Sanger Campbell, "The Narrator as 'He,' 'Me,' and 'We': Grammatical Person in Ancient Histories and in the Acts of the Apostles" in *JBL* 129, no. 2 (2010): 400.

²⁶ Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 8.

One of the differences that has gained a lot of attention is the different portrayal of Herod as found in *War* 1 and *Antiquities* 14-17. Responding to the work of Walter Laqueur, Joseph Sievers states:

Laqueur wanted to explain the difference between Josephus' image(s) of Herod in *War* 1 and in *Ant.* 14 on the basis of Josephus' shift of opinion. However, many of the differences are so subtle that no solid theory can be based on them. On the whole, however, it has to be recognized that the image of Herod and his family is much more critical in the *Antiquities* than in the *War*.²⁷

One of the commonly cited differences regarding Herod's family concerns the Alexandrian War of 47 BC. In *War* 1.187-92, there is a great description of Herod's father Antipater's achievements. In *Ant.* 14:127-39, the credit is given to Hyrcanus II. Another example of differences is that *War* describes Antipater and Herod's close tie to Jerusalem, while *Antiquities* focuses on their Idumaean ancestry. It is explained: "This shift is expressed by Josephus himself, not just because of new information (he was aware of Herod's Idumaean background when writing the

²⁷ Joseph Sievers "Herod, Josephus and Laqueur: A Reconsideration" in David M. Jacobson and Nikos Kokkinos (eds.), *Herod and Augustus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 89.

War), but because of a changed appreciation of or attention to Antipater's and Herod's status."²⁸

Another interesting difference is the account of the Egyptian false prophet Theudas. In *War* 2.261-263, Josephus says that he gathered thirty thousand followers and only a few escaped the Roman response while most were killed or taken prisoner. In *Ant.* 20.169-171, Josephus says that four hundred were killed and two hundred taken prisoner.²⁹

The differences are not always that obvious. John Dominic Crossan comments on the differences found in the account of the Jewish attack on Stephen, who was a slave of Caesar, and the subsequent retaliation by Ventidius Cumanus as described in *War* 2.228-229 and *Antiquities* 20.113-115:

First, the three explicit mentions of “brigands” in the former text are reduced and changed to a single mention of “seditious revolutionaries” in the latter one. Next, it is twice noted that the villages were to be plundered in the second but never in the first version, a feature, by the way, that makes destroying a Torah scroll fit better with that first situation. Finally, it is the “eminent men” and not just the “inhabitants” who are enchained in the later account, and

²⁸ Sievers, “Herod,” pp. 99-100.

²⁹ Luke speaks of four thousand following the Egyptian in Acts 21:38.

the implied punishment seems more severe there as well. I read all of these changes as part of Josephus' deliberate emphasizing in the *Antiquities* even more than in the *War*, the responsibility of Jewish brigands as revolutionaries and of Roman governors as maladminstrators.³⁰

Something similar to the differences in the Gospels over who is named at a specific event is found in the description of the attack on Samaria in *War* 2.234-235 and *Ant.* 20.120-121. The earlier account describes the mob as being under the leadership of Eleazar and Alexander, while the later account only mentions Eleazar. In *War* 2.129, Josephus is the sole general sent to prepare Galilee for war, while in *Life* 28-29, 77-78, Josephus is one of three priests sent to preserve the peace.

Sometimes, the discrepancies have suggested differences in historical value. Regarding the *War*, Thackeray states "the historian's narrative *as a whole* cannot but be accepted as trustworthy."³¹ In comparing *War* and *Antiquities*, Thackeray comments "There are, as is natural, inconsistencies between the two accounts; but, generally speaking, it may be said that the author faithfully follows his written

³⁰ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. 179.

³¹ H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus: The Jewish War Books I-II* (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1927), p. xxiv.

authorities.”³² It is when one gets to the *Life* that there are “unaccountable discrepancies.”³³

Reasons For Differences Within Josephus

It is fair to ask why there are such discrepancies within the works of Josephus. John Dominic Crossan begins the conversation with these thoughts:

When one reads two versions of something in Josephus...one should not simply choose either version at random and much less conflate the two into a sensible compromise. Instead, each must be read critically as one version of a basic source, be that Josephus’ own prepared outline or the work of another, but now arranged apologetically and thematically according to the basic Josephan development from apologist of Rome to Judaism in the *Jewish War* but of Judaism to Rome in the *Jewish Antiquities*.³⁴

Shaye Cohen speaks of “the development of the historian from a Roman apologist to a religious nationalist.”³⁵ Crossan responds by explaining: “[Josephus] began as apologist for Romans to Jews, and he ended as apologist

³² Thackeray, *War*, p. xxvi.

³³ Thackeray, *War*, p. xxvi.

³⁴ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 95-96.

³⁵ Cohen, *Josephus*, p. 240.

for Jews to Romans. In reading through his works, therefore, one must constantly and carefully consider where the specific writing is located along that line of change and development."³⁶

It seems that the first question that must be asked is not what were the historical events being described, but what was the specific context in which the book was written. Thackeray explains the different contexts between Josephus' major works:

The *War*, written in the prime of life, with surprising rapidity and with all the advantages of imperial patronage, was designed to deter the author's countrymen from further revolt by portraying the invincible might of Rome. The *Archaeology* was the laboured work of middle life; compiled under the oppressive reign of Domitian, the enemy of all literature and of historical writing in particular, it was often apparently laid aside in weariness and only carried to completion through the instigation of others, and with large assistance towards the close; its design was to magnify the Jewish race in the eyes of the Graeco-Roman world by a record of its ancient and glorious history.³⁷

³⁶ Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, p. 94.

³⁷ H. St. J. Thackeray, *Jewish Antiquities Books I-III* (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1930), p. vii.

Steve Mason deals with the differences within Josephus in this way:

[H]is literary aims and rhetorical constraints, which change somewhat from *War* to *Antiquities*, provide the main reason for the changes in presentation. Even in *War* Josephus lets slip some indirect religious criticisms of Herod, but to dwell on them there would not have helped his argument. In the *Antiquities*, by contrast, his purpose is to show that divine judgment inexorably follows departure from the laws of Moses, so his treatment of Herod's career is replete with illustrations of this point. It is this change of purpose in the *Antiquities* that explains his willingness to employ the new material and the critical language.³⁸

Life, which is an appendix to the second edition of *Antiquities*, was written as a response to accusations found in a rival history of the Jewish war by Justus of Tiberias. Although sources and the length of time between the works played a role, one cannot discount the importance of Josephus' different purposes in how he presented his material.

³⁸ Mason, *Josephus*, p. 159.

The Gospels and Josephus Within Ancient Historiography

Just because there are differences both within the Gospels and within Josephus does not require that they are both examples of good historiography, not even good *ancient* historiography. The question is: how do they fit within the context of ancient historiography? Donna Runnalls explains: “Josephus wrote with an apologetic intention. Nonetheless, he followed the tradition of the classical authors whose purpose in writing history was to give pleasurable instruction not only in political theory, but in religion and ethics.”³⁹

To what degree were discrepancies tolerated in the ancient endeavor to present factual and pleasurable accounts? Shaye Cohen explains:

Rhetoricians long before the first century had considered the relationship of an author to his source and had decided that the historian was expected to improve upon, or at least vary, the diction of his source. What was important was not novelty of the content but of form. “Do not shun those subjects about which others have already spoken, but attempt to speak better than they did”, says Isocrates 4.8. “Better” means “with better style” or “with finer eloquence.” The new

³⁹ Donna R. Runnalls “Rhetoric of Josephus” in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 737.

account will, on the whole, be faithful to its source but factual discrepancies are bound to appear from the nature of the paraphrasing process.⁴⁰

Cohen continues:

An author was expected to take some liberties with his source. He could freely invent details to increase the color and dramatic interest of the account. He was expected to recast the narrative, to place his own stamp upon it, to use the material for his own purposes, to create something new. But on the whole he was faithful to the content and sequence of the original.⁴¹

While modern historiography stresses careful citation of sources, in ancient historiography “too close adherence to the source raised the specter of plagiarism or, at least unprofessionalism.”⁴²

If ancient historians, whether the evangelists or Josephus, were willing to allow certain differences for the sake of style, what historical value do these texts have for us in reconstructing the events of the past? Craig Keener notes:

Contrary to what some have argued, ancient historians generally had concerns for accuracy regarding events.

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Josephus*, p. 29.

⁴¹ Cohen, *Josephus*, p. 31.

⁴² Cohen, *Josephus*, p. 31.

Although historians, especially elite historians, were also concerned with rhetorical presentation, they did not consider factual and rhetorical goals incompatible so long as rhetoric was kept within appropriate bounds (the verdict of appropriateness varying from one historian to another).⁴³

Historians continue to rely on Josephus and other ancient historians despite their obvious apologetic and rhetorical agendas. These sometimes manifest as discrepancies between accounts and yet they still provide a valuable historical witness.

Conclusion: Dealing with the Differences

Do the differences between the Gospel narratives, particularly the passion and resurrection narratives, disqualify them as valuable historical sources? There is no reason that they should, especially when the Gospels are understood in their proper context. Critics will continue to find problems where they want to, but they are often based on misunderstandings of the nature of the literature. Regarding difficulties just within the Gospel of Mark, Raymond Brown explains: “These are inconsistencies in the light of a modern microscopic quest for logic. Are they really illogi-

⁴³ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 96.

calities in a swift-flowing, impressionistic narrative such as Mark has given us?”⁴⁴

Modern historians would like to see a very exact degree of precision in the sources they study. The demand for twenty-first century standards of precision is not appropriate. Dealing specifically with the oral culture, but relevant to the present discussion, Boyd and Eddy remind us:

As a wide range of studies have shown, communication within an oral conception/register – both in its oral and written modes – tends to operate with much less stringent standards of linguistic precision than does, say, the modern, Western, highly literate academic world. Unfortunately, for over two centuries of critical New Testament studies, Western academics have often read and judged the Gospels through the lenses of their culture’s standards of relevant precision.⁴⁵

The same principle holds to looking at ancient historiography in general. Ancient precision in wording and details did not play the same role as it does today. As Michael Licona states: “those who complain of contradictions and inventions in the Gospels are guilty of judging them in terms of photographic accuracy, when this may not have

⁴⁴ Brown, *Death*, p. 307.

⁴⁵ Eddy and Boyd, *Jesus Legend*, p. 433.

been the intent of the author.”⁴⁶ Licona goes on to say: “It is important to note that all of the discrepancies between the Gospels usually cited appear in the peripheral details rather than at the core of the stories.”⁴⁷

An examination of the works of Josephus, a historian who is used greatly in piecing together the events of the first century is a good example. Josephus wrote a number of works, including some that overlap in the time that they are describing. Events recorded in *War* are found also in *Antiquities* and *Life*. One might assume that the events would be reported in exactly the same manner. The truth is that there is a difference, not just in style or wording, but in detail. There are differences such as the number of people present or involved in different situations. These differences are similar to what we find between the Gospel accounts of the passion and resurrection.⁴⁸ If such lack of precision is acceptable between accounts by the same author, how much more is it acceptable between accounts recorded by four different evangelists?

⁴⁶ Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 597.

⁴⁸ One may note there are sometimes variations even within one biblical author’s writing. Licona discusses the variations of Luke’s description of the conversion of Paul in Acts. Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, pp. 387-99.

**Book Review: *The Trace of God*
by Joseph Hinman**

*Don McIntosh, M.S., M.Div., Dr. Apol.*¹

*The Trace of God:
A Rational Warrant for Belief*
Joseph Hinman
Grand Viaduct, 2014
418 pages

ONE OF THE CONCERNS of natural theology is establishing justification – or “warrant,” as Alvin Plantinga and others have put it – for belief. In *The Trace of God: A Rational Warrant for Belief*, author Joe Hinman has presented a sophisticated argument for rationally warranted belief in God on the basis of religious and mystical experience. As an avid reader of all things theological, apologetic and scientific, I found *The Trace of God* both illuminating and compelling. It quickly became evident to me, as it should to any reader, that Hinman has done his homework (and then some) in order to lay out a fresh and powerful presentation of the old argument from religious ex-

¹ See footnote on page five for a brief bio of Don McIntosh.

perience to the existence of God for a twenty-first century readership.

Hinman constructs his case like a high rise, meticulously laying his foundation and building on it layer by layer. He thus begins with a very useful and interesting explanation of “Preliminary Concepts and Definitions,” introducing readers to technical concepts (the “religious a priori,” religious experience and mystical experience), found throughout the book but not likely to be encountered often outside the fields of theology, psychology or sociology. This is followed by a discussion of his “Decision Making Paradigm,” one tailored for the subject at hand. Given that God is (by definition) not an object of empirical knowledge, we must decide whether belief in God (as opposed to empirical confirmation of God) is rational. Hinman proposes that in principle the evidence of religious experience is sufficient to meet a *prima facie* burden of proof – that is, on the strength of these experiences belief in God should be deemed rationally warranted until and unless someone presents reasons or evidence to overcome the warrant. In the process he offers a keen analysis of Thomas Kuhn’s depiction of scientific revolutions and an insightful critique of the logic behind a concept often used (and abused) by science-minded naturalists: “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.”

From there specific arguments are presented, of two distinct types: “the argument from co-determinate,” and “the argument from epistemic judgment.” The argument

from co-determinate is roughly analogous to an inference from footprints in the snow to people having been present recently. Evidence of God's activity in the form of very basic and culture-spanning religious experiences leaves a psychological imprint upon the human psyche, leaving recipients of the experience in turn understandably, and quite rationally, inclined to believe in God as a result. This, essentially, is the trace of God. Experience of the *numinous* – of the holy, transcendent, awe- and fear-inspiring presence of God – has been recorded at all times and cultures, and therefore constitutes empirical grounds for belief. Moreover, these experiences confer universally beneficial effects upon those who have them: an enhanced psychological outlook, physiological health, and hence overall well-being. The related argument from epistemic judgment concerns the reliability and validity of the experiences reported. These experiences are consistent in character, regular in occurrence, and shared by a majority of people. And again the effects upon the persons who have them are demonstrably and overwhelmingly positive.

Having presented the arguments, Hinman bolsters those arguments by revisiting the studies used to derive the data for human religious experiences. Here the book takes a decidedly technical turn, examining the criteria for identifying religious and mystical experience, then the methodology chosen to elicit and record human responses to those experiences, for a large and wide-ranging number of studies. This for me was the least interesting portion of the

book, but for the serious-minded atheists Hinman intends to challenge it may be the most important. By carefully describing the empirically focused instruments and methods used to collect the data, Hinman preempts any objection to the effect that the argument from religious experience can be reduced to so much unscientific, subjective tale-swapping. Along the way various other objections are considered and rebutted, e.g., that emotions are unreliable indicators, or that religious experience is "mental illness."

The way I see it, the remainder of the book consists of mopping-up operations in the form of rebuttals to actual or potential objections and counterarguments. This includes a review and defense of the idea of "religious a priori" as a rational default position for believers to take. With direct experiences of God at hand believers have "no need to prove" – that is, no burden to justify – their faith, either to themselves or to others. Also in this part of the book is a critique of Wayne Proudfoot's skeptical arguments against the religious experience inference to theism, which proceed from a faulty assumption that the experiences are purely subjective and ineffable. This is followed by consideration of various other forms of "alternate causality" other than the presence of God: brain chemistry, as postulated by researchers like Michael Presinger (this recalled a fascinating online debate I had, many years ago now, involving what my atheist friends called the "God module" part of the brain); the effects of drugs; evolutionary mishaps; and the like.

Reading *The Trace of God* was for me a blessing. This is not to say that the book will be a page-turner for everyone. The sheer richness of the material is difficult to digest in places, if well-researched and erudite, and the presentation almost unfailingly methodical. Those accustomed to popular-level inspirational writing, theology or apologetics will need to buckle down and concentrate to take in the information and appreciate the arguments. And whereas in the interest of disclosure I should mention that Hinman is a friend of mine, I should also mention that I do not agree with everything he has to say in this book – particularly his take on New Testament atonement and soteriology. Still, he comes close to my own view with this: “...(T)he universal nature of mystical experience does not invalidate either religious truth in general or the Christian tradition. God is working in all cultures, and what he’s doing in all the cultures of the earth is moving people toward Christ” (p. 365). Amen.

All in all, this book has more than earned its place on my shelf. Much like the life-transforming religious experiences it describes with such meticulous care, *The Trace of God* left me with not only better informed, but with a strong desire to seek God in my experience and to share the good news of that experience of God with others. For this believer that makes *The Trace of God* a worthwhile spiritual and intellectual investment.

Book Review: *Old Testament Use of Old Testament* by Gary Edward Schnittjer

Dr. Johnson C. Philip, M.Sc., Ph.D.¹

Old Testament Use of Old Testament:

A Book-by-Book Guide

Gary Edward Schnittjer

Zondervan Academic, 2021

1,052 pages

MANY WRITERS HAVE EXPLORED the New Testament use of the Old Testament. However, the Old Testament use of the Old Testament is a relatively new field of study. Because the way the Scripture “uses itself” helps in both Christian apologetics and Bible interpretation, this book should prove to be a great help to Bible expositors as well as Christian apologists.

Sound interpretation of a text requires knowledge of its context. Bible expositors will find Schnittjer’s work helpful in finding the precise meaning of a given statement when it is examined in the light of the original quoted

¹ See footnote on page five for a brief bio of Johnson C. Philip.

statement. What is more, since often the Old Testament quotation within the Old Testament takes place in the same society or a similar society and context in which the original statement was made, the benefit to the Bible interpreter is considerable.

Christian apologists would find these quotations and their meaning and implication highly useful for multiple reasons. First, often this helps them to clarify the meanings of obscure or difficult passages. Second, when the canon quotes from the canon it provides them with another evidence for the canonicity and unity of the Scripture. It also helps them to demonstrate that the canonical nature of these books was obvious to people in the Old Testament, so that it was not some arbitrary council formed after the time of Christ that declared these books to be canonical.

This is a massive A4 size hardbound volume of 1,052 pages. Such a resource is not meant for the faint-hearted; nor is it a condensed kind of handbook used for a quick reference. Rather, it is designed for very serious Bible expositors, apologists, theologians, and highly motivated Bible students.

Today a “quotation” is a well-defined entity, and people need to quote within well-defined parameters. They are supposed to clearly indicate if words have been omitted, and/or emphasized by the person who uses the quote. Paraphrases are to be clearly indicated as paraphrases, and allusions are to be clearly indicated as such. What is more, the actual page number from which the quotation has

been taken needs to be indicated, along with enough detail of the book, magazine, or article for others to easily locate the book if and when needed by a researcher. Such constraints did not exist before modern times. As a result, a book of quotations from a period before the time of Christ is bound to differ, in terms of reference citations and other conventions, from a book that analyzes modern quotations.

The author was fully conscious of this limitation, or deviation from modern expectations. He has solved this problem by giving an exhaustive thirty-page Introduction to Old Testament period quotations, the types of quotations, and their nature. A careful reading of this section is a must for every serious student of the Bible who wants to make good use of Schnittjer's work. Ignore it, and you ignore much of the benefit that can be obtained from this book.

After the Introduction, the author covers all 39 books of the Old Testament in 846 pages. The Old Testament books after Second Chronicles are not arranged in the Bible in strict chronological order. To do justice to chronology, i.e. to establish the precise order and time period of the quotation, the author has arranged the Old Testament books in their right chronological order. This ensures that if a given passage is quoted more than once, then the earlier quotation comes earlier and the later quotation comes later in the book. While this is necessary and useful, it can create difficulty for those who want a quick check or quick veri-

fication of a quotation. For this sort of thing, the book provides exhaustive indices to Bible references, topics, and many other kinds of information.

There is a very useful chapter titled “Toward the New Testament” which bridges from the Old Testament use of the Old Testament to the information available about the New Testament use of the Old Testament. This is an amazing study for the motivated student of the Scripture. A chapter titled “Networks” offers an unexpected bonus. People in the Old Testament were familiar with their history. Writers therefore wrote in the context of the known history of God’s people. Such historically linked writing, in the light of known context, is called a *network*. A large number of networks are cited textually and via graphics. This is a pioneering work, and offers further help to Bible students, apologists, and expositors.

Schnittjer’s book is not an easy read, and it is not meant to be one. It is meant for serious students of the Bible who are ready to grapple with heavy stuff. A more concise version of this book would be a welcome step for those who have never been to a seminary.

Though *Old Testament Use* is a content-heavy and massive volume, its tone is simple, interesting, and absorbing for the motivated student of the Bible. This resource can be used with great profit by theological students at all levels, from bachelors to doctoral. Schnittjer has written a substantial contribution which should prove useful for many generations to come.

