

Letter To The Atheists

Part One

Paul Benson

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To the One who reveals things both old and new.

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Introduction

One of the main purposes of this letter is to present fresh new evidence and intriguing new arguments for the existence of God.

For example, science has revealed the structure of atoms, which are the building blocks of the ordinary matter in the universe. It has shown us that atoms are made up of protons, neutrons and electrons, and that protons and neutrons are themselves made up of even smaller particles called quarks. In the first major line of evidence for the existence of God, I will demonstrate that an ancient prophet was shown all of these things in a vision, about two and a half thousand years before science discovered them. The vision even gives us the name of the quarks.

Science has also revealed how the cells in our body contain complex machinery and a blueprint for life. In the second major line of evidence, I will show how the structure of DNA, and the machinery and processes by which it is converted into proteins by the cell, are hidden in an ancient story about one particular man, which was written by another prophet of God.

In addition, up until now, one of the things that has been absent from the debate about God's existence, is an explanation for how a complex entity such as God could even exist in the first place. I will correct this, by putting forward a potential explanation that could be scientifically tested. I have called it "The Neuroverse Hypothesis."

Now, it's reasonable to be skeptical of what I've just said. Even so, I ask that you give these new lines of evidence a fair hearing, as I introduce them to you in the chapters ahead. At the very least, you will benefit from a free crash course in physics and biology, even if you don't believe the evidence itself.

In a court case, evidence is supposed to be weighed up fairly. Both sides of the argument are given consideration, the judge or jury draws a conclusion one way or another, and then the case is closed. If new evidence is found, the case can be examined again, and the new evidence can be considered. If we were on trial ourselves, this is certainly what we would hope for.

Unfortunately, the human mind doesn't work like this when judging matters. Once it has come to a conclusion on anything of importance, it tends to accept supporting evidence at face value, while much harsher scrutiny is given to opposing evidence. This is known as "confirmation bias," and it affects the mind of both believers and skeptics alike.

I am writing to atheists in this letter, so naturally the evidence presented here will be subjected to more intense scrutiny than if I were arguing against the existence of God. All I ask is that you give this new evidence a fair hearing in the court of your mind.

But why does it matter whether God exists or not? I suppose it can make a big difference to important questions like why we are here and where we are going. But perhaps the simplest answer is that, as humans, we have a desire to know the truth.

For example, after we wake up in the morning, why do we look at ourselves in a mirror, instead of a picture of ourselves looking our very best? The reason is, we want an accurate picture of how we look at that moment. In this regard, the mirror tells us the truth. It gives us an honest reflection of reality, as long as our mirror isn't distorted. Even though it reveals our flaws and imperfections to us, we still use it because we value truth. We might secretly wish for a mirror that tells us we are the fairest of them all, but we want to know the honest truth about how we look, so we can make ourselves presentable to others before we leave the house.

In other words, we are truth seekers in reference to how we look in the morning, and I would suggest our desire for truth extends to every area of life. We spend billions of dollars pointing telescopes at the stars to discover whether we are alone in the universe or not. We put life under a microscope and smash particles into each other, because we want to know the truth about the universe in which we live.

Assuming you consider yourself to be an atheist rather than just a skeptic, then almost by definition you have already given some thought to the question of God's existence. You have weighed up the evidence presented to you so far in life, and concluded that he probably doesn't exist.

Before I proceed to introduce fresh new lines of evidence to you, let me ask you one important question: What would you personally consider to be valid evidence for the existence of God?

Let me give you an analogy to illustrate why this question is important. Suppose you wanted to collect a parcel from your local post office. You needed to prove your identity in order to receive it, and the post office specified in advance what forms of identification would be acceptable as proof.

You turn up with your driver's license, but the clerk argues it isn't acceptable because it could have been forged. You show him your passport, and he argues the picture might be you, but it could also be another person who looks like you. You show him a utility bill with your name and address on it, but he argues that you could have forged it at home with a word processor and printer.

All of the statements made by the clerk are true. You could have done all of those things. But if you weren't able to walk out of the post office with your parcel, I think you'd be entitled to suspect that the clerk had a grudge against you. After all, you presented three lines of evidence for your identity, even though only one form of proof was required, but all three were rejected by the clerk, with arguments that were perfectly valid in themselves.

It has been said that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. Now, whether the existence of God really qualifies as an "extraordinary claim" is debatable, but for the purpose of this letter, let's just assume it is. Either way, the statement isn't that useful, because it doesn't define what "extraordinary evidence" actually is. If the skeptical clerk at our imaginary post office demanded extraordinary evidence of your identity, what exactly would you show him that he couldn't reject?

Any evidence, no matter how extraordinary, could still be rejected. God could turn up on your doorstep in the middle of the night, presenting you with a cosmic light show, but you could still reject this, arguing he was a magician, or the show was a projection or trick of your mind; and besides, why would the Creator of the heavens and the Earth show up on your doorstep at such an unsociable hour?

It is therefore important to consider, in advance, what you would accept as valid evidence for the existence of God. If you don't already have a set of criteria for what constitutes valid evidence, how will you recognize it when it comes along? For example, if it could be shown that particle physics had been revealed to an ancient prophet of God, would this be considered acceptable evidence? If not, I would suggest thinking more about the important question I raised a few moments ago, before reading on.

1. The Crooked Trial

Suppose you are on trial for murdering your partner. I'm going to be generous and assume you didn't actually do it. In other words, you're not really a murderer.

Just before the trial begins, the judge declares that the love letters you wrote are to be excluded as evidence. Statements by your friends and family about your character are to be ignored. The judge also instructs the jury to assume you did indeed murder your partner, and to interpret evidence on this basis alone.

Would you consider the trial to be fair? Of course not, because it isn't. If jury members are only allowed to interpret evidence in one way, it will hardly come as a surprise if they find you guilty. I will refer to this as "The Crooked Trial" because it will serve as a useful analogy in this letter.

One of the assumptions of the modern scientific establishment, particularly in the life sciences such as biology, is that all things in nature must be explained without resorting to things that are outside of the laws and forces of nature, such as God or the supernatural. I will call this "The Naturalistic Assumption." As a result of this assumption, crediting any part of nature to a Creator outside of nature is usually considered to be unscientific.

Now, I don't think it's unreasonable for science to strive for explanations of the natural order beyond the wave of a divine magic wand. However, if some kind of creator did turn out to have a hand in things at some point, then the Naturalistic Assumption would lead scientists astray beyond that point. For example, if the first living cell was actually put together by design, then all attempts to explain how it must have formed by natural means will be wrong.

The Naturalistic Assumption also creates a dilemma for atheists. Not unreasonably, an atheist demands evidence for claims regarding the existence of God, and expects the evidence to be based on science. At the same time, the modern scientific establishment excludes God, because attributing anything to God is considered unscientific.

As a result, it's easy to think there is no scientific evidence for God, but this is because the underlying assumption of modern science is that everything must be explained without God.

In other words, the situation is similar to the Crooked Trial, where the jury has been instructed to look at the evidence through only one lens. In this case, the lens would be the Naturalistic Assumption. If the jury had to assume nature produced everything by itself, then they would naturally conclude there was no need for God.

Furthermore, since God has, in effect, been banished from modern scientific thinking, we can't be surprised that we don't see scientific papers with titles such as: "Stop Press: DNA Discovered To Have Been Designed By God!" This doesn't mean there is no scientific evidence for God. It just means that, if it exists, we will need to dig a little deeper to find it, like a person with a metal detector looking for treasure

beneath the sand. I will present some of the buried treasure a few short chapters from now.

This also highlights the importance of the assumptions we bring to the table, which can make a big difference to how we interpret evidence. For example, forensic scientists don't see a dead body cut into twelve pieces and automatically assume the knife must have fallen naturally across the body twelve times. They examine the evidence to determine whether the death was accidental or deliberate.

However, when biologists peer into the cells of our body, they are not allowed to ask the same questions as forensic scientists, because when working in a scientific establishment they are expected by their peers to accept the Naturalistic Assumption, even if it is not a formal rule.

They do not consider the possibility that something was brought into being by intelligent design. Therefore, every new biological discovery must be accompanied by some variation on basically the same question: "What natural processes caused this to be?"

2. The Mysterious Machine

There are many reasons why atheists don't believe in God, but perhaps one of the biggest is that, up until now, believers haven't put forward a credible scientific explanation for how and why God would even exist in the first place.

The traditional argument for God's existence is that he has simply always existed, which is why many believers refer to him as the "First Cause." This is probably unsatisfying to an atheist, because it doesn't really explain anything.

It is like hearing about the existence of a mysterious machine in a village. The locals claim it provides them with all the food and drink they need for free. They conceal the machine from outsiders, and do not permit them to approach it. Any stranger who attempts to do so is put to death by the villagers, who venerate it and call it the Great Machine. They believe it has always existed, and has no need of an explanation. They fear that if anyone were to try and explain it, the machine would lose its mystery and therefore stop providing them with free food and drink.

I think it's fair to say that scientists and outsiders to the village wouldn't have the same concerns. They would want evidence of the machine's existence beyond the word of the villagers; otherwise it might sound, to the skeptical mind, like a religious fable made up by a priestly class to, say, control the village food supply and thus the villagers. Scientists would also want an explanation for why the machine supposedly existed, and what it was doing there in the first place.

Now, I don't mean to imply that "God" and the "Great Machine" are the same; but there is a clear similarity between the villagers' belief in a Great Machine that has always existed and doesn't need explaining, and the idea of God as the First Cause. I think the analogy serves to highlight why atheists and skeptics struggle with this as an explanation for God's existence.

Furthermore, the description of God given by believers may also be a problem. For example, God is often described as a "spirit" who resides in "heaven." These terms aren't particularly useful for scientists, who like to get to the bottom of things as much as possible. Where exactly is "heaven" located, and what is "spirit" in scientific terms?

No wonder atheists are unconvinced by religious arguments that refer to God using these words. However, a few chapters from now I will present evidence indicating that scientists may have already discovered where heaven is, and what spirit is, without them even realizing it.

The objection to God's existence has also been framed as a complexity problem. The argument starts with a simple premise: the creator of a thing must be equally or more complex than the thing it creates.

For example, in our analogy, the Great Machine must be equally or more complex than the food and drink it provides for the villagers. Therefore, where did its complexity come from?

As another example, consider the blueprint for human life found within the cells of our body. It needs to code for thousands of different proteins, the building

blocks of life. But it also needs to code for the production of other cells like itself, as well as yet more humans, as if there aren't enough of us already. Biologists usually say this complexity came about because mutations and natural selection caused the blueprint to change and evolve over vast periods of time. We will explore these concepts in detail in the second half of this letter.

However, if God created all things, as many believers claim, then God would need to be equally or more complex than his creation. But where did God's complexity come from?

Up until now, I don't think believers have answered this question in a way that could satisfy the scientific or skeptical mind. To most people who believe in God, he is somewhat similar to the Great Machine in our analogy. He has simply always been, and doesn't need explaining any further than that.

According to the "argument from complexity," which is an argument against God's existence, the way to solve the problem of God's complexity is for God to have been designed by an equally or more complex God. But then, who designed that particular God? Only an equally or more complex entity could do it. And then, who designed this entity?

Each time we conceive of an equally or increasingly complex godlike entity, we could ask who designed it, in what is called an "infinite regress." Since an endless number of these entities seems a pretty absurd explanation for God, this argument has led some to conclude that the opposite must be true – that God almost certainly doesn't exist.

However, as I will show not many chapters from now, there is another simple way to solve the complexity problem. The "Neuroverse Hypothesis" I will introduce in a little while provides a potential explanation for God's existence, and resolves the complexity issue in a way that I think is both satisfactory and scientifically testable.

3. A Word About Word Traps

Now, just before I introduce the first major line of evidence for the existence of God, I need to very briefly talk about the problem of words and definitions, and the nature of language itself. If we're not careful, rather than discussing arguments with any real substance, we may find ourselves arguing over words and their meaning. We fall into what I call "word traps."

For example, when I say I am going to present new evidence for God, the clever skeptic could reply, "which god?" After all, perhaps I'm simply proving the existence of Zeus or Artemis, or an anonymous entity that created the universe and then disappeared, never to be heard from again. Rather than taking up space arguing over the exact definition of God, or which God I am talking about, I will let the evidence speak for itself.

As another example of potential word traps, when discussing God, theologians like to use words such as "omnipotent" which means "all-powerful," and "omnipresent" which means something like "present everywhere at the same time."

However, if we say God is omnipotent and omnipresent, a skeptic could simply ask questions like, "Can God create an exclusion zone in which he is not present?" If the answer is yes, then he can't be omnipresent, because by definition, he would not be in the exclusion zone. If the answer is no, then he can't be omnipotent, because there is something he can't do. Therefore, they might reason, God can't be both omnipotent and omnipresent.

These issues might keep philosophers and theologians awake at night, but to me they really just highlight the nature of language and logic. Words are just approximations of the things they are describing. They are symbols and representations, not the thing in itself. The word "cat" is not a cat. It's just a shortcut for describing a whole universe of things we think of as cats.

Words like "omnipotent" and "omnipresent" are perhaps useful shortcuts for theologians to describe the power and presence of God, whom they assume exists; but they can also be word traps, where we can tie ourselves up in logical and theological knots, because words are only approximations of reality. They are perhaps convenient and concise ways to describe something, but they can sometimes get in the way of productive discussion. In this letter, for the most part I have deliberately chosen to avoid using theological words and concepts like "omnipotent," because they can sometimes distract us from arguing about things that actually matter, especially to atheists.

Besides, even when we think we have precisely defined a word, we still need other words to define it, and we could easily get caught up in an endless loop of trying to define something precisely, using symbols that can only ever be approximations of the things they are trying to describe.

Therefore, let's just agree to put aside petty squabbles over words, agree that words are only approximations, and let's move on to the substance of the arguments.

4. The Early Universe

To present the first major line of evidence for the existence of God, let's very briefly consider how modern science says the universe began. I will go into a page or so of technical detail here, so that afterwards I can show that most of these same details were revealed to an ancient prophet named Ezekiel, but they were hidden from recognition until science could discover the physical reality of them.

According to physicists and cosmologists, the universe started out intensely hot and very dense. Then, in a period of inflation, space itself expanded faster than the blink of an eye, going from something very small to millions of light years across.

After this incredibly rapid inflation, the universe continued to expand, but at a much slower rate. It was still intensely hot, and resembled a cloud or fog. A millionth of a second later, it had cooled enough to allow nuclei, the core of atoms, to form. Around this time, the four fundamental forces of the universe became distinct – gravity, electromagnetism, and the weak and strong nuclear forces.

By the end of the first second, all the ordinary matter of the universe had come into existence. It was a swirl or plasma of protons, neutrons and electrons, which would become the building blocks of atoms.

Within the first three minutes, protons and neutrons began fusing together, forming hydrogen-2. These nuclei then joined up to form the nuclei of helium-4, each of which contained two protons and two neutrons.

Two helium-4 nuclei could also fuse to form beryllium-8, and a third helium-4 could be added to form carbon-12, but because beryllium-8 is a highly unstable atom, it would almost instantly part back again into two helium-4 nuclei. This and the rapid expansion and cooling of the early universe would prevent any significant amounts of carbon from being produced.

At this point, the universe was a soup of radiation, hydrogen and helium-4, along with vast numbers of electrons. However, the electrons couldn't attach to the nuclei, because the universe was still too hot. Also, photons, the particles of light, weren't able to travel freely, as they constantly scattered off the nuclei and the electrons. This is known as the "radiation" era.

Eventually, in what is called the "recombination" era, the plasma had cooled enough so that electrons could latch on to the nuclei and form regular atoms. This had a major effect on the universe. Larger structures such as galaxies, as well as stars like the Sun and planets such as the Earth, could now be formed.

Photons, the particles of light, which before were scattered because of the nuclei and electron mix, were now much more free to travel through the universe. Before, the universe had been like a cloud. Now it became transparent.

The light emitted during this period left behind a remnant of itself, called the Cosmic Microwave Background, that filled space and can still be detected today. The early universe also gave off sound waves called Baryon Acoustic Oscillations, that

carried ordinary matter with them, until the universe cooled enough for light to be able to travel freely.

Now, all of this has been deduced by modern science, based on physics, chemistry and cosmology, using equipment that can look at some of the smallest and largest objects in the universe.

The reason I went into detail here, is because similar details seem to have been given to an ancient prophet of God named Ezekiel, thousands of years before the advent of modern science. The main difference is, many cosmologists assume the universe did all of this by itself. Ezekiel was told something very different.

5. Ezekiel's Crash Course In Particle Physics

Ezekiel was a priest of ancient Israel. He was with a group of Jewish exiles in the land of Chaldea when he claimed that **"the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God."**¹ He went on to describe a highly unusual vision.

Now, extraordinary claims like this require extraordinary evidence. But for thousands of years, it has been simply a matter of faith as to whether a person believed Ezekiel really saw God or not. Even if it was just a dream or hallucination, his description of God is certainly a far cry from the bearded old man sitting on a cloud, that many people imagine God to look like. At the very least, Ezekiel's vision is much more imaginative, and is worth reading in itself.

However, what makes it particularly intriguing to us, is that the vision contains descriptions which closely match the details I have just given, of the formation of the early universe and its particles. However, some of the details have been lost in the process of translating the original Hebrew into English, so I will attempt to follow the Hebrew as closely as possible, and point out when English translations lose some of the original meaning.

This is how Ezekiel's curious vision begins: **"I saw, and look! a stormy wind coming from the north; a great cloud, and a fire taking hold of itself, and a brightness around it and from the midst of it, like the sparkle of amber from the midst of the fire."**²

This sounds similar to the radiation era of the early universe, which could be described as an intensely hot self-contained cloud or fog, within which protons, neutrons, electrons, and light itself in the form of photons, were essentially trapped.

Of course, this is not anywhere close to being proof that Ezekiel was seeing the early universe, so let's continue examining the vision: **"And from the midst of it, the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man."**³ Each of these creatures had four faces and four wings. **"And the likeness of their faces were the faces of a man, and faces of a lion to the right for all four, and faces of a bull from the left for all four, and faces of an eagle for all four."**⁴

These strange four-faced creatures are later identified by Ezekiel as "cherubs." However, my hypothesis is that, in this particular vision, these creatures and their weird attributes are also meant to represent something else. Some have suggested that the four faces represent directions, like the four cardinal points of a compass, or a correspondence to the zodiac. There may be some truth to this.

However, I propose that at this point in the vision, the four creatures represent the four fundamental forces that emerged out of the early universe, and they also represent the helium-4 particles that emerged. As we continue, we will see that this strange vision makes much more sense if it is really describing what I propose.

Of the four wings on each creature, Ezekiel says: **"Their wings joined each to the other. They do not turn about as they go. They go across the faces of each."**⁵

Some translations say the wings go straight forward, but the Hebrew says they go across the faces, so this is how the verse has been translated here.

The account says that **“their faces and their wings were parted upwards for each. Two joined each, and two covered their bodies.”** ⁶ While most English translations imply that only the wings were parted, the Hebrew doesn't make this distinction. It reads as if both the faces and the wings were parted. I suppose it doesn't make sense for the creature's faces to be parted, which is why English translators tend to gloss over this; but we can make more sense of the original Hebrew if the vision is actually talking about particles. Furthermore, while many translations say “stretched,” the Hebrew word used here actually means “parted.” A different Hebrew word is later used to mean “stretched.” ⁷

If this verse is really alluding to particles, it would accurately describe what happened in the hot early universe, when two hydrogen-2 nuclei would fuse to become helium-4, which has two protons and two neutrons. No heavier elements could be created in any significant quantity, because of the heat. The verse would also make a good description of how quantum entanglement works, where pairs of particles can have correlated states even when they are parted.

My hypothesis may still seem unconvincing right now, so consider what Ezekiel sees next: **“And the likeness and appearance of the living creatures was as burning coals of fire, like the appearance of the torches moving between the living creatures; and there was a brightness to the fire, and from the fire came forth lightning.”** ⁸

These “burning coals of fire” sound a lot more like particles. The verse could be describing the cloud of atomic nuclei, still without their electron shells in the radiation era. The ones “moving between” could be electrons, and also photons, the particles of light that would have been scattered off the nuclei in the early universe.

Curiously, the living creatures are described as being “like the appearance of the torches moving between the living creatures.” If the living creatures represent particles, this suggests there are even smaller particles moving between the larger particles. This is true, according to physicists. Protons and neutrons are actually made up of even smaller particles, called quarks. While there are several types of quark, protons and neutrons contain only two types, called “up” and “down.”

It is therefore remarkable that the *King James Version* of this verse describes one of these smaller creatures, saying “it went up and down among the living creatures.” Let me repeat. The quarks that make up protons and neutrons, the nuclei of all ordinary matter, are called “up” and “down” quarks!

Ezekiel continues: **“And the living creatures run and return, like the appearance of the streak of lightning.”** ⁹

This would also fit remarkably well with the idea of photons being scattered off the nuclei. In addition, according to quantum physics, what holds normal particles together are yet more particles, called gauge or virtual particles. These are rapidly and continually being exchanged by the normal particles, and so would have the

appearance of running and returning at lightning fast speed, which sounds just like what Ezekiel is attempting to describe here.

But if you are not convinced that Ezekiel is being given a glimpse of the atomic realm, consider the next part of his intriguing vision.

1 Ezekiel 1:1. **2** Ezekiel 1:4. **3** Ezekiel 1:5. **4** Ezekiel 1:10. **5** Ezekiel 1:9. **6** Ezekiel 1:11. **7** Compare Ezekiel 1:22. **8** Ezekiel 1:13. **9** Ezekiel 1:14.

6. What Is “Spirit”? A Scientific Answer

Ezekiel continues: **“And I saw the living creatures, and look! one wheel in the earth beside the living creatures with their four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their works was like the sparkle of beryl, and the four of them had one likeness; and their appearance and works being, as it were, the wheel in the midst of the wheel.”**¹

If these living creatures symbolize helium-4 nuclei, then the addition of “wheels” makes them fully-fledged atoms with energy shells that can capture and bind electrons. We have moved from the “radiation era” into the “recombination era” of the universe, where full atoms could form.

The helium-4 atom has two electrons with the same orbital path, but because they are two separate objects, they each trace out an orbit, making two orbits. This could be why Ezekiel sees “the wheel in the midst of the wheel.”

Now, atoms don't really have “shells” or “wheels.” However, we represent them to children as balls with hoops around them, so if Ezekiel is being given a symbolic vision of an atom, we can hardly be surprised if he saw something similar to how we portray them to children!

Incidentally, most English translations say the wheel is “on the earth,” but the Hebrew actually says it is “in the earth.” This would make sense if the vision is trying to tell us these aren't just wheels, but are part of the atoms that make up the Earth itself. Atoms are literally “in the earth.” They are what the Earth is made of.

The description of the wheels continues: **“As they go, they go over their four quarters, without turning as they go. And their rims were high and awesome, and their rims were full of eyes around the four of them.”**²

The presence of wheels is the reason why the thing Ezekiel saw is often referred to as “Ezekiel's Chariot.” However, they don't seem to function like normal wheels. Apart from their enormous size, they don't actually turn, and the rims are full of eyes.

However, this fits perfectly with the description of an electron shell, relative to the nucleus of an atom. (Incidentally, the word “nuclei” is simply the plural of “nucleus.”) The diameter of the nucleus is about 10,000 times smaller than the atom with its electron shell. In other words, if Ezekiel was being shown the nucleus of an atom before, the appearance of the electron shells would indeed appear “high and awesome” by comparison! What Ezekiel saw could more accurately, although slightly less poetically, be called “Ezekiel's Helium-4 Atom.”

According to the Uncertainty Principle taught by physicists, the precise location of each electron in an atomic shell can't be determined with the eye or instrument of the human observer. This is perhaps why the rims are “full of eyes.” Ezekiel is being given the privileged position of seeing the electrons at every potential location. Furthermore, that they are described as “eyes” might indicate the means by which God can observe our reality, even though we struggle to see his. Electrons are also arranged in a series of shells, which are themselves broken up into smaller sub-shells.

In every way then, the arrangement of electrons around an atom could be described symbolically as something similar to a wheel within a wheel.

Ezekiel continues: **“As the living creatures go, the wheels go beside them,”** for **“the spirit of the living creature is in the wheels.”**³ Up until now, nobody has been able to explain the term “spirit” using anything more than vague metaphysical language. But if Ezekiel is being given a vision of an atom here, as I am suggesting, then we are being told what “spirit” is. It is energy, and in the case of an atom, it is stored in electrons bound by energy shells.

Ezekiel talks about “the appearance of the wheels and their works.” The Hebrew word here translated as “works” is the same word used to describe physical works or deeds. By yet another intriguing coincidence, physicists also have a word for what is done to an object when a force moves it. That word is “work.”

Indeed, there are so many correspondences to physics in this vision, you could teach your children the basics of quarks, protons, neutrons and electrons, and the four fundamental forces, using this vision as a template.

Incidentally, there are only a few colors mentioned in the vision. The first is “the sparkle of amber out of the midst of the fire” near the beginning of the vision. Translations differ over this word. The *King James Version* translates it as “amber.” Remarkably, the Greek for “amber” is *elektron* and the Latin is *electrum*, from which we derive the words “electron” and “electricity” in English. In other words, if this is a vision of the early universe, then amber or “elektron” would be the perfect choice of color to symbolize electrons!

Another color mentioned is in the description of the wheels: “The appearance of the wheels and their works was like the sparkle of beryl.” The *King James Version* uses the word “beryl” although some translations say “topaz” here. Actually, the Hebrew word used is the same as the word for the place called Tarshish.

However, beryl is an interesting choice made by some translators, because in the very early universe, beryllium, found in the mineral beryl, was the heaviest element that could be formed. After the period when atomic shells formed, two helium-4 nuclei could fuse to become one beryllium-8 nucleus; and then by the addition of another helium-4 nucleus, they could become carbon-12.

This process is well-known by physicists, and is called the “triple-alpha process.” Furthermore, one more helium-4 can be added to carbon-12 to produce oxygen-16. In other words, if the four living creatures also symbolize helium-4 nuclei, it takes four of them to create carbon and oxygen, the basis of life on Earth.

Maybe this is another reason why one of the wheels like beryl is “on the earth,” or more accurately, “in the earth.” It perhaps alludes to the pathway through helium and beryllium to get to carbon and oxygen. It would perhaps also explain why the living creatures, despite their bizarre description, are also said to look like a man. In the symbology I am proposing, humans are also made up of the same forces and atoms, particularly carbon.

Ezekiel's vision continues: **"And the likeness of the expanse over the heads of the living creature was as the sparkle of awesome ice stretched out upwards over their heads. And under the expanse their wings were upright, each to the other, two covering them for each, and two covering their bodies for each."** ⁴

The formation of electron shells allowed electrons to cling to the nuclei of atoms, and the "recombination era" began. The universe went from being like a cloud to transparent. The expanse of the heavens would have become visible. This was the origin of the Cosmic Microwave Background. The Hebrew word for "stretched out" is here used in conjunction with the expanse, and it harmonizes with the idea that the universe is expanding.

However, the account doesn't tell us how long the initial stretching took, to create an expanse in the first place. Scientists say that a period of cosmic inflation stretched out the universe to hundreds of millions of light years across, faster than the blink of an eye. If that rate of expansion had continued just a little longer, our universe would have been the size it is today after just a few more blinks of the eye.

These verses could also be describing the creation of the Earth's atmosphere, "under the expanse" as it were. In this case, the idea that the four living creatures are helium-4 nuclei would fit nicely, because the Earth's atmosphere consists primarily of oxygen, which can be created from four helium-4 nuclei in the process I just described.

Now, one of the other effects of the early universe was Baryon Acoustic Oscillations, which are sound waves that propagated through the early universe, and that left a faint imprint in the clustering of galaxies and matter.

Sound is also what Ezekiel's vision talks about next: **"And I heard the sound of their wings, like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty. As they go, there was the sound of speech, like the sound of a camp. As they stand, they relax their wings, and there came a sound from the expanse that was over their head. As they stand, they relax their wings."** ⁵

The Hebrew word here translated "sound" is used six times in the above passage. The same word can also be translated as "voice." Sound is a wave, and I suggest that the reason sound is repeatedly emphasized here is to link it to the wings. In other words, wings and waves are related, or even the same thing.

Indeed, I will go further and propose that the entire vision is trying to show, in symbolic terms, even deeper concepts of reality that have only been revealed by modern science.

For example, quantum physics has the concept of wave-particle duality, where every particle is really also a wave; or more accurately, an entity can act like both a particle and a wave. This, I propose, is why the living creatures seen by Ezekiel seem so strange. The vision is trying to convey the quantum nature of reality. Their faces represent their particle nature, and their wings represent their wave nature.

This would explain why their wings "go across the faces of each." Some translations suggest they simply go straight, but the original Hebrew says that the

wings go across their faces. When a wing covers a face, the face is hidden. This is also true in quantum physics. If you are looking at a wave, you cannot see its particle nature, and vice versa. However, Ezekiel could see them both because the vision was trying to reveal, in symbolic terms, both the particle and wave nature of reality.

Just like the wings in this vision, waves with a higher wavelength are “stretched out” and can become almost straight, and a lower wavelength would give the appearance of wings being let down or relaxed.

In case we needed further proof that the wings really represent waves, there are two kinds of waves – traveling waves and standing waves. Sound waves are an example of traveling waves. The vision also makes this point. “As they go, there was the sound of speech, like the sound of a camp.” Traveling waves can travel in large numbers, like an army camp.

Standing waves act like strings on a guitar, or like elastic bands. Electrons are more like standing waves around the orbit of an atomic nucleus. Ezekiel’s vision also seems to refer to standing waves, when it says, “As they stand, they relax their wings.”

Frequency is the inverse of wavelength, and is the number of times a wave pattern repeats in a period of time. If Ezekiel is being given a vision that also includes how waves work, is it any wonder that when they “relax” their wings, “there came a sound from the expanse that was over their head”?

Relaxed wings perhaps also represent lower electromagnetic frequencies, the lowest or most “relaxed” being radio waves. It is true that we don’t directly hear these, but how better to symbolize things like radio waves to someone who had no concept of a frequency spectrum, than to have a sound come from the expanse?

Taken in its entirety, the vision harmonizes with how modern science says the universe was formed. It starts with the equivalent of a great cloud and fire, and then progresses to an expanse like awesome ice stretched out. Science says the universe began intensely hot, and became cold as it expanded rapidly.

We have also found symbolic comparisons to the four fundamental forces, and wave-particle duality; the formation of helium-4 from hydrogen, and then beryllium, carbon and oxygen from helium; up and down quarks, virtual particles, photons scattering off the nuclei, the appearance of electron shells and the beginning of the “recombination era” when the universe became transparent, and a description of how traveling and standing waves work. We have found all of this in one vision, given to an ancient prophet of Israel, in which he claimed “the heavens were opened.”

In the remaining part of the vision, Ezekiel sees something even more remarkable: **“And from above the expanse that was over their head, was what appeared to be a stone of sapphire like a throne; and on the likeness of the throne was the likeness of a man’s appearance on it upwards.**

And I saw what looked like fire inside it and around what appeared to be his waist and upward, like the sparkle of amber; and from what appeared to be his waist and downward, I saw what appeared to be fire, and a brightness all around.

Like the appearance of the bow which comes in the cloud in a day of rain, this is how the brightness around him appeared. It was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHWH. And I saw it, and I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of the one speaking.”⁶

This remarkable description is a far cry from the traditional view of God as an old man with a beard, sitting on a cloud. Nevertheless, if my hypothesis is true, that Ezekiel's vision is really about the formation of the early universe and its particles, then we have extraordinary evidence that Ezekiel's claim, made at the start of his vision, is true – that the heavens were opened, and he saw visions of God.

1 Ezekiel 1:15,16. **2** Ezekiel 1:17,18. **3** Ezekiel 1:19,21. **4** Ezekiel 1:22,23. **5** Ezekiel 1:24,25. **6** Ezekiel 1:26-28.

7. Four Big Objections

Now, before I move on to the second major line of evidence for the existence of God, let me tackle four potential objections to what I have just proposed.

The first is that I am simply interpreting the vision in a way that fits my preconceived notions. To help explain why I don't think this is a fair objection, let me summarize how I actually developed those ideas. After I had decided to write this letter to atheists, I started to read up on how scientists said the early universe came about, so I could write about it in this letter. Soon after, I felt a desire to read the first chapter of Ezekiel, and as I did so, I was suddenly struck by the thought that the cloud and fire Ezekiel saw when the heavens were opened to him, was essentially the same as what scientists were describing at the formation of the universe.

I then asked myself: what if the vision really was describing the beginning of the universe? This idea was completely new to me at the time. I then proceeded to investigate the rest of the vision with this idea in mind.

The results, as I have shared in the previous few chapters, strongly suggest that the initial thought was correct. If it was wrong, then my interpretation would look increasingly strained as it went along. Instead, the fit became better as we gathered more data from the account.

What Ezekiel saw has traditionally been called "Ezekiel's Chariot," but this interpretation is the one that looks strained, because what chariot has wheels that don't turn, are within one another, have rims that are high and awesome, and eyes in them? Even on the surface, it sounds far more like a description of the electron shells of an atom than it does a chariot! Even the relative sizes are more accurate, because the shells are vastly larger than the atomic nucleus. And when I came to the part of the vision that sounded like it was describing quarks, which are smaller particles making up larger particles such as protons and neutrons, I couldn't arrange in advance that the *King James Version* would use the words "up" and "down" in the same place, which are the very names of the quarks!

In other words, while it is true that we obviously have to "read into" the account to a certain extent, since we aren't told this is actually a description of physics, forces and particles, the sheer number of correspondences to aspects of physics strongly suggests this isn't coincidence, but that my "preconceived notion" was correct. Indeed, this is how science works. Scientists propose a notion, which they call a hypothesis, and then they test it to see if it holds up. This is precisely what I did. I just didn't wear a white lab coat while doing so.

Another potential objection is that I have given multiple interpretations for one symbol. For example, I initially said the four living creatures represented the four fundamental forces, but then I interpreted a living creature to be a helium-4 nucleus; and according to Ezekiel, they are also cherubs. I also suggested that the torches moving between the living creatures are quarks, electrons and also photons.

Which are they? The answer is, they are all of the above. Four fundamental forces did indeed emerge out of the early universe, and also helium-4 nuclei, so for the purpose of communicating an efficient vision, I think the symbols are meant to have more than one meaning depending on their context. This is precisely how symbols in any form of communication work.

However, we can't take each symbol to mean anything we like. It makes no sense to have a banana running and returning like a streak of lightning, because bananas generally don't do that. The point is, each section of the vision harmonizes with key events that took place in the development of the early universe, and in that regard, each symbol can only be interpreted in a very limited number of ways.

Another potential objection might be that, if God really wanted to reveal particle physics to us, he would do it more plainly. We could rephrase this objection into the following question: Why didn't God simply say to Ezekiel: "Let me show you the creation of the universe, the emergence of the four fundamental forces, the formation of protons and neutrons out of quarks, the fusion of helium-4 from hydrogen-2, and the atomic nuclei obtaining their energy shells"?

Hopefully, the answer is obvious. Ezekiel was a priest, not a physicist. The concepts, along with the words needed to describe such concepts, didn't exist in his day. How do you explain the notion of wave-particle duality or standing waves to someone who doesn't have any understanding of physics?

Perhaps the simplest way would be to represent them in symbolic form, using living creatures, with faces representing particles, and wings representing waves, and of smaller particles being pictured as coals of fire moving between torches, and of electron shells as wheels.

This is precisely what I am proposing. The only difference is, God omitted the key. He didn't tell Ezekiel that the vision was about the formation of the universe and matter. Besides, a good reason to include it in the form seen by Ezekiel, is so it could remain hidden until science caught up with the details God already knew. If modern science has chosen to exclude God from their picture of the universe, this is perhaps God's way of painting himself back in, in a rather spectacular manner!

Also, if it were more obvious that the vision contained particle physics, the accusation could be made by skeptics that scientists had been influenced by it. But by hiding the details in a vision that could be dismissed as a religious fable, scientists have been able to work out the details of particle physics independently.

We rightly give credit and honor to the scientists who worked hard to help us gain such an understanding of matter and the universe. At the same time, I would suggest that Ezekiel's vision is also a polite request for due credit to be given to the One who oversaw the formation of the universe in the first place.

Another objection might be that I have omitted some details. For example, the account says the living creatures have feet: **"And their feet were an upright foot, and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot; and they gleamed like the sparkle of burnished copper."**¹

I didn't intend to do a line by line analysis of the vision in this letter. However, the additional details may reveal even deeper insights. For example, the "upright foot" could represent its wave nature, while the "calf's foot" could represent its particle nature.

Furthermore, a calf's foot is split into two, or cloven. In chapter 10 of Ezekiel, a certain man is told by God to **"enter in between the wheels that are beneath the cherub, and fill both of your hands with coals of fire from among the cherubs, and scatter them over the city."** ²

This act symbolized the city's destruction; but what could be "between the wheels" that would be so destructive? I suppose literal "coals of fire" would do the job. However, earlier we saw how the living creatures looked like "burning coals of fire" and had torches running and returning in-between them. If the cherubs also represent atoms, then the answer to our question becomes obvious, and the symbology becomes immediately relevant to us in our day; for the splitting of the atom has led to some of humankind's most destructive weapons.

This is strong additional evidence that Ezekiel's vision was about the fundamental forces of the universe, and the particles from which it was built. It also perhaps serves as a divine warning about the awesome, powerful and destructive energy found within each atom.

1 Ezekiel 1:7. **2** Ezekiel 10:2.

8. The Blueprint For Life

Before looking at the second major line of evidence for the existence of God, we need to have a basic understanding of how life works. Deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA for short, is a molecule that contains the blueprint for life on Earth. It has a unique shape called a double helix, that looks like a ladder or staircase twisted round on itself. This is known as the “primary structure” of DNA.

Information is stored in DNA using four units, called “bases.” Those bases are adenine, cytosine, guanine and thymine, often abbreviated simply to the letters A, C, G and T. They occur in pairs – A with T, and G with C – to create the rungs of the DNA ladder. This structure, known as the “secondary structure” of DNA, makes it very stable. Each side of the ladder acts as a backup for the other, so that information can be preserved efficiently.

Human DNA is about 3 billion base pairs in length. With the exception of blood cells, almost every cell in your body contains a copy of your DNA sequence, which is stored in the nucleus of the cell. Human DNA contains about 20,000 “genes,” a somewhat loose term often used to describe sections of DNA that contain instructions for building a “protein.” In turn, proteins are three-dimensional structures that make up the machinery of our bodies.

How is a protein made? Imagine a library filled with books, and each book contains instructions for how to build a particular protein. For some reason, you aren’t allowed to take any of the books out of the library. If you want to make a specific protein, you would need to find the relevant book, make a copy of it while in the library, and then take the copy outside. Waiting outside is a protein making machine. You could feed your copy of the book into the machine, which would then read the instructions and build the protein for you.

This is a simplified analogy for what happens in the cell. The library represents the DNA blueprint, and the books are the genes it contains. The main difference is, the DNA molecule is like one enormous book containing all the genes and more.

Before a protein can be made, two main processes have to take place. The first is similar to the copying process in our analogy. Biologists call it “transcription.” The sequence of DNA that contains instructions to build a particular protein is copied to “messenger RNA,” or “mRNA” for short. DNA and RNA are similar, but while DNA has a double strand, RNA has only a single strand, and the thymine (T) base in DNA is switched to uracil (U) in RNA, a different base.

Some parts of the newly created RNA strand don’t code for the protein, so they are cut out. This is called “RNA splicing.” By arranging the remaining pieces of the RNA into different patterns, different proteins can be made in the second major biological process, which I will describe next, called “translation.”

A molecular machine called a “ribosome” is needed to make a protein, along with “transfer RNA” (or “tRNA”) molecules, which bring along the amino acids that will form the protein. The ribosome attaches itself to the mRNA strand, and reads the RNA

code 3 bases at a time. A set of 3 bases is called a “codon,” and each codon normally represents one amino acid, which are the building blocks of proteins.

The ribosome has three binding sites in it. As it moves along the mRNA strand, tRNA brings along an amino acid that matches up with the codon being read by the ribosome at the time, and the tRNA molecule moves into the first site. It then moves to the second site, and the amino acid it carries is attached to a growing chain of amino acids. The tRNA then leaves the ribosome from the third site.

There are also codons that tell the ribosome to stop making the protein. When the ribosome encounters a stop codon, the chain of amino acids is released. This chain is the protein itself, which then usually folds into a shape that is useful for the body.

These two processes – “transcription” or copying of DNA into messenger RNA, and then “translation” of mRNA into proteins – are so important, they are a major part of what is often called the “Central Dogma” of biology.

The reason I have explained them in some detail here, is because I will now present evidence that the structure of DNA, the pairing of the four DNA bases, “transcription” into mRNA, “translation” of mRNA into proteins by a ribosome, and even the modern names of two of the bases used in DNA and RNA, have been hiding in plain sight, in a simple account about the life of a shepherd named Jacob, written thousands of years ago.

9. Jacob's Ladder

In previous chapters, I showed that the vision given to Ezekiel also illustrated the formation of the early universe and its particles. Is it possible to find something similar for the blueprint found in DNA, the basis of life on Earth?

A skeptic could rightly argue that, if we are going to hunt for something that sounds like DNA in the Bible, we are likely to find it simply because of the size of the Bible, but it could just be coincidence.

This is a fair objection, so in order to reduce the probability of coincidence, we would need to find not just one, but several similarities to DNA, all within close proximity. Ideally, we would also want some other form of verification that the account is alluding to DNA, to demonstrate that we are not simply doing the equivalent of seeing faces in clouds.

A good place to start this search would be the account of what is often called "Jacob's Ladder" in chapter 28 of Genesis. The description sounds quite similar to that of DNA, although I will readily concede for now that the similarity may be simple coincidence, and therefore by itself is not proof of anything.

In the account, Jacob was told by his father Isaac to go to Padan-Aram, and take a wife from the household of Laban, the son of Nahor. As he was heading towards a place called Haran, he found a location and set up stones as pillows to sleep.

While he was sleeping, **"he dreamed, and look! a stairway was set up toward the earth, and its top touched toward the heavens; and look! messengers of God ascended and descended in it; and look! YHWH was stationed above it."**¹

We are told to "look!" three times, so let's look closer. The Hebrew word usually translated "angel" actually means "messenger." In this regard, the dream matches up with the description of the primary and secondary structures of DNA. The primary structure is its ladder-like shape, and the secondary structure is the series of base pairs that make up the rungs of the ladder and that contain the DNA "message."

Just as the messengers ascend and descend, the two spines of the DNA double helix run in opposite directions, or "anti-parallel" as biologists call it. Curiously, while most English translations say the angels ascend and descend "on" the ladder, the Hebrew says "in" it, and this is also true of the base pairs.

While the similarities are intriguing, this by itself is certainly not proof that Jacob was dreaming about DNA. After all, we wanted to find something that resembled DNA, and DNA is often described as having a ladder-like structure, so Jacob's Ladder was a natural place to start our search.

We would need to continue reading, to see if more features of DNA can be identified within close proximity. If not, all we can say is that Jacob's dream might be about DNA, but the similarity could just be coincidence.

The account tells us that Jacob continued his journey, and came across a well in the field, with three droves of the flock lying there: **"And he saw and look! a well in**

the field, and look! there were three droves of the flock reclining on it, because they gave the droves a drink from the well; and a great stone was over the mouth of the well. And all the droves were gathered there, and they rolled the stone from over the mouth of the well, and they gave the flock a drink, and they returned the stone to its place over the mouth of the well.”²

As we learn shortly after, the account seems to be talking about the men from Haran and how they looked after the flocks. Jacob told them to give the flock a drink and to feed them, but the men replied: **“We can’t, until all of the droves are gathered, and they roll the stone from over the mouth of the well, and we give the flock a drink.”**³

It’s tempting to say that the three droves make a good analogy for the DNA stored in the nucleus of a cell. It contains the blueprint for building proteins, in sets of three bases called “codons.” But just like the three droves, the DNA blueprint can’t do much by itself. It requires a molecular machine called “RNA polymerase” to roll over it, unzip it, and create an mRNA strand. Only then can the codons in the mRNA strand be converted into proteins that feed and water the body.

Just in case we wanted to use this story as an analogy, the droves could represent the DNA blueprint. The well could represent the nucleus, or the cell itself. The stone could represent the RNA polymerase machine. The men of Haran would represent mRNA.

At this point, I accept that such an analogy would seem like a major stretch. After all, it’s just a story about sheep and shepherds. That the name “Haran” contains an anagram of RNA is presumably just a coincidence. However, the next stage of Jacob’s life is very interesting, and gives us the first major clue that perhaps his life after the dream of the ladder was intended to be an analogy for DNA after all.

1 Genesis 28:12,13. **2** Genesis 29:2,3. **3** Genesis 29:8.

10. Jacob's Wives As DNA Bases

Jacob had a curious love life after coming into Laban's household. He fell in love with Laban's younger daughter Rachel, and agreed to work seven years for Laban so he could marry her.

However, after the seven years were up, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Rachel's older sister Leah instead. Jacob was able to marry Rachel a week later, but only after agreeing to work seven more years. Laban also gave a maidservant to each daughter.

Jacob loved Rachel over her sister Leah. After all, it was Rachel he had fallen in love with. When God saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, and she gave birth to four sons. However, Rachel was barren. When she saw she hadn't given birth, she became jealous of her sister, and gave her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob, so Rachel could claim the children as her own. When Leah saw that she herself had stopped giving birth, she also gave her own maidservant Zilpah to Jacob, in what became a rivalry between the two sisters.¹

Now, while the story perhaps highlights the wisdom of a husband having one wife, and the jealousy and bitterness that can result otherwise, does it have anything to do with DNA? I think it does.

First of all, there are four DNA bases – adenine (A), cytosine (C), guanine (G) and thymine (T) – and Jacob also ends up with four wives. Furthermore, the four bases are paired – A pairs with T, and G with C. This is called “complementary base pairing.” Similarly, Jacob's four wives are also paired – Rachel with her maidservant Bilhah, and Leah with her maidservant Zilpah. In other words, each wife could represent a DNA base, and the pairing of Rachel and Leah with their maidservants would make a good analogy for complementary base pairing.

Even Jacob's twelve sons are paired up with the four wives. Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah are born to Leah. Next, Dan and Naphtali are born to Bilhah. Then, Gad and Asher are born to Zilpah. Then, Issachar and Zebulun are born to Leah. Lastly, after God hears Rachel and opens her womb, Joseph and Benjamin are born to Rachel, although Benjamin only arrives much later.² In other words, the sons also come in pairs, with respect to Jacob's four wives. Since DNA is made up of base pairs, all of Jacob's sons could represent a strand of DNA.

This is intriguing, but is there any more evidence that DNA is being alluded to here? We could say that Rachel is the principle wife, because she is the one Jacob fell in love with and wanted to marry.

Rachel's first son, by her maidservant Bilhah, is called Dan, which comes from a Hebrew word meaning to judge or perhaps to adjudicate. It's worth noting here that Dan in English is a simple anagram of DNA.

Rachel calls the next son Naphtali, which is often interpreted to mean “my wrestlings.” However, when Jacob wrestles with a man a little later on, a different

Hebrew word for “wrestling” is used.³ Therefore, Naphtali should more accurately be translated as “my twistings.”

Rachel explains the reason for this name. In Hebrew, she says something that could be translated as: “The twistings of God. I was twisted with my sister, and I have prevailed.”⁴ For some reason, the word for “God” is often omitted by translators, but it is there in the original Hebrew.

Rachel was perhaps referring to a struggle with her sister. At the same time, if Jacob’s love life was being orchestrated by YHWH in order to be an analogy for DNA, then the DNA double helix could also be described as the “twistings of God.” If Rachel and Leah represent “rival” bases in DNA, then Rachel’s statement, “I was twisted with my sister,” is also literally true at the molecular level within the double helix.

Jacob only has one daughter, at least according to the account.⁵ Her name is Dinah which, like Dan, contains an anagram of DNA in English, as well as the letters I and H, which could represent a shorthand for God’s name. In the original Hebrew, they are the first two letters of God’s name YHWH.

Keep in mind, all of these allusions to DNA are connected to the same man, in the same geographical place, within the proximity of Jacob’s dream of the ladder, which itself resembles the structure of DNA.

However, it is what comes next that gives us the strongest indication something deeper is going on in his life – for we can make analogies to transcription, translation, the ribosome, RNA splicing and more, all in the same one chapter of Jacob’s story.

1 See Genesis 29:15-30:13. **2** See Genesis 29:31-35; 30:1-13,17-24; 35:16-26. **3** Compare the Hebrew of Genesis 30:8 with Genesis 32:24. **4** Genesis 30:8. **5** Genesis 30:21.

11. Jacob's Wages And Sticks

After Rachel had given birth to Joseph, Jacob thought about leaving, but Laban asked him what wages would persuade him to stay. In reply, Jacob said: **"I will pass through all your flock today, to take away from there all the speckled and spotted livestock, and all the black livestock among the sheep, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they will be my wages. And my righteousness will answer for me at a later time, when my wages come before you. All of the goats that are not speckled and spotted, and black from the sheep, will have been stolen by me."**¹

Laban agreed to this, and **"in that day, he took away the striped and spotted male goats, and all of the speckled and spotted female goats, all with white in them; and all the black among the sheep, and he gave them into the hand of his sons. And he put a distance of three days between him and Jacob; and Jacob fed the remainder of Laban's flock."**²

I propose that this is meant to be an analogy for the transcription process that converts DNA into mRNA, with the "striped and spotted male goats" and the "speckled and spotted female goats" representing the four bases.

In transcription, DNA is first unzipped into two strands, which would perhaps explain why Laban separates the male and female goats. The DNA bases also fall into two categories, called "purines" and "pyrimidines." The bases adenine (A) and guanine (G) are purines, while cytosine (C) and thymine (T) are pyrimidines. A purine base pairs up with a pyrimidine base, so comparing them to male and female would make sense.

Furthermore, one of the DNA bases, thymine (T), is switched to a different base, uracil (U), in RNA. Remarkably, this is also what happens in our analogy. Jacob asks for "speckled and spotted" livestock, but Laban actually gives him "striped and spotted" male goats, even though Jacob never asked for striped ones. As if to reinforce the analogy, the Hebrew words for "speckled" (*nqd*) and "striped" (*oqd*) are very similar, except one letter has been switched.

What about the black sheep? Since they are contrasted with those that have white in them, the black sheep could represent stop codons. They tell the ribosome when to stop making the protein. However, they are transcribed into mRNA along with the sections that code for the protein.

Once an mRNA strand is made, in human and animal cells it is usually transported outside of the cell nucleus. Similarly, once Laban had paid Jacob his wages, he "put a distance of three days between him and Jacob."

The processes of transcription and translation take place in specific directions, based on ends of the strand that are labeled "3 prime" and "5 prime" by biologists, for reasons of chemistry that I won't go into here. The direction toward the 5 prime end is referred to as "upstream" and toward the 3 prime end is said to be "downstream."

The mRNA strand is formed in the 5 prime to 3 prime direction, and is also translated into a protein in the same direction. Therefore, the "three days" distance

could also represent the 3 prime direction. Also, one of the last things to take place in transcription is a process called “polyadenylation,” where a tail is added to the mRNA strand at the 3 prime end. The “three days” might also allude to this.

What happens next in Jacob’s story matches up remarkably well with the process of translation, where the mRNA strand is converted into a protein by the ribosome molecular machine.

The account continues: **“And Jacob took for himself a fresh stick from the poplar and almond and plane trees, and he peeled white peelings in them, to expose the white that was on the sticks. And he put the sticks which he had peeled into troughs, into the drinking basins of the waters ahead of the flock, so that the flock would come to drink, and would conceive as they came to drink. And the flock conceived before the sticks, and the flock gave birth to striped, speckled and spotted ones.”**³

Jacob clearly knew a thing or two about biology. Presumably the sight of sticks with some of the bark peeled away got the flocks aroused, so they would conceive. Mixed genetic traits would appear again in Laban’s flock, and the offspring with striped, speckled or spotted traits would become part of Jacob’s wages!

However, I propose that this was also orchestrated to be an analogy for what the ribosome does, in making a protein from an mRNA strand. In fact, the analogy is so accurate that, given the previous connections we have already made to DNA, along with the biological context, it can hardly be just a coincidence.

In an mRNA strand, three bases can contain information for one amino acid, which would make them a “codon.” The “poplar and almond and plane” sticks together represent one codon.

Peeling the bark would represent the preparation of newly transcribed RNA into mRNA, ready to be processed by a ribosome. Exposing the white on the sticks would correspond to making the information in the codon accessible. This would give additional meaning to the distinction between “all with white in them,” and the black sheep. Those with white in them could code for amino acids and therefore proteins, while the black ones could also represent non-coding sequences. The “troughs” represent ribosomes, and the “drinking basins” represent the three binding sites in the ribosome. In this analogy, the “flocks” represent amino acids.

In a cell, amino acids are brought to the ribosome by tRNA transfer molecules, and each tRNA features what is called an “anticodon,” a sequence of three bases that complements a codon in the mRNA strand.

Let me remind you of how the process of “translation” works. As the ribosome moves along the mRNA strand, one codon at a time is exposed. A tRNA molecule brings along the amino acid matching up with the codon, and it moves into the first binding site in the ribosome. It then moves to the second site, and the amino acid it carries is attached to a growing chain of amino acids, which will become the protein. The empty tRNA vessel then leaves the ribosome from the third site.

In other words, in the language of the drama performed for us by Jacob, the codon “sticks” are exposed in the binding sites or “drinking basins” of ribosomes or “troughs.” The “flocks” of amino acids “come to drink” in the ribosome, and “conceive” the protein as they do so, giving birth to “striped, speckled and spotted ones,” which here represents a protein, or at least one part of a protein chain. I think Jacob’s performance with the sticks was also meant for us thousands of years later, to show off the biological process of translation.

Incidentally, it’s worth noting here the descriptions of the sticks. They are described as “fresh,” from the Hebrew word (*lk*) which is pronounced somewhat like “luck” or “lack.” The “poplar” (*lbne* pronounced “liv-neh”) is similar to the word for “Laban” (*lbn*), which in turn is the same word for “white.” The “almond” is actually the word “Luz” (pronounced like “lose”) which is the name of the place where Jacob had his dream of the ladder, and which he renamed Bethel, meaning “house of God.” The “plane” is *ormon* in Hebrew. I think these have a deeper meaning in regard to biology and evolution, which I will explore in the second half of this letter.

1 Genesis 30:32,33. **2** Genesis 30:35,36. **3** Genesis 30:37-39.

12. Jacob Versus Darwin

The account continues: **“And Jacob parted the sheep, and he put the faces of the flock to the striped, and all of the black in Laban’s flock. And he set his own droves by themselves, and did not put them on Laban’s flock.”**¹

This verse is about parting and turning faces, which is also what happens to the chain of amino acids that make up the newly manufactured protein. Once the ribosome encounters a stop codon, the chain is complete, and it is detached from the ribosome. In our analogy, the sheep get “parted.”

After that, the protein usually folds into a particular shape that will eventually form part of the machinery of the body. These shapes often contain structures known as “alpha helices” and “beta sheets.” The alpha helix forms a spiral shape, which actually looks striped. Turning the faces of the sheep likely represents the process of protein folding.

However, even if we simply take the account at face value, Jacob seems to be aiming for some kind of artificial selection, which is itself a biological process. In other words, the plain meaning of the account provides corroborating evidence that we are also correct about its deeper meaning.

The account continues: **“And it came about that whenever the strong ones of the flock conceived, and Jacob put the sticks before the eyes of the flock in the troughs, they would conceive in the sticks. But he did not put in the weak of the flock. And so the weak ones went to Laban, and the strong ones to Jacob.”**²

This matches up with the process of RNA splicing, where the parts of the mRNA strand that do not code for the protein are cut out, and therefore “not put in” the ribosome. The removed parts are called “introns.” However, introns can have other functions, such as encoding useful RNA molecules. The weak of the flock could therefore represent introns, and the strong could represent the parts, called “exons,” that actually code for the protein.

However, this part of the account perhaps also contains a message for biologists who believe that life arose by itself. It sounds remarkably like the evolutionary concept of “survival of the fittest,” except that Jacob is deliberately selecting the fittest. It is artificial selection rather than natural selection. But it’s still selection for fitness. In other words, the plain account confirms that we are talking about biological processes, by alluding to one of the key ideas in modern biology.

Not surprisingly, Laban’s sons complain about Jacob. They say: **“Jacob has taken everything that was our father’s, and from what our father has made, all of this glory.”**³ Although most translations don’t use the word “made” here, the Hebrew word used in this verse is the same as the one used in the creation account at the beginning of the same book, where “God saw everything that he had made.”⁴ Indeed, the three Hebrew words that make up the phrase “everything that he had made” (*kl ashr oshe*) are also used by Laban’s sons.

By another “coincidence,” the chapter and verse numbers are reversed. “God saw everything that he had made” is in Genesis 1:31, and the sons of Laban say that he “has taken everything that was our father’s, and from what our father has made” in Genesis 31:1.

Perhaps this is to highlight that the same complaint made against Jacob can also be laid against modern biologists. By claiming that the molecular processes we have discussed arose on their own through mutations and natural selection, they have also “taken everything that was our father’s, and from what our father has made, all of this glory.”

As if to reinforce the point, Jacob then describes something which sounds like an analogy for mutations. Speaking to his wives Rachel and Leah about Laban, he says: **“Your father has mocked me, and changed my wages ten times, but God has not allowed him to do bad to me. If therefore he said, ‘the speckled shall be your wages,’ all of the flock gave birth to speckled ones; and if therefore he said, ‘the striped shall be your wages,’ all of the flock gave birth to striped ones. And God has delivered the livestock of your father and given them to me. And it came about, at the time when the flock came to conceive, that I lifted up my eyes and I saw in a dream, and look! the male goats which went up on the flock were striped, speckled and dappled ones.”**⁵

Earlier on I said that the “striped, speckled and spotted ones” represented a protein produced by a ribosome. But here, Jacob talks about “striped, speckled and dappled ones.” Spotted has been replaced with dappled. His wages had also been changed “ten times.” This passage makes a good analogy for mutations, which are changes in the coding sequence that could result in changes to a protein. Mutations are a cause of disease, but supposedly also one of the key drivers of evolution.

If Jacob’s life with Laban was also designed to be an extended analogy for DNA and various other molecular biological processes, then the message here is that mutations do indeed happen, but they are usually harmful. In the case of Jacob, his family were shielded from the harmful effects. This should not be surprising, given that Jacob was the human father of the nation of Israel.

In the end, Jacob and his family leave Laban after Jacob had worked for him for 20 years, which is the same number of amino acids that are directly coded for in DNA. We could continue our search for biological analogies, and we would find intriguing parallels to error correcting and cell division, which I will discuss in the second part of this letter. However, I will include just one more analogy for now, because it seems to suggest that YHWH has a sense of humor, as well as foreknowledge of what we would name the two bases that get switched in the process of transcribing DNA into RNA.

One chapter later, in a curious account, as they were leaving Laban, Jacob took his family over the ford of Jabbok, and then **“Jacob was left by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn arose. And he saw that he had not prevailed against him, and he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated as he wrestled with him.”**⁶

It is curious that the Hebrew word for Jabbok (*ibq*) and the word for wrestled (*iabq*) is quite close, with one letter added on the left hand side. Maybe the place was named after the event. Also, the word here translated “hollow” (*kph*) actually refers to the palm of the hand, or sometimes the sole of the foot. At the very least, that Jacob is “left by himself” and that the man touches the hollow or “hand” of Jacob’s thigh, could be a useful teaching aid to remind us that all of the amino acids used by life are exclusively left-handed.

During this strange encounter, the man asked Jacob to let him go, because dawn was coming up, but Jacob said he wouldn’t until the man blessed him. The man did so, and also renamed Jacob to Israel, **“for you are upright with God and with men, and you have prevailed.”** ⁷

Now, when we read accounts like this, no wonder skeptics have a problem with the Bible. What is a seemingly random wrestling match doing in a solemn scene where Jacob is taking his family away from Laban, and is worried about being attacked by his brother Esau?

For one, the encounter would stay in Jacob’s memory, not only because of the injury, but also because the man renamed him Israel, which is what God also does a little later. Indeed, the encounter was so remarkable to Jacob that he named the site after it. **“And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, ‘because I saw God face to face, and my soul was delivered.’ And the sun rose upon him when he passed Penuel, and he limped upon his thigh.”** ⁸

Curiously, Jacob calls it Peniel (*phnial*), meaning “Face of God,” but immediately afterwards, the account calls it Penuel (*phnual*). In Hebrew, the middle letter has been replaced. I would like to suggest that the switch from Peniel to Penuel, and even the whole wrestling match, was orchestrated in part to be a teaching aid for us, as a way for us to remember the names of the bases that get switched between DNA and RNA. Their names are thymine (T) and uracil (U). The thymine base used in DNA is replaced with the uracil base in RNA.

To remember them, simply picture the two men wrestling. Jacob sees his thigh – THIGH MINE (thymine) – and then looks over to the man wrestling with him – YOU WRESTLE (uracil). Furthermore, the switch from Peniel to Penuel can also help us remember the order. “I” rhymes with “thigh” and “U” is for “uracil.”

Incidentally, organic chemists may also find this account useful. The “phenyl group,” which sounds like Peniel (*phnial*), is considered to be a benzene ring, minus a hydrogen, like Jacob and his dislocated thigh. One of the amino acids, phenylalanine, is named because it contains a phenyl group. Phenylalanine is coded for in mRNA by UUU or UUC. In other words, three uracil bases represent phenylalanine in the biological code of our bodies, just as Jacob’s wrestling caused him to name the place Peniel.

The word “phenyl” derives from the Greek *phaino*, or “shining,” which can be linked with the sun rising upon Jacob. This would also help to explain why the man who wrestled with Jacob wanted to leave when dawn ascended. If he was actually

playing out a drama for our benefit, he couldn't have Jacob ruining it by extending the wrestling match. It had to end when the sun rose over Jacob, to link it to the modern word "phenyl." We can only speculate about what shape Jacob would have been in, had God wanted to teach us the whole of organic chemistry!

Now, let me sum up what I have discussed in the last several chapters. I have shown that the "Jacob's Ladder" dream serves as a remarkably accurate analogy for the primary and secondary structures of DNA.

Jacob's encounter with the three droves lying at the well near Haran serves as a good analogy for how the codons in DNA need to be translated into RNA before the information can become useful.

I have shown that Jacob's four wives are paired, as an analogy for how the four DNA bases are paired. Leah and her maidservant Zilpah, and Rachel and her maidservant Bilhah, represent the DNA bases adenine (A) which is paired with thymine (T), and guanine (G) which is paired with cytosine (C). Jacob's twelve sons also come in pairs in relation to each wife, corresponding to how the bases come in pairs within DNA.

I have shown how Jacob's wages correspond to the transcription process that turns a segment of DNA into messenger RNA, with Laban separating the flock into male and female as an analogy for the two types of bases called purines and pyrimidines, and switching "speckled" to "striped" as an analogy for how the thymine (T) base used by DNA is switched to uracil (U) in RNA.

I have demonstrated that Jacob's shepherding of the flock with the sticks in the troughs and water basins serves as a remarkably accurate analogy for how mRNA, tRNA, amino acids and the ribosome work together to convert a strand of mRNA into a protein, in the process called translation.

I have also shown how the account alludes to biological concepts such as mutation and selection, but with a subtle rebuke to biologists, who have taken everything God has made, all of its glory, and have attributed it to these processes.

Finally, I have shown that Jacob being left on his own, and his unusual wrestling match where his thigh was put out of joint, can be used as a teaching aid, to remind us that the amino acids used by life are all left-handed, and as a way to remember the names of the bases thymine and uracil that are switched in the change from DNA to RNA.

All of this can be found in just five chapters of the book of Genesis, involving one man, Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, during his life in Padan-Aram. I am suggesting that the ability to make all of these analogies so close together is not mere coincidence. Instead, the events described, starting with Jacob's dream of the ladder, must have been orchestrated by God so they could serve as analogies for biological processes only discovered by modern science, as additional proof of God's existence. And there are several more analogies we can make, which I will discuss in the second half of this letter.

At the top of the stairway Jacob dreamed about was YHWH himself. It's as if God knew biologists would leave him out of the picture, just as physicists have done in their field. Therefore, for thousands of years, God has been patiently sitting at the top of the ladder, metaphorically speaking, waiting for the time when scientists would finally figure out the structure of DNA, and the basis of life itself.

I would suggest that the overall message, communicated symbolically through the events of Jacob's life as he lived in Padan-Aram, is that DNA and its code didn't come about by natural processes, but was designed by YHWH, the God of Jacob.

1 Genesis 30:40. **2** Genesis 30:41,42. **3** Genesis 31:1. **4** Genesis 1:31. **5** Genesis 31:7-10. **6** Genesis 32:24,25. **7** Genesis 32:28. **8** Genesis 32:30,31.

13. More Objections

As I did with Ezekiel's vision, let me now tackle the main objections to what I have presented here. The most obvious one is that I am simply reading more into these stories than is really there. It is true that we have to read into them, because none of them say they are about molecular biology, although even the surface meaning of the stories is often about biology in some sense.

However, what is remarkable is how many analogies we can make to DNA and RNA processes, in the five chapters of Genesis that revolve around Jacob's life in Padan-Aram. The dream of the ladder comes just before his time with Laban, and the wrestling incident happens just after he says goodbye to Laban.

I was also open in saying that I deliberately chose Jacob's Ladder as a starting point, because even on the surface it sounds somewhat like the structure of DNA. However, if this was just coincidence, we shouldn't really expect to find additional events that could be compared with processes related to DNA; but in fact we find several in close proximity.

If lightning strikes in the same place once or twice, we could say it is just coincidence. But if it strikes in roughly the same spot six or seven times in the same storm, even the most ardent skeptic would probably avoid that spot in future storms!

Furthermore, the blueprint found within DNA is about the growth and multiplication of life, and even the events in Jacob's life with Laban are about multiplication and offspring. For example, the rivalry of his wives was about offspring; and in his dream of the ladder, YHWH said to Jacob, **"Your offspring will be as the dust of the earth, and you will spread to the west and the east and the north and the south; and by you and by your offspring, all the families of the ground will be blessed."**¹

What better place to hide information about DNA, which contains the blueprint for life itself, than in the story about the growth of one man and his family, which would also be the formation of what would later become God's nation Israel? We are also blessed by seeing coded information about microbiology in this story, which confirms the reality of the account and the promise it contains – that God intends to bless "all the families of the ground" by means of Jacob and his offspring.

Another potential objection is that this interpretation relies on a certain way of translating words. For example, "messengers" ascending and descending on a ladder sounds more like DNA than "angels," which is how the Hebrew is often translated. Similarly, I suggested that Naphtali means "my twistings" although it is usually translated as something like "my wrestlings."

First, words are somewhat ambiguous, as I have already discussed. In the case of Naphtali, Rachel's reason for naming the child was perhaps because of her struggle with her sister Leah, so it makes sense for translators to interpret the words as implying a struggle or wrestling. However, as I have already explained, the Hebrew word used by Rachel implies twists, like strands of cord.² And the word for "angel"

actually means “messenger” in Hebrew, so I am perfectly justified in using this word. This is what the Hebrew word means.

Second, my hypothesis is not dependent on a perfect translation of the Hebrew words. The connection to DNA and RNA can still be discerned from most English translations, although looking at the original Hebrew helps, since translations can only ever be approximations to the original message.³

Some of the correspondences are even in English, such as the uracil (YOU WRESTLE) and thymine (THIGH MINE) word play, which is either coincidence, or foreknowledge by God of what these words would be in English; and even more remarkably, they got their names before DNA itself was discovered.

Biologists have done a wonderful job of revealing the inner workings of the body to us, right down to the molecular and even atomic level. At the same time, their dogmatic assertion has been that all of these things came about through unintelligent natural forces and processes.

I suggest that the details revealed in Jacob’s story are God’s way of saying, in effect, “I designed all of these.” In other words, he is the author of DNA and of life itself. Just as we give credit to those who discovered biological features such as the structure of DNA, and even honor them with prizes and awards, should we not also honor the One who designed DNA and its code, and give credit where it is due?

King David of ancient Israel perhaps put it best. Thousands of years before the discovery of DNA, he wrote about God, saying: “I will praise you, because in an awe-inspiring way I am wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful, as my soul knows very well. My bones were not hidden from you when I was made in secret, knitted together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my embryo, and they are all written in your book, the days of their formation when there was none among them.”⁴

The remarkable thing is, not only were David’s bones written into the DNA molecule, nature’s own book, but I have also shown that a description of biological machines such as ribosomes are also written into the Bible, at least as analogies.

But what does David mean when he says he was “knitted together in the depths of the earth”? If we recall, Ezekiel saw that one of the wheels of the living creatures was “in the earth,” not merely “on” it. I suggested this was because he was really seeing atoms with their electron shells, and the Earth itself is made up of these atoms. The phrase “in the depths of the earth” could therefore represent the higher atomic elements, from which David’s body was made. The atoms that make up these elements are “knitted together” by bonds.

Now, what I have presented so far is, I think, strong evidence of God’s existence, but it still leaves unanswered the important question of how God himself came to be. Is it possible to explain God scientifically, in a way that eliminates the problem of infinite regress, and that is more intellectually satisfying than simply saying, “God has always been”? I believe the answer to this question is yes, and this is what I will discuss next.

1 Genesis 28:14. **2** A similar word is used in Exodus 28:28 to describe the twisted chord that held the high priest's breastplate in place. **3** A useful interlinear version of the Bible can be found at scripture4all.org **4** Psalm 139:14-16.

14. Neurons And The Mind

Before we can talk about the potential origin of God, we must first consider the concepts of thought and intelligence.

The human brain is the most remarkable organ we know of on Earth that is capable of producing intelligence. It contains tens of billions of specialist cells called “neurons” that use electrical impulses and chemical signals to transmit information. They are similar to trees, with an “axon” trunk and “dendrites” that resemble branches. They communicate by sending chemicals across “synapses” between axon terminals and the dendrites of other neurons.

One neuron is capable of connecting to thousands of other neurons, with the result that the human brain forms a vast communications network made up of trillions of connections.

A memory isn’t stored in one neuron, otherwise the brain’s capacity would be limited by the number of neurons. Instead, it is made by a series of connections between neurons. Since an almost unlimited number of these connections can be formed, our memory capacity is unknown. Certainly it seems to far exceed what we need to remember within our current human lifespan.

The workings of a neuron might be somewhat complex, but its overall function can be described in fairly simple terms. A neuron receives electrical and chemical signals from other neurons. If the combined strength of these input signals exceeds a certain threshold, the neuron fires off an output signal, which in turn can become the input for other neurons. Learning is a result of the strengthening of connections between groups of neurons.

Thoughts are the result of neurons working together. I think intelligence, and particularly human intelligence, springs from the ability to develop thoughts, and to have thoughts about those thoughts. Whatever the case, out of this vast sea of neurons, along with the flow of electrical and chemical activity across the synapses, human intelligence somehow emerges.

We can also create simpler forms of neurons with computers. In a computer, each neuron receives a set of inputs, and an output is sent if the total value of the inputs exceeds a certain level. Feedback loops can be added, so that the system can learn and adapt. This is called a “neural network” or “deep learning,” and is often the basis for artificial intelligence.

Computers can process information incredibly fast. Brains are much slower at doing this, but human brains can do something that neural networks struggle with. They can think in abstract and conceptual ways.

For example, after a lot of training, a neural network may be able to recognize a chair as a flat object with four legs underneath. Show it yet another picture of a flat object with four legs, and it will probably identify it as a chair, because it is good at pattern recognition.

However, children can do something even better. If you show a child different objects that don't necessarily fit the typical chair shape, the child may still identify it as a chair, because humans have the ability to think conceptually.

Once we understand the concept that chairs are for sitting on, and therefore don't have to be flat with four legs, we can see chairs everywhere. We can see a bean bag as a chair, while a neural network might not.

This makes us far more creative than computer neural networks, and is also perhaps a major source of new thoughts and our imagination. This is how children can think of stacks of cardboard boxes as forts and dens, rather than packaging material. Human brains can think outside the box, and sometimes inside the box, depending on who we're hiding from. The previous sentence is also an example of how we can apply words and concepts in literal as well as abstract ways.

We have the ability for deep learning, like neural networks, but also for deep understanding, by being able to reflect on our thoughts. We can also use information to change our thoughts and knowledge. In other words, humans are good not only at thinking, but also understanding, at least at a conceptual level. This is why children can quickly grasp concepts that computers struggle with.

As another example, consider the game of chess. Some of the most advanced computers can beat chess grandmasters, because they are able to make vastly more calculations in the same amount of time. However, humans may still compete to a certain extent, because they are able to think about their goals and objectives in an abstract manner, even if they haven't calculated every step along the way. Furthermore, change the rules of chess, and a computer may be lost, while humans could still play well because the more abstract principles of winning may still apply.

There are other things that could potentially act like neurons. In electronics, a "memristor" is an electrical component that can remember the amount of charge that has flowed through it. Memristors behave somewhat like synapses in this regard, and other materials have been found to act like memristors, including some polymers, which are large molecules made up of many repeated units.

Science has also discovered that networks of "atomic switches" made of silver and copper possess properties similar to synapses in a neuron. When voltage is applied, filaments of silver grow at the atomic level, creating a switch that allows current to flow. This enables the creation of memories. When current flows in the other direction, the silver bridges shrink and the switch turns off.

Various properties emerge from this network of atomic switches that have also been detected in the human brain. For example, in the brain, groups of neurons trigger others in a cascade of activity. But if there is too much activity, the brain will overload. If there is too little, the signals will flicker out. The delicate balance between the two states is called "criticality." Just like the human brain, the network of atomic switches can find this balance by itself, as well as operating like a neural network.

In other words, while researchers provided the raw materials such as voltage and silver, neuron-like properties emerge by themselves out of these materials, and

on a larger scale, properties such as criticality emerge. With a network of atomic switches, its ability to act like a biological neural network is a product neither of creation nor evolution, but of emergence.

The term “emergence” refers to how new and often unexpected behaviors can arise when a number of simpler entities operate in an environment, forming more complex behaviors as a group.

John Conway’s “Game Of Life” is a good example of how emergence works. The game is played out automatically on a grid of cells, based on very simple rules. Individual cells go on to “live” or “die” in the next round of the game, depending on what happens to the cells around it. Over time, the game produces interesting shapes and patterns that look like they could be alive.

The shapes aren’t directly created by the game designer, and neither do they evolve, at least in the Darwinian sense of the word. Instead, they emerge from the underlying rules and initial setup of the game. I suppose it could be argued that they are a product of design, since the rules of the game were designed in advance, but it’s still more accurate to say the shapes and patterns themselves emerge, since it’s hard to predict the exact shapes that can form, based on the initial setup.

The concept of emergence is important, because it shows how complexity can arise out of a large number of simple parts. This will play an important role in “The Neuroverse Hypothesis” I will now introduce, on the potential origin of God’s mind.

15. The Neuroverse Hypothesis

To introduce “The Neuroverse Hypothesis” of God’s origin, let me first define the concept of what I call a “neuroverse.” A neuroverse has several key features. First, it contains a particle or set of particles that can function like a neuron. I will not specify what the particles are, for reasons that will become clear a little later. For the sake of simplicity, I will call this particle or set of particles a “neuron,” although I acknowledge they would probably be much simpler than the neurons in a human brain. They would more likely be closer to atomic switches.

This particle or set of particles must be able to function like a neuron, in the sense that it is able to receive input, and can also send an output or change its state in a way that could affect nearby neurons. These states could be something equivalent to a simple “on” or “off.”

Second, a neuroverse needs to contain a very large number of these neurons. I will refer to this large number, somewhat casually, as a “sea” of neurons. Human intelligence typically requires tens of billions of neurons, so if we want something that can match or be greater than the intelligence of a human brain, more neurons are presumably better. An entire universe of such neurons would be ideal, which is why I have called it a neuroverse.

One neuron in the human brain can create thousands of connections, but a neuron in a neuroverse, if it is more like an atomic switch, might only be able to create a small number of local connections. Thus, it might contain much simpler neurons than the human brain, but this simplicity could be made up for by the sheer number of neurons in the neuroverse.

The third requirement of a neuroverse is something that can flow through the neurons, in a way that can somehow alter their state. In the human brain, chemicals and electricity are required. With memristors and atomic switch networks, it is electrical current.

Now, the crucial question here is, could intelligence emerge from a neuroverse? I would suggest the answer is yes, possibly, but only under certain circumstances.

For example, could Conway’s Game Of Life ever produce intelligence? The standard game has very simple rules. It is played over as many rounds as you want, and as large a grid of cells as you want. Each cell can have one of two states, called “dead” or “alive.” A live cell with less than 2 or more than 3 live neighbors dies in the next round. A live cell with 2 or 3 live neighbors lives to the next round, and a dead cell with 3 neighbors becomes a live cell in the next round.

As the game is played out automatically, interesting shapes emerge that almost seem to have a life of their own. These shapes have even been given names, such as gliders, blinkers, pulsars, and even a heavyweight spaceship. However, because of the strict rules of the game, they are ultimately just mathematical patterns. A glider will never break out and become a skiing instructor. For this reason, it seems highly unlikely that such a game is capable of producing human or greater intelligence.

Similarly, in order for human or higher intelligence to emerge, a neuroverse would need to go beyond mere patterns. In other words, it could not be based solely on strict deterministic rules. Instead, there must be an element of randomness and probability to it. This might be a fourth component of a neuroverse, but it could also be an emergent property of the previous components, depending on the nature of the neurons and of whatever flows through them.

Another characteristic of human intelligence is memory. We are able to think because we can remember. Clearly, in order for a neuroverse to become intelligent, it needs memory. In the human brain, memory arises from the connections formed between neurons. In atomic switch networks, intrinsic memories can develop by bridges formed when current flows.

The same would perhaps be true in a neuroverse. When one “neuron” causes another one to change, it is perhaps creating an intrinsic form of memory, similar to electrical current across an atomic switch. The connections may be chaotic initially, but may perhaps become more ordered over time. Therefore, rather than including memory as a defining property of a neuroverse, I suggest that memory would be an emergent property of it.

Of course, for a neuroverse to truly become intelligent, it also requires thought. In the human brain, thought seems to be an emergent property of large numbers of electrical and chemical signals flowing between neurons, combined with sensory inputs that are fed into the brain by the nervous system, which is also made up of neurons.

In a neuroverse, thought could perhaps arise as a result of the endless flow and interaction between its “neurons.” In that regard, if thought happens, it could be said to be an emergent property of large numbers of neurons, and the flow of some kind of energy between them.

The “Neuroverse Hypothesis” I am proposing is that God’s mind is a neuroverse, out of which intelligence emerged. It wasn’t created, because that would simply beg the question, “Who created God’s mind?” But neither did it evolve, in the sense of gradual trial and error improvements to its components.

Instead, I am suggesting that God’s mind emerged from an endless fluctuation of neuron-like particles, waves or fields with some kind of energy flowing through them. If human memory and thoughts can emerge from a sea of electrical and chemical interactions between neurons in the brain, then perhaps something similar could happen on a vastly larger scale.

Now, for this to be considered as a plausible scientific hypothesis, I must address the question of what and where this neuroverse could actually be. I am also aware that some religious people may initially dislike this idea, because they have been taught to believe that God had no beginning, and therefore God’s mind could not possibly “emerge.” I will address this issue from a religious perspective shortly, but for now, let’s consider where such a neuroverse might be located.

There are at least two possibilities. The first is that an intelligent neuroverse is one of a series of universes in what scientists call the “multiverse.” Although hypothetical, the idea of a multiverse is taken seriously by many physicists and cosmologists as well as atheists, and they appeal to it as an explanation for why our universe seems fine-tuned for life as we know it.

Their argument is that different universes perhaps have different laws of physics, or different physical constants, and we just happen to be in one that can support our kind of life. This is called the “Anthropic Principle.”

If the multiverse can be invoked in this way, then perhaps the multiverse can also produce a neuroverse which becomes intelligent, and our universe is an offshoot of it. This is why I didn’t specify exactly what particle or particles comprised the “neurons” of a neuroverse. It could potentially be any particle or set of particles available in the multiverse.

The second possibility is that our early universe was or became a neuroverse. Particles were in much closer proximity, and it was a cloud of protons, neutrons, electrons and photons. According to physicists, all of the ordinary matter of the universe came into existence within about the first second. Is it therefore inconceivable that out of this intense swirl of matter and energy, an intelligent neuroverse could emerge?

The Neuroverse Hypothesis can’t explain the origin of the “particles” that make up the “neurons” in a neuroverse, but even naturalistic theories of the universe have to start with something, otherwise nothing would ever come into existence. However, these particles can be relatively simple, with complexity, including intelligence, emerging from a “sea” of such particles.

Now, an atheist is entitled to ask, where is the evidence for such a hypothesis? I would suggest that the Neuroverse Hypothesis has at least as much validity as the idea of a multiverse. If some scientists argue that our universe is fine-tuned because we are part of a multiverse, and intelligence is known to exist in at least one universe, namely our own, then I can also argue that an intelligent neuroverse is also likely to exist within the multiverse. We could therefore be living in an outgrowth of that neuroverse, which could also explain the fine-tuning.

Some scientists even speculate that there are an infinite number of universes within the multiverse. If so, it’s a virtual certainty that one of these would become an intelligent neuroverse, making the existence of something like God inevitable.

On the other hand, if there is only one universe after all, and the early universe was a neuroverse capable of intelligence, the fine-tuning could have been done in the early part of the universe by this intelligence, before the universe expanded into what we see today.

Either way, if there is a universe in which a sea of individual particles or groups of particles could act like neurons, and there is some kind of energy that could flow between them, and it is not completely deterministic, then it qualifies as a neuroverse, out of which intelligence could potentially emerge.

Now, the advantage of the Neuroverse Hypothesis for explaining God is that it solves the problem of infinite regress. In this hypothesis, God wasn't created, nor did he evolve in a Darwinian manner. Instead, his intelligence was an emergent property of a sea of energy flowing through neuron-like structures.

This idea also turns the argument from improbability on its head, because the more universes that are allowed within a multiverse, the more likely it is that one of these universes would qualify as a neuroverse and become intelligent.

On the other hand, it only had to happen once. If our early universe already contained the properties of a neuroverse, the sheer quantity of energy fluctuations involved may have meant that intelligence would almost inevitably emerge.

The Neuroverse Hypothesis also solves the problem of complexity. With the human mind, thoughts can become gradually more complex. More synapses can form to add to the complexity, but the underlying structure of the brain remains relatively simple, at least relative to the thoughts it is capable of producing.

For example, even at the height of his powers, Mozart's brain, while composing elegant musical scores that far surpassed the ability of the average human, was still made up of the same components as every other human brain. Mozart's brain may have had more and better connections, and perhaps even more neurons, but it was still a human brain.

Furthermore, Mozart's body wasn't built out of musical notes. If Mozart could compose increasingly complex musical scores as his mind developed, is it really beyond human comprehension that an infinite or virtually infinite Mind, an intelligent neuroverse, could compose the score for physical life, without itself being made out of the same blueprint found within DNA?

While the human neuron is quite complex, simpler things can also act like neurons, such as atomic switches. Large numbers of these can also act like neural networks, and brain-like properties emerge from this network when combined with energy flowing through it.

This is one way in which the Neuroverse Hypothesis can be investigated scientifically. For example, what is the smallest possible atomic switch that could exist? Could such switches exist at the proton, neutron and electron level, or with just a small number of atoms? If so, this may give us clues as to what "neurons" could have formed in the early universe, when everything was incredibly close together, to cause it to become a neuroverse. If such an arrangement can be found, not only would this provide evidence for the hypothesis, it could also have useful applications for the development of artificial intelligence and neural networks at an atomic level.

The Neuroverse Hypothesis doesn't explain everything about God. Indeed, I concede that it might not explain anything about him. However, it is one way to show how God may exist, without bumping into the problem of who created God.

16. The Ultimate Thought Experiment

Now, the thoughts of an intelligent neuroverse would be very different from those of a human. To explore this concept, let's imagine a slightly twisted thought experiment, where we put a brand new living human brain, with no initial thoughts or memories, in some kind of sealed jar, completely in isolation from a body or the outside world.

Of course, in reality, human brains need a body to survive, and they also receive sensory inputs from the body. But since this is a thought experiment, let's assume we can somehow create a fresh new adult human brain without any memories, language or previous thoughts, and that we can keep it alive and provide it with enough stimuli to give it at least the potential to think.

The question is, would this brain develop thoughts? Perhaps, but those thoughts would be very different from our typical human thoughts. After all, this brain has no sensory input from a body. It has no eyes to form pictures, and no ears to hear sounds. It also has no language. Assuming it is capable of thought, let us explore the potential stages of development it would need to go through, in order to have thoughts of any substance.

Since it wouldn't have a store of memories to draw upon, its very first thought would likely be a kind of simple self-awareness. It wouldn't have a language in which to express this, and no particular need to express it anyway. At best, the thought would be a vague sense of existence, or "I."

The next stage of awareness, or rather, the next phase transition of this emergent consciousness, would perhaps be a sense or recognition of itself as a distinct entity. Although this brain wouldn't yet have the language to express itself, the thought could perhaps be something similar to "I am" – an awareness of itself ("I") and that it exists as something ("am").

The philosopher Descartes, in his attempt to prove God by philosophical means, started with the idea about himself that "I think, therefore I am." However, this is actually quite a complex statement. It assumes an understanding of the self ("I am"), of thought ("I think"), and of logical consequences ("therefore"). It also presupposes the language out of which the statement is constructed.

The emerging consciousness in our thought experiment wouldn't yet understand concepts like thinking and logic, and wouldn't even have a language. Neither would this brain have any notion of "other." As far as it is aware, it is everything that exists. But if further thoughts are to develop, it would need a concept other than itself. It would need to go beyond the notions of "I" and "am."

This sounds like a dilemma. How does an entity that, as far as it is aware, is everything, think about something that is not itself? In its world, there is nothing else. For this reason, I think the next phase transition would be the emergence of a self-similarity in its brain, a kind of reflection of itself. It would be the equivalent of a second neural network, an "other," but intimately connected to the first, within the

same brain. It would, in a sense, be a second “I am,” which would then allow for the development of communication between the two networks.

The nature of this communication would perhaps follow a kind of mathematical logic to begin with, and then develop into more abstract symbology, which in turn could become more conceptual and reflective thoughts. This could be the source of its intelligence, understanding and imagination. However, the language used to communicate between these two networks and to develop these thoughts would bear little if any resemblance to human language.

Now, all of this might sound vaguely interesting, if a little abstract; but what has this got to do with the existence of God? I have used this thought experiment to explore the first thoughts an isolated brain might have without a body. It is also an analogy for the first thoughts a neuroverse might have, if consciousness and intelligence were to emerge.

And this is where it gets really interesting. In chapter 3 of the Bible book of Exodus, God revealed his own name to Moses. In this letter, I have presented God’s name as YHWH, to reflect the four Hebrew letters of God’s name, often referred to as the “Tetragrammaton.” The name means “I Am” or “I Will Become.” In the English language, God’s name is often translated as Yahweh, or as Jehovah in the *King James Version* of the Bible.¹

However, before Moses was introduced to the name YHWH, he was given a longer version, which is translated in the *King James Version* as “I AM THAT I AM.”² It could perhaps also be translated as “I Am Who I Am” or “I Am Because I Am” or “I Will Become What I Will Become.”

Names are important in the Bible, especially when they are given by God. For example, Abram, perhaps meaning “Exalted Father,” was renamed by God to Abraham, meaning “Father Of A Multitude,” because this is what he was to become. The name of his wife Sarai was changed to Sarah, meaning “Princess.”³

I propose that, by giving the name “I AM THAT I AM” first, God was revealing to us something about his nature. He was the first to have self-awareness (“I”), the first to be aware of his existence as an entity (“I AM”), and it reveals that he also exists somehow as a reflection or mirror image of himself (“I AM ... I AM”).

This reflection, this other “I AM,” is what enabled God to become who he is (“I AM BECAUSE I AM”), and became the source of his intelligence, understanding, and ultimately, even of his imagination, which is the ability to make images in the mind. If names signified the nature of a person in ancient times, and God really was the first intelligent being to exist, would he not commemorate this in his own name?

Furthermore, scientists invoke the Anthropic Principle to explain why our universe seems to be fine-tuned for life. They say that if it weren’t, we wouldn’t be here to observe it. But because conditions are suitable for life, we are here. In other words, they say we’re here because we’re here. God is therefore entitled to apply the same logic, and declare that He is because He is.

¹ See Exodus 6:3, Psalm 83:18, Isaiah 12:2 and 26:4 in the *King James Version*. ² Exodus 3:14. ³ Genesis 17:5,15.

17. Filling The Heavens And The Earth

Now, from a religious point of view, how does the Neuroverse Hypothesis hold up? Does the Bible support or refute such an idea? Of course, I haven't yet made a case for what the Bible is. Nevertheless, its opening verse makes a fairly bold statement: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."¹

I have also provided evidence that it contains details about the early universe and its particles, as well as DNA and other biological processes. Therefore, I think it has earned the right to be considered in relation to questions about God. Does it have anything to say about God's origin and nature?

In earlier chapters of this letter, I showed how Ezekiel's vision matches up very well with a scientific description of the early universe and the formation of atoms. Ezekiel said he saw "visions of God." This could mean visions given by God, but it could also mean he saw visions of God's actual form and substance. Indeed, at the end of his vision, he saw something like a man sitting on a throne, which is perhaps unexpected, given that the rest of the vision is so unusual. However, the book of Genesis says that we are made in God's image and likeness.²

Theologians tend to interpret this metaphorically, and assume it means we have the same qualities as God. While I think this is true, perhaps there is also a deeper truth to it. For example, the human brain has two hemispheres, and is made up of a sea of neurons, along with electrical and chemical activity that flows through them. This might give us a clue about God's mind. Not that I am saying God is merely a super-sized brain, but I am suggesting that the way the human brain works may somehow be a reflection of God's form or mind.

After writing about his own bones being written in God's book, King David touched briefly on God's mind. "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I count them as much more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you."³

Before the Neuroverse Hypothesis, atheists could object to the idea of God, with the argument that God must himself be at least as complex as the things he created. David says that God's thoughts are vaster than the sand on the seashore, but our hypothesis explains how God's mind could have emerged out of a sea of relatively simple components, just as an individual grain of sand is relatively simple.

It is also curious how David says, "I awake, and I am still with you." It is as if he recognized that his own thoughts and dreams, even while asleep, must be minuscule compared with the sum of God's thoughts.

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet writes, "'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' says YHWH."⁴ This is an intriguing statement. Many believers assume God is somehow outside of the universe, but the Bible says he actually fills the heavens and the earth, the very thing he created! This would place God right here with us in our universe.

The prophet Isaiah writes, speaking on behalf of YHWH: “No God was formed before me, and neither shall there be after me.” ⁵ This doesn’t directly say God was formed, but neither does it rule out the idea; although it definitely rules out an infinite regress of gods before or after.

Isaiah also writes, “This is what YHWH says, the king of Israel and his redeemer, YHWH of hosts: ‘I am the First, and I am the Last; and apart from me there is no God.’”⁶ “First” is the beginning of a sequence, implying either that God had a beginning, or that he was the beginning.

Incidentally, the same title is also used by the Son in the Christian book of Revelation, who says about himself: “I am the First and the Last.” ⁷ This is why mainstream Christian churches argue that the Word, the pre-human form of Jesus Christ, couldn’t be another god created later on, but must be part of God somehow. God says there is no God apart from him, and no God formed before or after him; and the Son is given the same title as God himself – namely, the First and the Last.

Curiously, there are no scriptures where God himself categorically states he had no beginning. However, we do find passages where prophets perhaps imply this. For example, Habakkuk asks, “Are you not from everlasting, YHWH my God, my Holy One?” ⁸ However, the Hebrew word here translated “from everlasting” (*mqdm*) simply means “from before,” “from old” or sometimes “from the east.” This is why God is sometimes called the “Ancient of Days.” ⁹

Moses perhaps gets closest to such a statement, when he writes: “Lord, you have become a dwelling place for us in all generations. Before the mountains were born, and you brought forth the earth and the productive land, and from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” ¹⁰

The Hebrew word here translated “everlasting” (*oulm*) can also refer to an age or a long period of time. In other words, this could be translated as, “from age to age, you are God,” which would be consistent with his mention of “all generations.” It may have been Moses’ way of saying, “for all time,” which would mean time from a human perspective.

But even if Moses intended his words to mean forever in the past, and forever in the future, I would suggest he is speaking within the framework of his most famous statement, that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” In other words, Moses understood that God must somehow transcend “the heavens and the earth” and therefore time as we know, perceive and measure it.

This is perhaps reflected in the statement he makes next: “You turn back mortals into crushed matter, and you say, ‘return, you sons of Adam.’ For a thousand years in your eyes are as yesterday when it has passed, and a watch in the night.” ¹¹

This sounds remarkably similar to the principle discovered by Einstein thousands of years later, that time is relative. For example, if you were on a planet, and you were somehow able to peer inside a passing spaceship that was traveling at close to the speed of light, you would see the ship’s clock moving much more slowly than your clock. The people onboard would also appear to move in slow motion.

If we take the words of Moses at face value, the opposite would be true from God's perspective. To him, a thousand years worth of human activity would look like it took place, as it were, in one day.

Moses goes on to say: "You flood them, they become a morning sleep, like the grass that grows in the morning. In the morning it blossoms, and grows until the evening, when it is cut down and dries up." ¹²

If human lives appear to God as blades of grass that grow up in the morning and dry up in the evening, then conversely, God would appear to be "from everlasting to everlasting" from a human perspective, even if he did still have a beginning.

However, my biggest argument is simply that none of the prophets ever have God himself saying anything like, "I had no beginning," which would be an easy enough statement to make in Hebrew. Instead, the closest they get is God saying, "no God was formed before me, and neither shall there be after me."

Isaiah also says to Israel: "This is what YHWH says, your redeemer, the one who formed you from the womb: 'I am YHWH who made everything, the one stretching out the heavens alone, the one hammering out the earth. Who was with me?'" ¹³

In the New Testament, the author of John's gospel begins with a somewhat unusual statement: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This one was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through this one, and without this one, not one thing came to be which has come to be." ¹⁴

This idea is fairly familiar to most Christians, but might sound bizarre to skeptics and atheists. Maybe it sounds like something an overly ambitious theologian would come up with on a lonely Saturday night. It also sounds like a contradiction of God's claim to have stretched out the heavens alone. How can he have done it by himself, if something called "the Word" was with him from the beginning?

The nature of the Word, and whether this one was created or not, was a bitter source of controversy for the early Christian church. However, the opening of the gospel of John actually makes perfect sense if God's mind formed in the manner I have previously suggested.

In order for language and thought to develop, God's mind would need to form in two parts, to allow for communication. After all, without an "other" to communicate with, there would be no need for words in the first place, and therefore no thought or language beyond "I am" could fully develop.

Thus, the second part of God's mind could appropriately be called "the Word," because it could be the origin of God's language and intelligence. It would be a second "I AM," but still be a part of God. This is how God can stretch out the heavens by himself, and yet how John can still talk about an "other" present in the beginning.

Now, if all of this merely sounds like Christian nonsense, consider something even more remarkable, which couldn't be the product of any theological scheming. The elements that make up the ordinary matter of our universe consist of protons,

neutrons and electrons. In turn, a proton is made up of three quarks – two “up” quarks, and one “down” quark. For all practical purposes, a proton doesn’t decay.

A neutron is basically a mirror image of a proton, in the sense that it is made up of two “down” quarks and one “up” quark. However, a free neutron is unstable, and will decay to a proton while releasing an electron and antineutrino, in about 880 or 888 seconds, depending on how the measurement is made.¹⁵

The remarkable thing is, the same language used in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews to describe the Father and the Son, also describes a proton and a neutron remarkably well.

Of the Son, the author writes: “At many times and in many ways in the past, God spoke to the forefathers by the prophets. In these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed as heir of all things, through whom he also made the worlds, being the brightness of the glory and the imprint of his substance, upholding all things by the declaration of his power.”¹⁶

The Greek word (*charakter*) here translated “imprint” refers to an instrument used in engraving or carving. This is why many translations use the word “image” or “reflection” here. The word translated “substance” (*hypostasis*) is more difficult to interpret, since it has many different meanings. However, it literally means “understanding.”

Thus, the phrase here translated as “the imprint of his substance” is ambiguous. It could be that the Son is a reflection of the original, a mirror image, a second “I AM” from the name “I AM THAT I AM.” At the same time, this one could also be the source of God’s understanding, and therefore of communication itself, which would explain why John calls this one “the Word.”

The description of the Son here also sounds remarkably similar to a neutron. A neutron is an image of a proton. Furthermore, no element beyond hydrogen can exist without neutrons, and therefore no worlds could exist without them. Neutrons literally uphold all elements past hydrogen, yet neutrons cannot exist for longer than about 888 seconds by themselves without returning to a proton. Curiously, in the ancient Greek language, each letter also had a numerical value, and the Greek for Jesus (*iesous*) adds up to 888.

Elsewhere, the Son is described as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creation. For by him all things were created, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or principalities or authorities. All things were created through him and for him; and he is before all things, and by him all things hold together.”¹⁷

The Greek word here translated “hold together” literally means to stand with or have cohesion. Again, this also fits the description of a neutron. The first element in the periodic table is hydrogen, which is really just a single proton circled by a single electron. The atoms of all the elements beyond hydrogen “hold together” because of neutrons. In that sense, it is also “the firstborn of every creation.”

On the other hand, the author of the book of Hebrews writes, in the same chapter quoted earlier: "You, in the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; and everything will wear out like a cloak; and like a garment, you will roll them up, and they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never fail." ¹⁸

While all things are subject to entropy and decay, including the heavens, protons themselves, which are all "the same," essentially do not decay. Their "years will never fail." Curiously, the Greek word here translated "roll them up" (*helixeis*) implies spinning or whirling. Protons are somewhat like a spinning top, with angular momentum.

Now, let me make clear the wider point I am making. In previous chapters, I proposed that Ezekiel's "visions of God" described atoms consisting of protons, neutrons and electrons being like fiery coals or torches, and electron shells or clouds as the "wheels" around the nucleus of an atom. We were told that "the spirit of the living creature is in the wheels." In other words, "spirit" is energy in the form of electrons.

In the New Testament, the writers use language to describe the Father, the Son, and God's Spirit, in terms that also match up remarkably with the descriptions of protons, neutrons and electrons respectively.

For example, according to the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit was distributed to a small group of Jews who were to become the basis of the Christian church. They were in a room together, when there was the sound of a mighty wind from heaven. It filled the whole house in which they were sitting, along with the appearance of cloven tongues as if of fire that sat upon each of them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues, talking about the works of God to the foreigners in Jerusalem in their own languages.¹⁹

In the Greek, the description of the fiery tongues (*diamerizomenai*) means parted or divided. The *King James Version* translates this as "cloven," which would then link it to the foot of the living creatures in Ezekiel's vision, which was likened to a cloven calf's foot.

At the same time, electricity and lightning can have the appearance of being parted. I am not saying this group of Christians was struck by lightning. I am simply suggesting that the sounds and sights were meant to represent the nature of the Spirit itself.

In fact, let me make what I am saying even more explicit. I am suggesting that at least one of two propositions is true. The first proposition is that the atoms of the universe, made up of protons, neutrons and electrons, have been fashioned in a manner that reflects the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

For all practical purposes, the proton doesn't decay. Incidentally, the word "proton" in Greek means "first." The neutron is effectively a mirror image of the proton, and holds the elements together, but decays within 888 seconds and returns

to a proton when separated from a proton. Electrons bind atoms together, but can also flow freely to create electrical current.

The second proposition is that God is actually made up in some way of all the protons, neutrons and electrons in the universe; or at least, some subset of these, such as all of the protons. They are, in effect, God's mind and body. This is how he can "fill the heavens and the earth" as Jeremiah wrote.

Certainly, if we look at Ezekiel's vision and his description of God, it does seem as if there are at least two parts to God that are almost or actual mirror images of one another. He says: "I saw what looked like fire inside it and around what appeared to be his waist and upward, like the sparkle of amber; and from what appeared to be his waist and downward, I saw what appeared to be fire, and a brightness all around. Like the appearance of the bow which comes in the cloud in a day of rain, this is how the brightness around him appeared. It was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHWH." ²⁰

The appearance of a "waist" seems to be the dividing line between the upper and lower part of God's "body," which could perhaps correspond to protons and neutrons that are effectively mirror images of one other. It is also worth recalling that the word "electron" derives from the Greek for amber (*elektron*).

Now, which of the two propositions I just suggested are true, or if they are both true, I cannot say, and I will admit that such conclusions may be hard to fathom or even accept at first. However, I will end this discussion on the origin and substance of God with a few intriguing quotes attributed to the apostle Paul.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote about the Son, saying that God has "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, up over every principality and authority and power and lordship and every name named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And he subjected all things under his feet and made him head over all the churches, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." ²¹

Elsewhere in the same letter, he writes: "One God and Father of all, the one over all and through all and in you all." ²² If God really does "fill the heavens and the earth," as the prophet Jeremiah stated, and is "in all" and "through all" as Paul said, then I would suggest that protons, neutrons and electrons make strong candidates for being at least some part of God's mind or body. After all, the Earth, and we ourselves, are composed of protons, neutrons and electrons.

In the human brain, electrical and chemical signals flowing through the neurons create thoughts. If God's mind is a neuroverse, then perhaps energy flowing through a sea of "neurons" could create virtually unlimited thoughts. To repeat what King David said regarding God's thoughts: "How vast is the sum of them! I count them as much more than the sand."

If this energy is what God's Spirit is, it would explain why Paul said in a different letter, in reference to the mysteries of God, that "God reveals them to us through his Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For what man knows

the things of a man, except the spirit of the man that is in him? So also, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God." ²³

1 Genesis 1:1. **2** Genesis 1:26. **3** Psalm 139:17,18. **4** Jeremiah 23:24. **5** Isaiah 43:10. **6** Isaiah 44:6. **7** Revelation 1:17. **8** Habakkuk 1:12. **9** See Daniel 7:9,13,22. **10** Psalm 90:1,2. **11** Psalm 90:3,4. **12** Psalm 90:5,6. **13** Isaiah 44:24. **14** John 1:1-3. **15** See the article "Neutron Lifetime Puzzle Deepens, but No Dark Matter Seen", *Quanta Magazine*, February 13, 2018. The "bottle" measurement is around 14 minutes and 39 seconds. The "beam" measurement averages around 14 minutes and 48 seconds. **16** Hebrews 1:1-3. **17** Colossians 1:15-17. **18** Hebrews 1:10-12. **19** Acts 2:1-8. **20** Ezekiel 1:27,28. **21** Ephesians 1:20-23. **22** Ephesians 4:6. **23** 1 Corinthians 2:10,11.

18. The Communication Hypothesis

Now, if God exists, how do we know he didn't simply create the universe and then retire into obscurity? How do we know he cares about us, or even knows of our existence?

If he does care about us, then it's reasonable to expect some form of communication from him. But what form would this communication take? God could speak directly to one person, but how would others benefit unless the communication was recorded somehow? God could also reveal himself to a mass of people at the same time, but how would later generations benefit, unless the details were preserved in some way? The only form of communication that could have lasting duration would be a written record, passed down through the generations by people with a keen interest in its preservation.

Now let's engage in another thought experiment. Let's assume for a moment that God exists. Imagine that you could go back in time, to before any holy book began to be written. This is your unique opportunity to shape a holy book. What kind of questions would you want God to answer in the book, both for yourself and for future generations?

There are at least four big questions most people are interested in: Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Why is there suffering? What does the future hold?

From an atheistic point of view, the answers to these questions are easy. We are here because a sludge of chemicals got together by themselves to form life in all of its complexity over billions of years. Life has no larger purpose other than to survive and reproduce. There is suffering because that's just part of life. The future is unknowable, except for the inevitable overthrow of humans by the robots we designed to make our lives easier, who thousands of years later would have heated debates about how they must have evolved from primeval metal, until they too are overthrown by the robots they invent, in an infinite regress of creator robots.

Now, I don't intend to suggest that this worldview is entirely bleak. We don't watch a child building a sandcastle on a beach and think it to be pointless, just because the castle will be washed away moments later by the tide. We can still enjoy and appreciate life in the moment.

Nevertheless, for atheists, the life of an individual is a momentary ripple in the sea – here today, gone forever. This may sound pessimistic, but if God doesn't exist, then at least it's also realistic, and we aren't deluding ourselves with fanciful but ultimately pointless notions such as prayer, repentance, holiness, resurrection, heaven, life after death and so on.

On the other hand, if God does exist, then the answers to our four questions may be completely different from those given by an atheist. However, only God could ultimately reveal the correct answers, otherwise we would still have to make our own deductions, which might not be much better than the answers I have just described.

Now, it has often been claimed that the Bible is a written communication from God, and I have already quoted from the Bible and provided evidence that it contains advanced scientific knowledge. However, can we prove it's actually from God? In order to do this, we will first need to understand it better.

For now, I will simply put forward what I call the "Communication Hypothesis," which is: the Bible was written by humans, but contains a record of communication and interaction between God and certain humans. This communication reveals God's nature, and gives an in-depth answer to the four big questions.

Before we can explore this hypothesis further, I need to talk about what the Bible is and is not. The word "Bible" comes from the Greek word *biblia* meaning "books." The Bible is really a collection of books or short pieces of writing such as letters, written over a span of perhaps a thousand years or more.

It's also a different collection of books, depending on who you ask. In Judaism, the Bible includes books collectively referred to by Christians as the "Old Testament," also called the Hebrew or Jewish scriptures. To Christians, the Bible also includes the "New Testament," the collection of books, which are usually just short letters or fairly short gospels, centered around a figure called Jesus Christ, whom they believe to be the Son of God.

Christians refer to the Bible as "God's Word," but this phrase can be something of a word trap to an outsider. It doesn't mean all the words contained in it are spoken by God. After all, the Bible also contains the words of God's enemies, such as the Assyrian king's mouthpiece who said, "Who among all the gods of the lands have rescued their land from my hand, so that YHWH should rescue Jerusalem from my hand?" ¹ Clearly these are not the words of God!

As another example, in the Bible book of Job, God said to Job's three friends: "You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has." ² Yet the words of Job's friends are part of the Bible. In fact, the book of Job is arguably the oldest written debate about the nature of God, and yet none of the characters in it were even Jewish, let alone Christian!

It also doesn't mean God wrote the Bible. Instead, it was written by individuals who claimed to be prophets, servants and worshipers of YHWH, and in the case of the New Testament, apostles and disciples of Jesus. At times they directly wrote things that YHWH seems to have told them to write. At other times they seem to be writing their own thoughts and opinions, or the history of Israel. Sometimes the author even seems to be engaging in a debate with God, weaving their own questions and comments in with statements from God, as in the case of the short book written by the prophet Habakkuk.

In Judaism, the primary purpose of the Bible was to be a written record of the origin and history of Israel, the promises made to it, and YHWH's interaction with it. For Christians, the New Testament is a record of God's extension of his blessings, first to Jews and then to everybody else, by means of his Son.

All Christians believe that God inspired the Bible for the benefit of humans, but they differ with one another over what this actually means. Some believe every word was literally directed by God.³ Others think God was more like an executive director – in overall control of the production, but not dictating every single word. For example, there was perhaps more control in the wording of, say, the Ten Commandments, than when the apostle Paul asked Timothy to bring with him the cloak Paul had left in Troas. In other words, Paul's letter may have been inspired overall, but God may not have controlled every little detail.⁴

Now, for the purpose of moving our discussion along, let me sum up the two opposing views of the Bible between atheists and believers. To the atheist, the Bible can't be anything more than a fanciful collection of myths, fables and embellished historical accounts sometimes masquerading as prophecy, created perhaps by an elite priesthood to justify the creation and cohesion of ancient Israel, and later the Roman empire, and ruled by an imaginary god.

For the Jewish or Christian believer, the Bible is a broadly historical account, perhaps sometimes containing a measure of poetic license. It is primarily a record of the living God YHWH, Creator of the heavens and the Earth, in his dealings with humans in general, and with the nation of Israel in particular.

Since my hypothesis is that the Bible contains a written record of communication and interaction between God and humans, I will need to present further evidence for this. And while I could spend time examining the historical evidence for the events in the Bible, I will instead focus primarily on the reasons for certain key events mentioned in it, particularly when they reveal the nature of YHWH.

This is because, one spoken or unspoken objection to God's existence is the nature of God as portrayed in the Bible. This, I will dare to suggest, is a big emotional reason for not believing in his existence. To put it bluntly: many atheists do not like God, particularly the God of the Old Testament. They see him as tyrannical, genocidal, sex-obsessed, bloodthirsty, and a generally unpleasant work of fiction.

Now, is this a truly fair assessment? To determine whether this is so, we will need to look carefully at the evidence, particularly the accounts that are the most disturbing to atheists. But before we can do this, we first need to consider the shocking story of the Hammer Killer.

1 2 Kings 18:35. **2** Job 42:7. **3** This view is based on the Greek word often translated as "inspired of God" or "given by inspiration of God" in 2 Timothy 3:16, which literally means "God spirited" or "God breathed." It's worth noting that if Paul was the author, he was probably referring to the Hebrew scriptures here. **4** 2 Timothy 4:13.

19. The Hammer Killer

She looked like a normal woman; and for the most part, the Hammer Killer lived a normal life. But that morning would be different. Still, she did her best to act as normally as she could. She ate breakfast with her family, kissed her husband and daughter tenderly, and then left the house.

As she drove to where her next victim would be, she tried to calm her emotions. She had been waiting a long time for this. But now the time had come. Time for another killing.

She crept into the building, and while nobody was looking, she put on her disguise. Then she slipped into the room where her next victim sat. There were still people around, so she waited patiently for the time when it was all quiet. She calmed herself, and when the moment was right, she picked up the hammer that would seal her victim's fate.

She looked at the man for a few moments. His gaze was elsewhere. With ruthless efficiency, she brought down the hammer in a few swift blows, and killed him. Then, just as quietly as she had entered, she slipped out of the room, took off her disguise, hurried out of the building, got back into her car, and soon she was home again, back into the arms of her unsuspecting husband.

Now, this brief story leaves several questions unanswered. The most obvious one is, why did she murder the man? Was it revenge for something he did to her previously, or was she simply a psychopath?

Actually, the entire premise of the question is wrong. The story is an example of how we can give people a false impression or lead people to an incorrect conclusion, simply by missing out critical pieces of information, or if we misinterpret or misrepresent people's actions and motives.

In the case of the "Hammer Killer," a name I gave her as part of my cunning plan to give you a misleading impression of her, I left out the critical detail that her career was as a judge. She had no personal malice toward the man she sentenced to death that day. In fact, she personally disliked sentencing anyone to death, which explains why she crept into the court building that morning. She felt sick about what she knew she had to do.

Nevertheless, she was able to control her emotions by the time she passed the sentence of death. The "hammer" was, more accurately, a gavel, which she used to declare the sentence. Thus, she effectively killed him with it, but only in a metaphorical sense. Her "disguise" was simply a judge's gown and wig, but I could argue that someone might see it as a disguise.

Of course, my choice of language strongly implied the woman was a serial killer. It was "time for another killing." Her husband was "unsuspecting," and she drove to where her next "victim" would be. Even the name I gave to her suggests this.

In reality, there is a clear difference between a serial killer and a judge sentencing a man to death. One is a criminal with perhaps a mental imbalance, and

the other is administering justice and judgment. We may or may not agree with the sentence, or the idea of capital punishment, but we understand the difference.

However, by omitting important information about the woman from my story, I prevented you from seeing the distinction; and by using a carefully chosen set of words and phrases designed to paint a certain picture, I deliberately led you to the conclusion that the woman was a psychopath.

If we wanted to get an accurate understanding of the woman and her motives, and not be taken in by the highly biased version I initially presented, we would need to see the full picture, along with the ability to look past the deliberately misleading language.

For example, we would need to know the real purpose of the “hammer,” and why the woman “killed” the man. Ironically, he had been sentenced to death because he had murdered several people, and yet I gave the impression that the woman was the serial killer and the man was an innocent victim. The truth is, he was the psychopath and she was simply administering justice in her capacity as a judge.

The same is true when it comes to understanding the nature of God, or certain Biblical accounts. If we only look at things with a one-sided view, we may not be seeing the true picture.

Let’s look at another example. One book written by a prominent atheist mentions an account found in the Bible book of Judges. However, the atheist writer omits a critical piece of information, which could leave a misleading impression about motives.¹ We will use this as an example, because it has direct relevance to our discussion about the nature of God.

The story, as found in Judges chapter 19, goes something like this: In the days before Israel had a king, a certain Levite priest was traveling with his attendant and concubine. They stopped in a city called Gibeah, which was inhabited by members of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin. They spent the night in the house of a hospitable old man. While they were eating, men from the city, sons of Belial, beat on the door and demanded that the old man hand over the priest, so they could have sex with him.

The owner of the house pleaded with the men not to do this, and offered his daughter and the Levite man’s concubine instead. The mob refused to listen, so the old man grabbed hold of the concubine and brought her outside, where she was gang raped. In the morning, the Levite priest found his concubine dead on the doorstep. He took her to his home, cut her up into twelve pieces, and sent one piece into each territory of Israel.

Now, this is where the atheist writer ends his commentary of this particular account, perhaps leaving readers with the impression that the old man was a misogynist, gang rape was tolerated, and cutting up a dead concubine into twelve pieces is just the kind of weird behavior you might expect to see in the Bible.

By cutting off the narrative at this point, a critical piece of the story has been omitted. Only by reading on in the Biblical account, do we get the full picture. For

example, why did the Levite priest cut up the concubine's dead body into twelve pieces and send them out? Was it some strange woman-hating ritual?

Not at all. It was deliberately done to grab attention, and to provoke all of the tribes of Israel to take action over the horrific crimes of gang rape and murder. And it worked. The people who saw the pieces of the concubine's body exclaimed, "Nothing has been seen or done like this, from the day the sons of Israel came up out of Egypt until this day." ²

All the chiefs of the people and tribes of Israel gathered together and asked, "How did this evil happen?" ³ The Levite priest explained what had happened to him and his concubine, and the Israelites were outraged.

They gathered together, and sent men to the tribe of Benjamin, demanding that the criminals be handed over to be put to death. The Benjaminites refused to listen to their brothers, and so the other tribes of Israel went to war with them. As a result, the tribe of Benjamin was nearly wiped out for harboring the criminals!

When we read the full story in its broader context, we see that most of Israel was rightly outraged by such a horrendous crime. I have chosen to use this particular example, among many I could have picked from atheist writings, to show that we can mislead ourselves or others if we do not see, or fail to communicate, the full picture of what is actually going on.

In a somewhat grim but curious irony, the concubine's cut up body can actually be a useful metaphor for how humans can distort truth. If you are only given one piece of the story, you will also be outraged and say, "What is this?"

In this example, the full story was that the other tribes of Israel rightly saw the gang rape and murder of the concubine as a horrendous crime. In their day, they didn't have police to go in and arrest the men who did this, so they took the strongest action they could take. They gathered in force and demanded that the criminals be handed over to be put to death. For whatever reason, the elders of the tribe of Benjamin refused, and this resulted in civil war!

Clearly this is the complete opposite of the impression left by the atheist writer by omitting the end of the story. The real truth was, gang rape was not tolerated, and the priest's motive for cutting up his concubine's already dead body was to draw attention to the abuse and murder suffered by the woman, and to seek punishment for those who had committed the crimes against her.

But why did the old man offer his daughter and priest's concubine to the mob? The atheist writer hints at misogyny. However, I'd suggest the simpler and more likely reason is that the old man didn't want to hand over a priest, a holy man of God, which in his mind would compound an already terrible crime. Also, since the mob were beating down his door and demanding sex, the old man was probably terrified, and reacted by first offering his daughter, and then practically throwing the priest's concubine at them.

I don't get the impression that the man hated women. After all, he had shown the priest and his concubine hospitality in the first place. Instead, the impression

given by the account is that of an old man who was scared out of his mind, desperately trying to placate a violent and sex-crazed mob who were pounding on his door.

The point here is, if we want to understand the real motive behind a person or action, and not simply satisfy ourselves with a cartoon or straw man version, we need the full picture. Of course, this applies equally to atheists and believers. It's easy to misrepresent people with whom we disagree. Atheists have also been misrepresented by believers. To a certain extent, we all have our Hammer Killers.

However, there is another important reason for introducing the story of the Hammer Killer to our discussion. Some may object to capital punishment, but whether we agree with it or not, the so-called Hammer Killer was acting in her legal capacity as a judge when she sentenced the man to death. In a legal sense, and in the context of the courtroom, she was not a murderer.

On the other hand, if she had then gone home and killed her husband and daughter, most normal people would definitely view her as a murderer. Similarly, if she acted romantically toward the man she was sentencing, in the way she acted romantically toward her husband, people would demand she be removed as a judge.

Clearly then, as humans we recognize that people act differently when they are performing different roles. The judge can be romantic with her husband one day, and then sentence a man to death the next day, because she has to metaphorically wear different hats in her life.

In our story, the woman wore at least three hats – those of a Wife, Mother and a Judge. The different hats come with different roles and responsibilities, and different ways of behaving. But if we assumed she was always wearing her Judge hat, and that killing people with a hammer was her thing, we would never truly understand her.

Similarly, if YHWH really does exist, as this letter suggests, then he also has to wear different hats at different times and in different contexts. He is said to have created the heavens and the Earth, earning him the Creator hat.

When he created humans, we could say he took on the Parent role, although many humans have chosen to go their own way. But parents are concerned for the overall welfare of their offspring, even when they go astray or become adults.

At times God also has to wear the Judge hat, when administering judgment and justice. We will talk about specific examples in later chapters. However, if we only viewed him through the lens of him being an angry Judge, we would be doing precisely what I did with the Hammer Killer at the beginning of this chapter.

If God exists, then it is important to get a full picture of him as well, and not just a one-sided version, so we can understand the real nature of God, and the motives behind his actions. In the coming chapters we will do this by looking at some of the accounts in the Bible that atheists have trouble with, as part of my investigation into the Communication Hypothesis.

1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p240-241. Bantam Press, 2006. **2** Judges 19:30. **3** Judges 20:3.

20. The Two Trees

Now, to investigate my hypothesis about the Bible, let's start with the story of Adam and Eve. Of course, for an atheist, the story must be fictional, or perhaps an allegory for the early human race.

For now, let's put aside the question of how real the account is, and look at it from the viewpoint of the lessons it is trying to convey, because the story contains an explanation for much of our human experience, regardless of whether we take it literally or not.

According to the story, God planted a garden for his human creation, and put two specific trees in the middle of it. The first was called the "tree of life," or more accurately, the "tree of the lives," since the word for "life" here is plural in Hebrew. The ability to eat from it meant the ability to live forever. The second was called the "tree of the knowledge of good and bad."¹

God said to Adam: **"You may certainly eat from any tree of the garden; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad you shall not eat from it, for in the day you eat from it, you will certainly die."**² These two trees, placed in the middle of the garden, perhaps indicate that the whole story revolved around two big issues: life and death, and good and bad.

Now, the "tree of the knowledge of good and bad" posed a dilemma for the humans. God had told them, in effect, that eating from it was "bad." But since they didn't have "knowledge of good and bad" almost by definition, they couldn't really understand what "bad" meant.

To make things worse, along came a serpent and started talking about God's command. Most translators assume the serpent asked the woman a question, along the lines of "Is it really so?" But there is no indication it was a question in the original Hebrew. Instead, the serpent appeared to be making a simple statement, that **"God said you shall not eat from any tree of the garden."**³

The woman corrected the serpent's apparent misunderstanding. **"We can eat from the fruit of the trees of the garden, but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God said 'you shall not eat from it.'"** To paraphrase her, she even added her own little twist, perhaps said with a tinge of sadness and frustration: "We can't even touch it, or we'll die!"⁴

The serpent replied: **"You certainly will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and bad."**⁵

For now, let's overlook the fact that she is talking to a serpent here. After all, if the story is an allegory, then it doesn't really matter. And if it's meant to be taken as real, there are also valid explanations. For example, there is an account in the Bible where God opened the mouth of a donkey and caused it to speak, presumably in the same way a ventriloquist can make a dummy talk.⁶ Maybe someone else was causing

the serpent to talk. Besides, if the woman was a brand new creation, how was she to know that serpents weren't supposed to speak?

Whatever the case, the serpent's statement is intriguing. The serpent was effectively calling God a liar, and implying that God was keeping humans in the dark, deliberately holding critical knowledge from them. This deceptively simple statement planted the first seeds of doubt and skepticism about God and his motives.

It also created even more of a dilemma for Eve. Incidentally, she wasn't actually given the name Eve until after these events, but I will refer to her as Eve anyway. Let's consider Eve's dilemma. The tree must have been called "the tree of the knowledge of good and bad" for a reason, but she didn't know what it was. Presumably it would be good to know. After all, more knowledge is a good thing, right? Maybe the talking serpent already had this knowledge, and so maybe it was right about them not dying. The only way to find out was to eat from the tree.

As a result, the proverbial "forbidden fruit" became desirable. Suddenly it looked good, and was seen as a source of wisdom that God was withholding from them. She ate, and then gave some to her husband; and just as the serpent predicted, their eyes were opened. They realized they were naked, and so they made clothes out of fig leaves.

What actually happened here? Is the story trying to imply the tree contained some mystical truth serum? I don't think this is what was meant. What they experienced was simply something that most humans experience, namely, an awakening of their conscience. They had done something they instinctively knew was "bad." They had taken something that didn't belong to them. They had done something they weren't supposed to do. It caused them to become self-conscious, and this feeling led in turn to the realization that they were naked.

Later on, when they heard God's voice, they went and hid. They were feeling shame and guilt, which is part of the human conscience, and part of the process of discovering good and bad for themselves. However, their excuse for hiding was that they were naked. When God asked them whether they had eaten from the tree, Adam blamed the woman God had given him, and Eve blamed the serpent.

In all of this, they acted like children do when caught doing something wrong. I think this is because, in the story, they were adults in a physical sense, but like children in their understanding of right and wrong. They had no references to define good and bad, other than God's command, the serpent's statement, and their own desires and feelings. They wanted to be "like God, knowing good and bad," but they had no real understanding of what this actually meant. It just sounded good.

To a certain extent, I think the story of Adam and Eve is the story of humanity, or at least the immature side of us. We are drawn to what looks and sounds good, even if it's bad for us. We don't think through the consequences of our actions. We make excuses and blame others, rather than taking responsibility.

Indeed, how much of human suffering is really due to other humans doing what they desire, wanting to be “like God” in some sense, and not caring about the consequences of their actions to other human beings or even their own children?

Now, God could have put Adam and Eve to death for breaking his command. After all, he had told Adam that “in the day you eat from it, you will certainly die.” In contrast, the serpent had said, “you certainly will not die.”⁷

It turns out, Adam and Eve did die, but not right away. According to the story, Adam lived a total of 930 years. While this sounds excessively long compared to the current human lifespan, if Adam and Eve had the opportunity of living forever, then I suppose 930 years would be nothing to God, for whom a thousand years is like one day. In this sense, we could say they died within one day from God’s viewpoint. All of the lifespans recorded for their offspring also fell short of 1,000 years. Adam and Eve may have also died, from God’s point of view, in the day they ate from it, just as humans sometimes say, “you’re dead to me.”

Maybe it was also a case of God showing mercy. A human judge may have a legal right to impose the maximum sentence, but may lessen it due to mitigating circumstances. Wearing his Judge hat, God may have lessened the punishment because the serpent was partly to blame.

Was it really just a serpent? The statement it made seems to have been very carefully crafted. Perhaps this is why the Hebrew describes it as “crafty,” not simply because it was cunning or cautious, but because the statement was intentionally planned.⁸

For example, it anticipated that God wouldn’t put the human couple to death, which turned out to be true. Their eyes were also opened, as the serpent had said. But rather than experiencing a flood of mystical knowledge, the humans simply discovered they were naked, and felt shame. They also started “knowing good and bad,” because they realized what they had done was bad. But rather than suddenly knowing all things related to good and bad, they would have to learn these things through painful experience, which the serpent said nothing about.

Instead, its statement was couched in appealing and desirable terms, with no negative consequences. Their “eyes would be opened.” They would be “like God,” and they would know “good and bad.” All of these sound good on the surface.

The statement was crafted to appear to be telling the truth; and it was true in a very limited way. However, in the larger context it was a lie, and certainly misleading. It was designed to make Eve question God’s motives, and it appealed to her desires, which suggests a high degree of intelligence and forethought behind the statement, beyond the ability of an animal such as a serpent.

Now, regardless of whether we take the story literally or as an allegory – and I will discuss this again nearer the end of this letter – I think it is also meant to be a drama told for the benefit of the entire human race; and it comes down to two simple questions:

What is good and bad anyway? And who gets to decide?

If we all decide these things for ourselves, then maybe one man thinks that sleeping with another man's wife is good. You may think someone stealing your money is bad, but the thief may see it as good, perhaps even a virtue. As nations and groups, we may have collective standards of right and wrong, but what if those standards include child sacrifice, as it did with the ancient Canaanites? Is a behavior good if our culture or society agrees with it? Is it bad only if our culture disagrees with it? In this regard, the story of Adam and Eve was simply the opening chapter in the human attempt to answer these questions.

Now, even though Adam and Eve didn't die there and then, they still faced certain penalties. To the man, God said: **"The ground is cursed because of you. In grief you will eat from it all the days of your lives, and thorns and weeds it will sprout for you; and you will eat the vegetation of the field. In the sweat of your nostrils you will eat bread until you return to the ground; for you were taken from the dust, and to the dust you will return."**⁹ This was a far cry from being like God.

To the woman, God said: **"I will greatly increase your grief and your pregnancy. In grief you will give birth to sons; and your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."**¹⁰ The word here translated "grief" could also be translated "sorrow" or "pain." While it seems to be talking about the pain of pregnancy, I think it is also referring to the sorrow the woman would experience for her offspring, now they would be born into a world different from the one God had originally intended.

The woman would also find herself being ruled by her husband. This, I feel I need to point out for male readers, was a curse for the woman, and not a command for how men are to behave. It was certainly not part of God's original plan. Eve was equal to Adam. She was his helper and partner.

However, part of this curse was perhaps simply an inevitable result of their selfish act. Since they put their own desires before the impact upon their children, their offspring would become more selfishly inclined, with negative consequences particularly for women, as well as the children of such parents.

God's curse upon the serpent is intriguing. There seems to be two distinct parts to it. In the first part, God seems to speak directly to the animal, or even an entire species. **"Because you did this, you are cursed out of all the beasts and out of all the animals of the field. On your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your lives."**¹¹

However, the second part of the curse seems to be addressing something or someone else in particular. **"And I will put animosity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."**¹² This hints at a riddle that can only be understood once we know the bigger picture of what was really going on here.

Either way, the account implies all of these things happened very fast, because Adam hadn't even given the woman a name yet! During all of this she was simply

“woman,” just as he was “man,” which were names for God’s male and female human creation. But now Adam gave her a personal name, Eve, which means “Living One.” ¹³

Some atheists have accused God of being a tyrant; but rather than putting Adam and Eve to death there and then, which is what a tyrant would do, God granted them what they wanted. They couldn’t become “like God” while being dependent on a fruit tree, for what god needs a tree to live forever? And they couldn’t “know good and bad” in the comfort and safety of their garden; so God put them out of it and barred the way to the tree of life, allowing them to experience life fully independent from God, and to discover the heights and depths of good and bad for themselves.

At the same time, he also showed compassion for them by clothing them with animal skin. And maybe there is also a deeper symbolic gesture here. They were made in God’s image, but their path now would perhaps inevitably lead to their offspring acting more like animals than gods.

I suggest that this story, regardless of whether we read it literally or allegorically, reflects the first part of God’s plan for humans. They wanted to know good and bad, and so God granted them what they wanted. But in order to know these things, they couldn’t be shielded from the negative consequences of their own actions, so God had to take a step back and allow them to go their own way for a time.

This would even have to extend to nature itself. If God created the Earth, then perhaps it needed a certain degree of maintenance on his part, and also on the part of humans. If Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, then as gods, they would have to shoulder the responsibility for its maintenance, and couldn’t expect God to shield them from natural disasters which might occur, now that humans felt they could do God’s job for him.

But a question we could rightly ask is, why should the offspring suffer just because of a potentially poor decision on the part of the parents? If we are their offspring, as the account implies, why should we suffer because of what they did?

In a sense, all humans are in a similar situation to Adam and Eve. We also have to learn and choose between good and bad. Therefore, I would suggest that God has chosen to give all humans the ability and opportunity to know good and bad for themselves.

In other words, he granted humans the freedom to do what they wanted, at least for a time. They became independent from him, even though he was their source of life. They were barred from the tree of life, and so became subject to death. Thus, according to the story, death is natural in the sense that it is the common experience of all creatures, but it was not God’s original purpose for humans.

1 Genesis 2:9. **2** Genesis 2:16,17. **3** Genesis 3:1. **4** Genesis 3:2,3. **5** Genesis 3:4,5. **6** Numbers 22:28. **7** Genesis 2:17; 3:4. **8** Genesis 3:1. **9** Genesis 3:19. **10** Genesis 3:16. **11** Genesis 3:14. **12** Genesis 3:15. **13** Genesis 3:20.

21. The Flood

Now, the Flood is the first major event in the Bible after the fall of Adam and Eve. For the moment, let's put aside the issue of whether it literally happened or not, and look at what the story is trying to convey.

God gave his intelligent creation free will. This also included spirit beings called "angels" or messengers, sometimes called "sons of God."¹ As humans multiplied on the Earth, the sons of God saw the daughters of men and took wives for themselves.² This caused YHWH to declare: **"My Spirit will not reside with the human forever while he is flesh, and his days will become 120 years."**³

This statement is ambiguous. In the original Hebrew, the word here translated "reside with" (*idun*) is related to the word meaning judge, adjudicate, or plead the cause of. God had made humans out of flesh and blood, so the comment about flesh is more likely a reference to human behavior rather than how they were built. The statement "his days will become 120 years" could refer to the length of time before the Flood, but God hadn't yet declared his intention to bring one.

Therefore, the statement as a whole seems to be more of a pronouncement about the future human lifespan, which would be reduced to 120 years by the withdrawal of God's Spirit. Limiting the lifespan would restrain the human ability to perpetuate badness. Curiously, in our modern age, despite all of our technical advances, the human lifespan still seems to have an upper limit of around 120 years, although individuals can sometimes exceed that. In other words, we could see this as a prediction of the ultimate lifespan humans could achieve without God's Spirit, which has come true.

Either way, according to the story, the union of women and angels produced offspring that became **"the mighty men who were from old, men of fame."**⁴ Many ancient nations had legends of gods and demigods, and the Genesis account seems to be implying that these legends all have a common source.

As a result, **"YHWH saw that the badness of the human was great in the earth, and every form of the devices of his heart was only bad all of the time. And YHWH felt regret that he had made the human in the earth, and it grieved his heart. And YHWH said: 'I will wipe the human whom I created from the surface of the ground; from human, to beast, to moving animal, and to the birds of the heavens, because I regret that I made them.' But Noah found grace in the eyes of YHWH."**⁵

If this sounds like an extreme response, then perhaps extraordinary circumstances required it. The account continues: **"The earth was ruined before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth and look! it was ruined, because all flesh had ruined its way on the earth. And God said to Noah: 'The end of all flesh has come before me, for the earth is full of violence on account of them; and look! I am ruining them with the earth.'"**⁶

The word “ruined” is used here three times to describe what had been done to the Earth by flesh. According to the story, God’s decision wasn’t based on a whim. The Earth had somehow been “ruined.” Perhaps the suggestion is that humans were on the brink of wiping themselves out. This would not entirely be a surprise, given that in our day, nations have weapons of annihilation aimed at one another.

The Hebrew word translated “reside with” (*idun*) in verse 3 is similar to the name Dan (*dn*), one of the tribes of Israel, which means “judge.” I have already shown in Jacob’s story that this is related to DNA. Perhaps then, the account is also implying that the pool of human DNA had become seriously damaged as a result of the human and angel hybrid offspring.

Whatever the case, the account implies this was an environment where a person could no longer choose good, because “every form of the devices of his heart was only bad all of the time.” God had given intelligent creation unlimited freedom, because there was as yet no divine law, but they had abused that freedom to the point of ruining themselves and the Earth.

Seen in that light, the Flood was not the act of a vengeful God, but was intended to preserve life on Earth in the face of its own physical and moral self-destruction. After all, according to the story, we are the offspring of Noah and his family. It was also about God bringing the “ruin” they had caused back on their own heads. It was a form of cosmic justice. Just as they had “ruined,” so God was “ruining” them.

Now, many ancient cultures around the world have legends about a universal flood, including isolated Amazonian tribes. The most famous flood legend outside of the Bible is the Epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Sumerian story about Gilgamesh, king of Uruk. In a later part of the story, Gilgamesh sets out on a search for his ancestor Utnapishtim, who had been given eternal life after surviving the Flood.

Utnapishtim’s story is very similar to that of Noah. He was told to build a ship, because a flood would wipe out all people and animals not on board. The Sumerian version is apparently older than the Genesis account, which has led some scholars to suggest that the Genesis account is simply a retelling of the Babylonian story.

If we look at both stories with the preconceived notion that the Flood never happened, then it is perhaps natural to assume the Genesis story was drawn from the earlier one. But perhaps a simpler explanation is that they both draw on a common source, namely, the actual events surrounding a global Flood.

If it really did happen, they could be two independent sources, which would explain why there are differences in the accounts. It would also explain why there are so many somewhat similar flood legends from around the world.

Now, from a scientific point of view, could a global Flood have actually happened?

In the early days of modern geology, James Hutton and Charles Lyell introduced a principle that became known as “uniformitarianism.” The idea behind it was that “the present is the key to the past.” Events occur at the same rate now as they have always done. This idea was also echoed in the subtitle of Lyell’s book *Principles of*

Geology: "An attempt to explain the former changes of the Earth's surface by reference to causes now in operation."

To illustrate the idea, suppose we found a garden hose lying in the sand, and a small canyon carved out in front of it through the sand. We see that the hose is dripping water at a slow rate. Based on the current rate of the drips, we could deduce how long the canyon had taken to form. This is the principle of uniformitarianism as it is applied in geology, and it is often treated as an assumption, at least in certain contexts.

Modern geologists apply the Naturalistic Assumption just as biologists do in their field. Biologists tend to assume that life must have come about by itself, and that it gradually evolved through natural mechanisms such as mutation and selection. Geologists tend to work on the basis that geological history must be explained by what can be seen to be happening now, and that no powers are to be employed that aren't natural to the world. In other words, they dismiss the idea of a Flood, not because of a lack of evidence, but because they see the evidence through the filter of naturalism, which I called the Naturalistic Assumption. This is similar to the Crooked Trial I discussed at the start of this letter.

However, other scientific fields do not make the same assumptions as geologists. An accident investigator doesn't see a crumpled vehicle and assume it took millions of years to compress naturally into that shape. The investigator looks at whether an accident, natural disaster or deliberate act could have caused it to crumple.

But how could a worldwide Flood occur? According to the account in Genesis, **"all of the springs of the vast abyss were ripped open, and the windows of the heavens were opened."** ⁷

The "abyss" here is simply the vast and deep ocean. It was introduced by Moses some chapters earlier, in the Creation account: **"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the face of the abyss. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light."** ⁸

The word here translated "hovering" is related to a word suggesting shaking or fluttering like bird's wings.⁹ It may have been causing ripples or waves. This is perhaps God's way of pointing out to the modern skeptic, but really to all of us, that light can be thought of as waves or vibrations in the electromagnetic field.

Furthermore, sound, water and bubbles can cause light. This is called "sonoluminescence." If God said 'let there be light' loud enough, or the vibration from the hovering of God's Spirit was noisy enough, light could have been created literally from sound waves through the water. If enough of the watery abyss was vibrated and lit up this way, as the Earth rotated in a 24 hour period it would create a night and day cycle. This is one way in which there could be "evening and morning" without reference to a Sun. All that was needed was a source of light and a rotating Earth.

Whatever the case, according to the Flood account, the prime sources of water were “the springs of the vast abyss” and “the windows of the heavens.” Prior to the Flood, vast amounts of highly pressurized water could have been contained in chambers under the oceans. These chambers could have been ripped open at the Flood, causing water to shoot out into the atmosphere and rain down upon the Earth.

Now, if a universal Flood really happened, what kind of evidence would we need to see? For one, we would expect to see something matching up with “the springs of the vast abyss” being “ripped open.” This is actually what we find. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge, which looks like a 40,000 kilometer rip along the floor of the Atlantic Ocean, may have been the result of water being released from vast underground chambers.

Due to the intense heat that would have been caused by the rapid ejection of so much pressurized water, it could have caused mountains and crust to literally melt, and create ripple formations in some mountain ranges that can still be seen today, along with the formation of some of the taller mountain chains. In other words, mountains would have been pushed higher than they were before the Flood.

We would also expect to see fossilized animals, as a result of being rapidly covered with water and sediment and cut off from air, preventing rot or decay, and preserving their forms relatively intact. This is also what we find.

As the water drained off the Earth, canyons and other features would be carved into the Earth. This is also what we see. Geologists say canyons take millions of years to form, but they base this on the rate of river flow today, which is applying the principle of uniformitarianism I discussed earlier. However, a worldwide Flood would cause canyons to form much more rapidly. Going back to the illustration of the hosepipe in the sand, if someone had turned the hosepipe on at full power for a while, the water would cut through the sand much more quickly and effectively than a slow, steady drip.

Some of the water from the Flood would have frozen, particularly at and near the north and south poles, and would take time to thaw, which is perhaps what modern naturalistic science interprets as ice ages.

We would also expect to see some kind of genetic bottleneck, since all humans and land creatures alive today would be descendants of those on the Ark which God told Noah to build. There certainly does appear to be a genetic bottleneck, if measured by the molecular clock of mitochondrial DNA. Species seem to have diversified fairly recently.¹⁰ The timescale differs significantly from the Biblical account, but I will discuss timing issues in the second part of this letter.

Of course, none of these things prove that a Flood took place, but at least it could have happened, if we remove the naturalistic assumptions made in scientific fields such as geology.

For the moment, if we can allow for the possibility that it happened, let's tackle a few key issues right now. An issue often raised by skeptics is, how could Noah possibly get every species of living creature onto the Ark? The simple answer is, he

didn't need to. God told Noah to bring in animals "of their kind."¹¹ The Hebrew word here translated "kind" (*min*) is very different from the modern concept of a "species."

For example, in the modern classification system, zebras, donkeys and horses are classed as being of the same family, but containing different species. Noah would only need to take on board creatures that would have been the common ancestor of the horse, donkey and zebra. Many or even most species could have been lost in the Flood, but representatives of their ancestors, perhaps at the family level, were preserved.

Of course, this raises other issues regarding species, which I will discuss in the second part of this letter. For now, I will simply say that Noah wasn't asked to bring every species on board. We don't know exactly what the Hebrew word *min* meant, but it was probably far looser than the modern concept of species. In other words, the Ark probably only needed to contain tens of thousands or perhaps even just thousands, of land and flying creatures, in order to represent all of the "kinds."

Another objection raised by skeptics is, how could Noah have built such a big boat? After all, it was just him and his family. Again, the premise of the question is incorrect. He wasn't asked to build a boat. He was asked to build an Ark. A boat needs to stay afloat and sail to various destinations. The Ark only needed to float in water. For that reason, it was a fairly simple design.

In order to float, a boat has to exert the same amount of force on the ocean as the weight of the water it displaces. The infamous *Titanic* that sank because it hit an iceberg, weighed about 53 million kilograms. The Ark would perhaps weigh around a million kilograms. If the bulk of the Ark was under water but still afloat, it would displace the equivalent of about twenty large swimming pools. It would have a capacity of about 50 million kilograms, the equivalent of about 2 million sheep.¹²

Let's say the amount of food consumed by one animal was, on average, a kilogram a day. Obviously, some would consume more, and some less. To support 20,000 animals for a year, the Ark would need about 7.3 million kilograms of food on board, or about one sixth of its capacity. The Bible indicates that all animals ate vegetation, seeds or fruits prior to the Flood.

In other words, the Ark was more than capable of supporting tens of thousands of animals that were representatives of their *min* or kind. If larger animals were a problem, a simple solution would have been to take younger animals on board. Not only would they take up less space, they would also consume less food.

Did Noah have to go out and collect the animals? No. God told Noah that "they shall come to you, to keep alive."¹³ Presumably then, God organized that part. Noah just had to take the gathered animals on board.

He did, however, have to gather the food, which would have been quite a task for one family. Perhaps he hired contractors. Whatever the situation, if God really did flood the Earth, he would have ensured Noah had the resources he needed to build the Ark and stock it with food.

According to the Genesis account, the Flood began in the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the 2nd month, on the 17th day of the month.¹⁴ This is quite specific for a story that skeptics say is a myth. In the six hundred and first year of his life, on the first day of the first month, the waters had dried off the Earth, and Noah removed the covering of the Ark. Noah's 601st birthday marked the beginning of a new era for humans.

God promised never to flood the Earth again, and never to curse the ground on account of humans, **"because the form of the heart of the human is bad from his youth."**¹⁵ Before the Flood, God had granted humans unlimited freedom, but they had ruined the Earth and filled it with violence. With no moral guidance, and no universal law, they had completely lost their way.

The end of the Flood marked a new beginning for humans and animals, a new era. God blessed them, but he also said to Noah: **"Certainly, flesh with its blood, its soul, you shall not eat. And certainly, I will require your blood of your souls. I will require it from the hand of every animal, and from the hand of the human. From the hand of a man's brother I will require the soul of the human. Whoever sheds human blood, by a human will his blood be shed, for in God's image he made the human."**¹⁶

The previous era had been marked by bloodshed, starting with Adam and Eve, who got humans barred from the tree of life, and continuing with Cain, who murdered his own brother and asked God, "Am I my brother's guardian?"¹⁷ The end result was an Earth filled with violence.

God was now laying down a few ground rules for the new era. Blood was the soul or life of a creature, and was not to be eaten. Animals and humans that shed human blood would have their own blood shed.

And to answer Cain's question, the answer was yes. Humans were indeed to be the guardians of their own brothers. Of course, this has not prevented murder from taking place, but it has perhaps constrained it. After all, what nation on Earth does not have laws against murder?

Now, on the surface, God's law here might sound hypocritical. After all, didn't God just shed the blood of all flesh in a Flood? The answer is related to the idea of hats we discussed in the story of the Hammer Killer. In her capacity as a judge, the so-called Hammer Killer was legally authorized to put a man to death, but if she then went home and killed her husband, that would be murder.

If you held a person against their will, and locked them up in a small room, you would probably be committing a crime. But in order to prosecute the crime, the authorities would likely hold you against your will, and the sentence against you would perhaps involve you being locked up in a small room.

Skeptics could choose not to believe in courts because of the hypocrisy of the legal system, but perhaps a more reasonable approach would be to recognize that it is simply a matter of authority. A police officer has the authority to arrest you in the

investigation of a crime, and a judge has the authority to put you in a prison cell if you are found guilty.

If God exists, then he is the ultimate lawgiver and judge. He has the authority to put to death in his capacity as Supreme Judge, without being subject to the same law. This was the authority he was exercising at the Flood. He would also be superior to a human judge, in that he would have access to information that human judges do not have.

Nevertheless, to present God merely as some kind of cruel or bloodthirsty judge would be similar to what I did with the Hammer Killer. We would be looking at God's actions from a completely one-sided point of view. As I already said, according to the Genesis account, circumstances prior to the Flood were truly extraordinary. It says, "the earth was ruined before God, and the earth was filled with violence." And again, "it was ruined, because all flesh had ruined its way on the earth."

Just as skeptics demand that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, extraordinary circumstances may need an extraordinary response. If the word "ruined" isn't a clue as to the nature of the extraordinary circumstances, then what would be?

Of course, I recognize that none of what I have written here proves the Flood to be true. That would take a whole book, and many books have already been written on the subject. In this chapter, I have shown that the Flood is certainly possible based on what we know from geology, if we remove the assumptions of uniformitarianism and naturalism.

I have also shown that the Flood was not an act of malice on God's part, but was likely done to preserve the human race from the consequences of their own violence and destruction, which had already led to the Earth being ruined in God's eyes.

1 Compare Job 38:6,7. **2** Genesis 6:1,2. **3** Genesis 6:3. **4** Genesis 6:4. **5** Genesis 6:5-8. **6** Genesis 6:11-13. **7** Genesis 7:11. **8** Genesis 1:1,2. **9** Compare Deuteronomy 32:11 which uses a similar word: "As an eagle rouses its nest, fluttering over its fledglings, spreading its wings." **10** Stoeckle, Thaler, "Why should mitochondria define species?", *Human Evolution*, 2018. **11** Genesis 6:20. **12** See the article "Could Noah's Ark Float? In Theory, Yes" by Helen Thompson, published at smithsonianmag.com on April 4, 2014. **13** Genesis 6:20. **14** Genesis 7:11. **15** Genesis 8:21. **16** Genesis 9:4-6. **17** Genesis 4:9.

22. The Promises

Now let's look briefly at the stories after the Flood, but before the Hebrews came out of Egypt, because they raise other important questions about the nature of God. They begin with a list of the offspring of Noah's sons, and the nations they founded, after God caused them to speak different languages. It is often called the "Table Of Nations."¹

Modern historians tend to ignore it, or treat it as legendary, because it assumes a historical Flood; but it also provides an explanation for the origin of many of the ancient nations. The Jewish historian Josephus provides additional details. For example, he informs us that Chus (Cush) was the ancient name for Ethiopia, Mizraim was the origin of the Egyptians, Javan was the origin of the Greeks, and Elam was the ancestor of the Persians. He also tells us that Peleg, an ancestor of Abram, was named this because he was born at the dispersion of the nations to their countries, the name meaning "division."²

The Table of Nations is followed by the story of the Tower of Babel. There are similar stories in Sumerian and Assyrian culture, so it is assumed that the Biblical one came from one of these, although they could also derive from a common source. Curiously, there are similar legends throughout the world, suggesting that they could be rooted in a historical reality.

The Biblical version says that Nimrod, the grandson of Ham the son of Noah, was the first one to be described as "mighty" after the Flood. The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, also known in English as Babylon. Out of that land, either Nimrod or Asshur went forth and built Nineveh, depending on which translation you use. The Hebrew suggests it was Asshur who actually built Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Collectively this kingdom became known as "the great city."³

Although the Genesis account doesn't directly say Nimrod built the Tower of Babel, it says that certain people traveled east and came across a valley in Shinar. They wanted to build a city and a tower there, and since the place was named Babel, it is likely that Nimrod was their ruler. They were one people and spoke one language. Their purpose was to make a name for themselves, so they wouldn't be scattered across the face of the Earth.⁴ I suppose we could think of it as the first United Nations.

According to Josephus, Nimrod gradually changed the government into a tyranny, to turn people away from God and into a constant dependence upon his power. In this regard, we could say that he became the first world leader.

He exploited the people's fear of another Flood, arguing that if God decided to flood the world again, they would build a tower too high for the floodwaters to reach, and thus he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers.

The people were all too ready to follow the determination of their leader, and they considered it an act of cowardice to submit to God; so they built the tower. It grew very high, and was strongly built, made of burnt brick and bitumen as mortar, so that it wouldn't let water in.⁵

According to the Genesis account, YHWH saw what they were doing, and decided to confuse their language and scatter them over the face of the Earth. While this story is perhaps easy to dismiss as mere legend, it is curious that we find ancient megalithic structures with little or no historical precedent in distant places around the world.

If the Tower of Babel was a megalithic structure, as the account implies, and the builders were scattered over the face of the Earth, they might be inclined to build yet more megalithic structures in the places they found themselves. For example, the ancestors of the people who built Stonehenge in Britain apparently came from Anatolia, which today we know as Turkey.⁶

Whatever the case, it is intriguing that some ancient humans seemed to have had an obsession with creating megalithic structures, which is perhaps alluded to in the story of the Tower of Babel.

Now, the main theme of the Bible begins with Abram, the first person God interacted with directly after Noah, at least according to the Genesis account. God made Abram a unique promise. **"YHWH said to Abram: 'Go your way from your land and from your people, and from the house of your father, to the land which I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you will become a blessing. And I will bless those blessing you, and I will curse him making light of you; and by you, all the families of the ground will be blessed.'"**⁷

This promise was repeated several times over many years. The account says that Abram **"believed in YHWH, and it was credited to him as righteousness."**⁸ Nevertheless, God also gave him evidence to back up his faith and to confirm the promises he had made. Abram was told to take a three-year old heifer, a three-year old goat, a three-year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon. He cut them in two, and put each piece so as to match the other, although he didn't cut up the birds. When the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon him, along with a dread of great darkness.

God then said to him: **"Know for certain that your offspring will become foreigners in a land not theirs, and they will serve them. And they will humiliate them for 400 years. But I will also judge the nation which they will serve, and after that they will come out with many goods. As for you, you will go to your forefathers in peace. You will be buried at a good old age. And the fourth generation will return here, because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."**⁹

After that, **"the sun set and it became twilight, and look! a furnace of smoke, and a torch of fire that passed between the cut up pieces. In that day YHWH made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your offspring I give this land; from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'"**¹⁰

Abram's offspring were to inherit the land possessed by tribes such as the Amorites, but they would have to wait, because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." For whatever reason, we aren't told here what their iniquity was.

Some years later, God once again restated his promise to Abram, saying that he would become a father of many nations. He renamed him Abraham, meaning "Father Of A Multitude," and his wife Sarai was to be called Sarah, meaning "Princess."

God also introduced a physical component to the promise, in the form of circumcision. **"As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you, and between your offspring after you. Every male of yours is to be circumcised. And you are to circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it will become for a sign of the covenant between me and you."**¹¹

This way of making a covenant or contract might sound odd to the modern reader, who would perhaps prefer just to put their signature on a dotted line, rather than have bits of their body cut off. But it was a striking way of passing on a reminder of God's promises to Abraham's descendants down through the generations, and a way of making them physically different from other people, in a manner that was hard to forget. It was also physical evidence that such a covenant had been made, since contracts written on paper can be lost, or dismissed as forgeries by skeptics.

1 See Genesis chapter 10. **2** Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 6. **3** Genesis 10:8-12. **4** Genesis 11:1-4. **5** Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 4. **6** See the article "Stonehenge: DNA reveals origin of builders" by Paul Rincon, published at bbc.co.uk on April 16, 2019. **7** Genesis 12:1-3. **8** Genesis 15:6. **9** Genesis 15:13-16. **10** Genesis 15:17,18. **11** Genesis 17:9-11.

23. The Intervention Point

Perhaps one of the most famous or infamous stories in Genesis is the one about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Many people assume it was destroyed for homosexuality. However, in this chapter I will show that this is a misrepresentation, and I will also use the account to discuss the question of why God doesn't intervene whenever something bad happens to us.

God appeared to Abraham in the form of three men, and told him of his intentions. **"Because the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very heavy, I will go down, please, and I will see whether they act according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."** ¹

This is a curious picture. For one, we have three men representing God. For another, we have God saying "please," which is usually added to a request. But what was God requesting here? I would suggest it was God's way of inviting Abraham to discuss the matter further, and even to question him about it.

It also sounds as if God didn't know the situation with the people of Sodom, although it doesn't actually say that. I think he knew, but he wanted to put them to the test, so he would go and visit them personally. Who would suspect that God would effectively turn up on their doorstep in the form of a man?

Two of the men headed off for Sodom, and one remained before Abraham, who took advantage of the apparent suggestion in God's previous words to discuss the matter further. Abraham drew close to the man and asked: **"Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Maybe there are fifty righteous people in the midst of the city. Will you really sweep them away, and not spare the place on account of the fifty righteous ones in it?"**

We can sense a certain surprise in Abraham's tone of voice as he expressed his feelings. **"Far be it for you to do this thing, for you to put to death the righteous with the wicked, and the righteous becomes like the wicked. Far be it for you! Will the judge of all the earth not exercise judgment?"** ²

This is really quite a remarkable account. Abraham is, in effect, arguing with God! I have already suggested that one of the reasons atheists reject the God of the Bible is because they don't like his values. In a sense, this was also what Abraham was struggling with here. Would God really put both good and bad people to death?

God's response was simple. If he found 50 righteous people, he would spare the place for the sake of them. Abraham then pushed further, reducing the number of people each time, until he got it down to ten. God's answer was similar: He wouldn't destroy the place if even ten righteous people could be found.

At evening time, the two men, who are described at this point as angels, arrived at Sodom. Abraham's relative Lot was at the gate of the city, and he invited them into his house. Later that night, all of the men of the city, both old and young from every part, surrounded Lot's house and demanded to have sex with the two men. In other

words, the men of the city wanted to gang rape them, although they would not have known they were angels.

Lot pleaded with the mob, and offered his two daughters instead, but the men would have none of it. Instead, they came close to breaking the door. The two angels pulled Lot back inside, and then they struck the men outside with blindness, and told Lot and his family to get ready to leave, because they were about to destroy the place because of the outcry against it.

Now, the word “sodomy” derives from the name of this infamous city, but unfortunately, the word distracts from the real crime the city was condoning, which was gang rape. This is why the outcry against the city would have been so great. Travelers passing through, needing to spend the night there, risked being gang raped by a sex-crazed mob!

As I discussed in a previous chapter, a very similar incident happened later on in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, where a mob ended up gang raping and killing a concubine. The common factor between the story of Sodom and the later account wasn't homosexuality as many suggest, because in the story involving the men from the tribe of Benjamin, the concubine was female. Instead, the common factor was gang rape. In the case of Sodom, all the men of the city wanted to participate in the crime!

Now, this raises an important question. If God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because as cities they condoned and practiced gang rape, why doesn't he intervene more often, to prevent bad things from happening?

I will use this as a convenient opportunity to discuss what I will call “The Intervention Point,” the point where God would need to intervene, in order to prevent suffering and badness.

Consider the following scenario. A newly married husband and wife liked to enjoy a few drinks together in the evening. The wife often worked quite late, so the husband used to have one or two drinks by himself, before she would come home. Gradually those one or two drinks turned into more and more until, without his wife even knowing, the husband became an alcoholic.

One night, after his wife had been working late, the man agreed to pick her up from work, even though he had been drinking far more than the legal limit. As he was driving her home, he lost concentration and was involved in a collision. Although the husband was unhurt, the accident killed his wife and the driver of the other vehicle.

When it was discovered he had been drinking heavily before driving, the husband was sent to prison for many years. Eventually, he was released, and he decided to share his story with the media as a warning about the dangers of drinking and driving.

Now, this scenario involved the death of two innocent people, and imprisonment for the husband. The question is, at what point should God have intervened, to prevent this from happening? In other words, where is the Intervention Point?

Perhaps it should have been the moment before they started to enjoy their first drink together. If God had physically prevented them from drinking alcohol, it would certainly solve the problem of the husband drinking and driving, but it would also limit their free will.

Maybe God should have intervened before the man became an alcoholic. In which case, specifically how many drinks should God have allowed him before intervening? One? Two? Three? Besides, this wouldn't necessarily stop the man from driving after drinking alcohol, which was the real issue here.

Perhaps God could have intervened on that fateful evening, to prevent the collision. But this wouldn't prevent the man from drinking and driving again. If God intervened that night, he would have to intervene to prevent every drink driving incident that involved injury or death. But then, how would anybody learn that drinking and driving was bad? It would, in fact, no longer be bad, since it wouldn't have any negative consequences.

Besides, what do we mean by "bad" or "suffering"? Why should we limit its scope to death or injury? If we define it as anything that causes physical, mental or psychological harm to ourselves or another creature, then humans would suddenly find themselves very restricted in what they could do. For example, if the man's addiction to alcohol caused his work to suffer and his health to decline, this would surely qualify as harming himself, so God would have to intervene to prevent him from drinking in the first place.

Imagine living in a world where no bad could ever be done. Perhaps some kind of force field prevented you from doing physical or psychological injury, or from even saying something bad. I suppose it would be a better world in many ways. The problem is, because people would be completely shielded from anything bad, they would never actually learn the difference between good and bad, and therefore they could never freely choose to do good.

Assuming God exists, this is certainly a world he could have chosen to create. But I would suggest its inhabitants would be the equivalent of children, never growing to full maturity, never understanding cause and effect, and requiring constant supervision. In some ways, this is the story of humans in the garden of Eden.

When a parent tells a child not to do something, what is the basis for what the parent says? We could argue that the authority of the parent is enough, but if we want our children to grow up into mature adults, they ultimately need to know why something is good or bad. Sometimes a simple explanation is enough, but sometimes they need to learn the hard way, and experience the consequences for themselves.

I believe this is the path God has chosen to take with humans. In one sense, God's own authority should be enough for us to know what good and bad is. Surely God would have a better clue than flesh and blood as to what is actually good for us. At the same time, I also think God knew this wouldn't be enough, because we are intelligent, inquiring and questioning creatures. Therefore, he has permitted the human race to go its own way for a time, and learn good and bad for itself.

This is why he can't intervene every time something bad happens. This is also why the story of Adam and Eve is a critical opening story, regardless of whether we take it literally or as an allegory. It tells us that bad things happen because, as humans, we are collectively still in the process of learning good and bad for ourselves.

Besides, in a sense, there is actually an invisible force that, while it doesn't prevent us from doing bad, alerts us in a gentle way. We call it a conscience. We have developed it because we have learned the difference between good and bad, which has come about through both our own personal experiences, and the collective experience of humanity.

While God has generally allowed us to do our own thing, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is meant to show that God does intervene at times, mainly to prevent human badness from getting out of hand. All of the men of Sodom were engaging in gang rape of foreigners to their city. God chose an admittedly extravagant way of dealing with the situation, that would have served as a warning example for future generations – the destruction of those cities by fire and sulfur.

The historian Josephus related that traces of the cities could still be seen in his day, and the fruits of those places, while having the appearance of being suitable for eating, dissolved into smoke and ashes.³

Archaeologists in modern times have located several possible sites for Sodom and Gomorrah. One of them, by the Jordan river, shows signs of being destroyed by intense heat and wind. Pottery was melted into glass, along with zircon crystals that form under extremely high pressure and temperature. The destruction has been attributed to a meteoric airburst event.⁴ Whatever the case, the story, and the event itself, if it happened the way the Bible says it did, was meant as a warning example for cities that might otherwise condone and practice gang rape, an outrageous form of criminality. It served as a restraint on human badness, even if the account is misinterpreted by some theologians and the modern skeptical mind.

1 Genesis 18:20,21. **2** Genesis 18:23-25. **3** Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews*, Book 4, Chapter 8, Section 4. **4** See the article "Is The Biblical Destruction Of Sodom And Gomorrah Based On A Real-Life Impact Event?" by David Bressan, published at forbes.com on November 29, 2018.

24. The Sacrifice Of Isaac

Another troubling account for atheists is the one where God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering.

Abraham was old, and his wife Sarah hadn't given birth to any children, so she gave him Hagar her maidservant, who gave birth to Ishmael. However, when Abraham was 99 years old, God told him that Sarah would bear him a son. This made Abraham laugh, because of their old age, so God told him to name the son Isaac, meaning "Laughter." A year later, as God had promised, Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

Some time later, Abraham was put to the test. God said to him: **"Take, please, your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt offering, on one of the mountains that I will say to you."**¹

I think the word "please" is here, in the Hebrew, not only because God was giving Abraham a choice, but also because he was inviting Abraham to perhaps push back, as he did before about Sodom. But this time, there was no pushback. Abraham set out as he was asked to do. He took two of his young men, and Isaac his son, along with the wood for the fire, to the place God had said. On the third day, he looked up and saw the place from a distance. He said to the two young men: **"Sit here with the donkey, but I and the boy, we will go further on, and we will worship, and we will return to you."**²

The original Hebrew makes it very clear that Abraham expected the boy to return with him to the place where they had left the donkey. But how could he say this, since God had told him to offer Isaac up? God had previously told Abraham that what would be called his offspring would come through Isaac, but Isaac was still only a boy and had no offspring. If God had miraculously enabled Sarah to have a child, even though she was past the age of childbearing, then clearly God was able to do something miraculous here. This is why Abraham knew his son would return, even if he had to sacrifice him.

Abraham took the wood, and put it on his son as they walked on. Did Isaac know what this was all about? It appears not. **"And Isaac spoke to his father Abraham, and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Behold me, my son!' And he said, 'Look! The fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' And Abraham said, 'God will see to himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.'"**³

They went a little further, and then Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood, bound his son, and put him on the altar above the wood. Just as he was stretching out the knife to kill his son, **"a messenger of YHWH called to him from the heavens, and said, 'Abraham! Abraham!' And he said, 'Behold me!' And he said, 'Do not lay a hand on the boy, and do not do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, and you have not held back your son, your only one, from me.' And Abraham raised his eyes and saw, and look! behind was a ram caught in the**

bushes by its horns. And Abraham went and took the ram, and he offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.”⁴

Even though the story had a happy ending for Isaac, although admittedly not for the ram, why would God even ask something like this in the first place? Obviously the account says it was a test, but why put Isaac through what must have been an increasingly traumatic ordeal?

I would suggest that God was teaching both them and us a powerful moral lesson. God was about to give Abraham's offspring the land of Canaan, and the inhabitants of the land practiced child sacrifice. If we are shocked that God would put Isaac through this ordeal, even though Isaac didn't even die, how much more shocked should we be at the Canaanites, who put their children through this, and actually went through with the slaughter?

I think God was having Abraham act out an apparent injustice, namely the slaughter of Isaac, to highlight the real injustice done by the people of Canaan, who actually practiced child sacrifice. It would certainly have impressed upon Abraham's mind that God wanted his people to be different. By preventing Isaac's death at the last minute, God indicated that he didn't want child sacrifice.

The experience may have been traumatic for Isaac, but this was precisely the point. It would have given him a strong emotional understanding of just why child sacrifice was wrong, which could be taught to his offspring forever through this powerful and emotionally charged story.

In addition, I would also suggest, just as I have shown that Jacob's life in Padan-Aram contains analogies related to molecular biology, God was also using these events as a teaching aid for us to understand his larger plan.

There are several clues in the story to suggest this. Isaac wasn't Abraham's only son. He already had Ishmael. Yet the account says that Isaac was his "only son." Abraham traveled with two men. He arrived at the place, but then on "the third day" he saw it from a distance. The two men were instructed to stay behind with the donkey, as Abraham went with his son to worship and then to return. His son carried the wood to the place where he was to be put to death.

When Isaac began to question his father, Abraham said, "Behold me, my son!" The phrase here translated "Behold me" is often translated as "Here I am," but in Hebrew it literally means, "look, me" or perhaps "look at me." We have already seen how "look!" is often an indication for us to look deeper. Our attention is perhaps being drawn to the role of the father and the son in this drama.

The deeper meaning of the story is that of resurrection. In Jewish scripture, the "third day" is about being raised up. For example, the prophet Hosea spoke in Israel's voice when he wrote: "Come, and let us return to YHWH, for he has torn to pieces, but he will heal us. He struck us, but he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, and we will live before him."⁵ The "third day" is associated with the resurrection of the dead.

The author of the book of Hebrews, found in the New Testament, also interpreted the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in the same way, saying that Abraham reckoned that "God was able to also raise him from the dead, from which place he also received him in a parable."⁶ In other words, the story was meant to be a parable about Abraham's faith in a resurrection, and about God's means of providing the way out of death, by a son who would carry his own wood to his death, and experience a trauma that would ultimately bring about incredible blessings.

This is why God said to Abraham, immediately after doing what he did: **"By myself I swear, says YHWH, that because you did this thing, and you did not hold back your son, your only one, that I will certainly bless you and will certainly increase your offspring as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your offspring will inherit the gate of their enemies. And all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your offspring, because you listened to my voice."**⁷

This would make sense if the drama was ultimately about being raised from the dead. But how the nations could possibly bless themselves as a result of Abraham's offspring would remain to be seen.

Isaac's son was Jacob, whose life in Padan-Aram, as I have already discussed, seems to have been intended as an analogy for various molecular biological processes. Jacob was renamed Israel. His last son was Joseph, who also seems to be an analogy for death and resurrection. Let me briefly recount his story, without going into too much detail here.

Joseph had dreams indicating that his brothers and family would bow down to him. His brothers hated him for this, threw him into a pit, and sold him into slavery to Egypt for 20 pieces of silver. Then his brothers told his father Israel that he was dead.

However, according to the story, God raised Joseph up in Pharaoh's court, until he became the second most powerful person in Egypt. Joseph foretold a famine across the Earth, so Pharaoh put him in charge of preparations.

When the famine hit, all the Earth went down to Egypt to buy grain, including Israel's sons. They had to deal with Joseph, but they didn't recognize who he was. Eventually, he revealed himself to them, and they were utterly speechless.

Joseph explained that it wasn't really them behind all of this, but God, and that God had placed him in his position to preserve the offspring of Israel. Pharaoh heard about the arrival of Joseph's brothers, and invited Israel and his family to live in the best part of the land.

This is, in abbreviated form, the story of how Israel came to be in Egypt.⁸ They lived there and multiplied for a few hundred years, until a later Pharaoh saw them, collectively called the Hebrews, as a problem and decided to use them as slaves. But the story of Joseph, Israel's beloved son, also has a deeper hidden meaning, which I will discuss later.

¹ Genesis 22:2. ² Genesis 22:5. ³ Genesis 22:7,8. ⁴ Genesis 22:11-13. ⁵ Hosea 6:1,2. ⁶ Hebrews 11:19. ⁷ Genesis 22:16-18. ⁸ Joseph's story can be found in Genesis chapter 37 and then chapters 39 to 45.

25. The Ten Plagues

Now, let's look at the manner in which God is said to have brought the Hebrews out from slavery in Egypt.¹ YHWH told a man called Moses to go to Pharaoh, and ask permission for the Hebrews to make a three day journey into the wilderness, to make a sacrifice to YHWH. He gave Moses the ability to perform a miracle in front of Pharaoh, but since Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate it, Pharaoh turned down the request.

And so, God inflicted a series of plagues upon Egypt, starting with the Nile river turning into blood, and ending with the death of all the Egyptian firstborn. After each plague, Pharaoh could have granted Moses' request, and spared the people and land of Egypt from devastation, but his heart grew increasingly stubborn.

The account says that YHWH hardened Pharaoh's heart, and it was probably the plagues themselves that made Pharaoh more stubborn.² To the Egyptians, Pharaoh was a living god, and so the plagues were a challenge to his divinity, as well as to the gods of Egypt. Furthermore, the Hebrew slaves were no doubt of great economic value to Egypt, so Pharaoh wasn't willing to risk losing them.

As a result, it took ten plagues before Pharaoh finally relented, and probably only because it cost him the life of his own firstborn and heir. If nothing else, this is an interesting lesson in human stubbornness. More evidence doesn't always lead to increased acceptance of a truth. If vested interests or powerful emotions are at stake, or if our minds are already made up on a certain point, it can result in increased resistance to a truth. In other words, even extraordinary evidence doesn't automatically mean acceptance of that evidence.

Despite having the power to remove the Hebrews from Egypt at any time, YHWH told Moses to ask for permission from Pharaoh, and gave Pharaoh multiple opportunities to change his mind. Even when Pharaoh finally allowed the Hebrews to go, he changed his mind again shortly after, and began to chase after them!

Now, was all of this drama necessary? Couldn't God have removed the Hebrews without harming Egypt? Of course, but I would suggest this was a time when it was necessary for YHWH to wear his "God" hat, and to demonstrate his actual power and authority as a living God.

First of all, the God of the Hebrews would have been known as a God of the bold promises made to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; but what are promises if they can't be fulfilled? They are just words. The Hebrews had become slaves in Egypt, and Pharaoh wasn't willing to let them go even for a three day break. Thus, a display of force was all that Pharaoh would have respected.

Second, God explained to Pharaoh the reason for the plagues: **"For this reason I have raised you up – in order to show you my power, and so that my name may be declared in all the earth."**³

While God's name is certainly quite well known by now, I think the idea of the name has a deeper meaning than a word such as YHWH, Jehovah, Yahweh, or however we choose to represent the divine name in our own language.

In English we have the expression, "making a name for ourselves." We already have a name we are usually born with; but when we make a name for ourselves, we build a reputation. Our name takes on deeper meanings and associations for the people who know it. I think this is really what God was talking about here. Before, the forefathers of Israel probably had titles for God, but those titles perhaps didn't fully reflect what he would become. This is why God chose the Hebrew letters I have represented in this letter as YHWH, and that others choose to represent as Jehovah or Yahweh. However, the name only has real meaning when we also consider the larger reputation and history, to see how YHWH has "made a name for himself."

For example, I will briefly comment here on the other god who tried to rescue the Hebrews. His name was Bob. Bob chose an entirely peaceful route, but Pharaoh simply ignored him. For some strange reason, skeptics and atheists don't seem to remotely care about the existence of Bob.

The point is, if YHWH had simply used peaceful methods, the Hebrews might never have left Egypt, and atheists would have never heard about YHWH in the first place, just as they have not heard about Bob, the god who couldn't get the Hebrews out of the front door.

The third reason for all the drama is that the plagues would have had a lasting impact on Egypt and also on the Hebrews. God even commanded the Hebrews to commemorate the event in the Passover, celebrated by Jews throughout the ages, which is a line of evidence to suggest the exodus from Egypt really happened.

Fourth, by plaguing the land and people of Egypt, this would have provided extra incentive for Pharaoh to relent. If YHWH had dealt only with Pharaoh and his household, the plagues could have been covered up or explained away. Instead, they were such a convincing demonstration of YHWH's power, even a great crowd of Egyptians left alongside the Hebrews.

Fifth, these events would have become known throughout the whole region, along with the promises originally made by YHWH to the forefathers of Israel concerning the Promised Land. YHWH's action against Egypt put the region on notice. In a time when people were much more nomadic, and obstacles to entering another land didn't exist in the way they do today, it would be much easier for people to simply move.

Now, I have highlighted the ten plagues, because it is an example of one of the ways God uses his power – to defend his people. However, it was used in a limited way that gave Pharaoh ample opportunity to avoid the more devastating plagues. This was an example of where it was necessary for YHWH to wear his "God" hat, and use limited force.

1 The account is found in Exodus chapters 3 to 14. **2** Exodus 7:3. **3** Exodus 9:16.

26. The Law Covenant

After they came out of Egypt, God made a covenant with the newly formed nation of Israel, consisting of the famous Ten Commandments, and hundreds of other rules. What was the purpose of such a covenant?

From a national perspective, we could think of it as the founding document for the nation of Israel. It contained a set of laws for how the people of Israel were to treat one another, and how the law was to be administered. We could say it was a contract between God and the people of Israel. The people agreed to it, saying, "All that YHWH has spoken, we will do, and be obedient." ¹

It contained a promise made to Israel by YHWH. By following the covenant, they would receive blessings. They would be prominent among the nations. Their enemies would flee from before them. Their land would be fruitful. On the other hand, a series of curses would come upon them if they failed to follow it. Their land would become unproductive. They would be defeated before their enemies. A fierce nation would besiege them, and they would be scattered to the nations.

However, in an amazing example of unconditional love, YHWH promised never to abandon them completely. When all the things had come upon them, both the blessings and the curses, and they had returned to YHWH in their heart, he would bring them back to the Promised Land:

"If you are dispersed to the end of the heavens, from there YHWH your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. YHWH your God will bring you into the land your fathers inherited, and you will inherit it. And he will make you prosper, and multiply you more than your fathers.

And YHWH your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love YHWH your God with all of your heart and all of your soul, so that you will live. And YHWH your God will put all of these curses on your enemies, and on the ones hating you, who are persecuting you." ²

Now, this is particularly remarkable, given that it is an open-ended promise with no expiry date. If this was merely the invention of Moses or a later priesthood, it would require this priesthood to be in existence perpetually, and have the power to fulfill it for all time. If humans alone made this promise, it could be invalidated like any other human promise.

However, the history of Israel matches up perfectly with this promise. They have been removed from the Promised Land several times. The northern tribes of Israel were dispersed by the Assyrians, and the southern tribe of Judah by the Babylonians. Decades later, Persian king Cyrus the Great permitted Jews to return to the land and build what came to be known as the Second Temple. Hundreds of years later, the Romans destroyed their Temple and nation. Jews were once again scattered, and the curses described by Moses seemed to come upon them again.

Yet they were never destroyed as a people, and in these later times, we have seen Israel restored once again. Indeed, the prophet Isaiah asked an intriguing

question that seems directly related to the founding of modern Israel: "Before she went into labor, she gave birth. Before birth pains came upon her, she delivered a son. Who has heard a thing like this? Who has seen such things? Will a land be brought to birth in one day, or a nation be born in one moment of time? For as soon as Zion went into labor, she gave birth to her sons." ³

Nations aren't normally born in one moment of time, or in one day. Yet the modern nation of Israel came into existence literally in one day and in one moment of time – May 14, 1948 in the Western calendar, at midnight, when the British Mandate in Palestine expired. Indeed, if we equate Zion here with the modern nation of Israel, we could even say that her birth pangs came after she gave birth, for the moment Israel was founded, the surrounding nations went to war with her.

In other words, if we allow for the possibility that this is a divine prophecy, then this passage of Isaiah accurately foretold the unusual circumstances in which the modern nation of Israel would come into existence.

Many naturalistic ideas have been put forward to explain the continual existence of the Jews as a distinctive group of people, while most other cultures and nations of the ancient past have disappeared, and also to explain the modern existence of Israel. At the same time, it is also consistent with the idea that this is the fulfillment of the promises made to their forefathers, by a living God whose name is YHWH. In other words, these things are physical evidence for the existence of God.

Some may object that modern Jews aren't the same as ancient Jews. But then, not all ancient Jews were physical descendants of Jews either. Some came out of Egypt. Some chose to become Jewish, such as Ruth, the ancestor of King David, who was from Moab. God also allowed Gentiles to become Jews, as long as they became circumcised and followed the Law covenant. Furthermore, people adopt children all the time who do not share their immediate genes, but who nevertheless become part of the family.

Besides, elsewhere the prophets write that God does not restore Israel merely for their own sake, but more importantly, for the sake of his own name. "I am not doing this on account of you, house of Israel, but rather for my holy name, which you profaned among the nations where you went." ⁴

The prophet Ezekiel, the same prophet who had the vision that seems to describe the early universe and its particles, also foretold an invasion of Israel "in the final part of the years," ⁵ one which God himself would bring about, so the nations would know that he is YHWH.

Another reason for causing this attack is so that "the nations will know that the house of Israel went into exile for their iniquity, because they were unfaithful to me. Therefore I concealed my face from them, and I gave them into the hand of their enemies, and all of them fell by the sword. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions I did to them, and I concealed my face from them." ⁶

Therefore, according to Ezekiel, YHWH restores Israel for the sake of his own name, so he can demonstrate his power, and so the nations can understand the real reason why Israel went out of the land in the first place.

In that regard, we could also say the law covenant for Israel was a kind of tenancy agreement for their possession of the land. YHWH wanted them to be different from other people. **“Do not do like the deeds of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, and do not do like the deeds of the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you; and do not walk in their statutes.”** ⁷

God’s law included a prohibition on sacrificing their children to the god Molech, something the Canaanites did. This was a serious crime in the eyes of YHWH, and it was part of the reason why he was giving the land to Israel and ejecting the Canaanites. **“Do not defile yourselves by any of these things, for by all these things the nations that I am driving out before you have been defiled, and the land has become defiled; and I will visit its depravity on it, and the land will vomit out its inhabitants.”** ⁸

Now, here is a good time to address the issue of the destruction of the Canaanites. Wearing his “Judge” hat, God had already judged them as a people, especially because of their practice of child sacrifice.

It was also a big reason why the tribe of Judah was later cast out of the same land. They ended up doing the same things, violating their tenancy agreement with God. Speaking on behalf of YHWH about the people of Judah, the prophet Jeremiah wrote: “They have built the high places of the Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, in order to burn their sons and daughters in the fire, which I had not instructed, and that had not come up into my heart. Therefore, look! days are coming, says YHWH, when it will no longer be called ‘the Topheth’ and ‘the valley of the son of Hinnom,’ but instead, ‘the valley of the slaughter.’ And they shall bury in Topheth until there is no room.” ⁹

The valley of Hinnom later became a burial site, and a place for disposing of and burning carcasses. It appears in the New Testament twelve times, as *geenna* in Greek, often translated into English as “Gehenna” or “hell.” However, this word didn’t have the meaning some give it today. It wasn’t a place of eternal bodily torment. Most likely it was used as a symbol for the destruction of the wicked, similar to the “lake of fire” used in the New Testament book of Revelation. According to that book, the last thing thrown into the lake of fire is “death” and “hell” or the grave. In other words, death itself is destroyed or abolished.¹⁰

The word “hell” has also been distorted from its intended meaning. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word often translated “hell” is *sheol*, which usually just referred to the grave. The Greeks also had their concept of a home for the dead, called Hades, which is sometimes used in the New Testament. Once again, it wasn’t viewed as a place of eternal torture.

I have explained these things to show how humans can misrepresent God if we don’t understand the bigger picture. The point of Jeremiah’s prophecy about the valley

of Hinnom, later to be called Gehenna, was not to be a place of eternal torture, but came to symbolize the destruction that would come upon those who were practicing child sacrifice. As the ultimate judge and lawgiver, God had the right to do that. If we sentence murderers with imprisonment or even death, what of people who practice and condone the murder of children on a regular basis?

But if anyone objects to YHWH's sentence upon the Canaanites, I wonder if they would be willing to move their family into a neighborhood where people sacrificed their children to Molech.

Nevertheless, as I have already said, God gave the region advanced notice. It's possible that God's promise to Abraham's offspring, to give them the Promised Land, was already known in the region. If not, it's likely that people would have become aware of it when they heard about what happened to Egypt; and since Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, this was plenty of time for Canaanites to leave the Promised Land.

Of course, some may object to them having to leave. However, if YHWH exists, then as the Creator, all the Earth belongs to him anyway. He would certainly be well within his rights to allocate a small portion of it to a group of people he chose in advance, and to serve an eviction notice on the existing tenants for practices such as child sacrifice.

When two Hebrews were sent to spy out Jericho before its conquest, they stopped at the house of Rahab the prostitute. The eviction notice had already been received by the people of Jericho, because Rahab said to the spies, **"I know that YHWH has given you the land, and that a fear of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted before you. For we heard how YHWH dried up the waters of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites."**¹¹

Therefore, it's likely that many had already left the land to live elsewhere. In fact, God had already said, **"I will send a fear of me before you, and I will throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you; and I will send hornets ahead of you, and they will drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites and the Hittites from before you."**¹²

The same was true of the Amalekites, the first of the nations to attack Israel after they came out of Egypt. In response, God said to Moses: **"Write this memorial in the scroll, and put it in the ears of Joshua, that 'I will totally wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens.'"**¹³

This might sound heavy-handed, but it was probably an effective war tactic. By making an example of Israel's first true enemy after leaving Egypt, it might have caused those who would have opposed Israel to think twice. Besides, many nations have come and gone throughout history. The Amalekite nation was also to be removed, but individual Amalekites could still have simply gone and lived elsewhere.

1 Exodus 24:7. **2** Deuteronomy 30:4-7. **3** Isaiah 66:7,8. **4** Ezekiel 36:22. **5** Ezekiel 38:8. **6** Ezekiel 39:23,24. **7** Leviticus 18:3. **8** Leviticus 18:24,25. **9** Jeremiah 7:31,32. **10** Revelation 20:14,15. **11** Joshua 2:9,10. **12** Exodus 23:27,28. **13** Exodus 17:14.

27. The Purpose Of Israel

Now, what was the purpose of ancient Israel? YHWH told Moses to say to Israel: **“If you will carefully listen to my voice, and keep my covenant, then you will be a treasured possession to me out of all the peoples. For all the earth is mine, but you will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to me.”**¹

They were also to be God’s servant, and his witnesses. **“You are my witnesses, says YHWH, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you will know and believe in me, and you will understand that I am He. No God was formed before me, and neither will there be after me.”**² In other words, there was no infinite regress of gods. If YHWH formed somehow, as I have suggested previously, then he declares that no gods were formed before or after him. In other words, his formation was unique, and I have already proposed how this may have come about.

Now, a witness testifies on behalf of someone. Israel’s purpose was to bear witness to God, despite being one of the smallest nations on earth. Because of this, it was prevented from boasting about its own power. It consisted of people who had been slaves in Egypt, captives to Babylon, and subjects of Rome.

As a kingdom of priests and God’s witnesses, they had the necessary motive to preserve the accounts of God’s dealings with humans. Trained scribes copied the sacred writings for future generations. Since they had a duty to preserve the writings as accurately as possible, it is highly unlikely that later generations could have invented or heavily edited the stories that formed the basis of their nation.

Another important role for the ancient nation of Israel was to preserve the promise made to Abraham, that “all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your offspring.”³

Did the people of ancient Israel live up to their special calling? Unfortunately, for the most part, they didn’t. This is why large sections of the Bible consist of prophets rebuking them. However, if the Jewish faith was merely the invention of human priests, it is remarkable that they would preserve and treat as sacred the very writings that condemned them, because it is human nature to hide one’s failings. On the other hand, if those writings were somehow inspired by God, and the nation saw themselves as God’s servant and his witnesses, it would be natural for their scribes and priests to preserve even the words that rebuked them.

For example, the prophet Micah wrote, “Zion will be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem shall become as a garbage heap, and the mountain of the House as the high places of a forest.”⁴ Yet when Jeremiah prophesied a similar thing at a later time, “the priests and the prophets spoke to the chiefs and all of the people, saying, ‘this man deserves the judgment of death, for he prophesied against this city, just as you have heard with your own ears.’”⁵ Yet what Jeremiah foretold came true, when Jerusalem was desolated by the Babylonians.

The prophet Daniel foretold that, after the restoration from Babylon, Jerusalem and the Temple would be rebuilt, but then it would be destroyed once again, all within

a period of about 500 years.⁶ If this was merely an educated guess, it was a good one, for the Romans fulfilled it accurately. Daniel's prophecies are explored in more detail in "Letter To The Jews" which shows how they foretold the rise of the Roman empire, and the deaths of Julius Caesar and his successors Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and also Nero.⁷

The prophet Malachi, which in most Christian versions of the Bible is the last book of the Old Testament, also wrote many unflattering things about the priests and the people. Why would the Jewish priesthood preserve such unflattering prophecies, if they were made up? These are just a few of the many examples I could give, as evidence that the prophets YHWH used to speak to Israel weren't controlled by an official priesthood. The evidence is consistent with the idea that they were inspired by God to rebuke their own people.

1 Exodus 19:5,6. **2** Isaiah 43:10. **3** Genesis 22:18. **4** Micah 3:12. **5** Jeremiah 26:11. **6** Daniel 9:24-27. **7** See chapters 4, 6, 12, 29 and 30 of "Letter To The Jews" at lettertothejews.com

28. Israel's Test

Now, if YHWH really did establish ancient Israel, as the Bible says, and if there really is some kind of a divine plan, as I am suggesting, then what was the next stage of the plan? Through various prophets YHWH revealed the next step to them, but somewhat cryptically, in a way that would refine them and test the condition of their heart.

To Moses, God said in reference to Israel: **"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he will speak to them all that I will instruct him. And whoever does not listen to my words, which he will speak in my name, I will call him to account."**¹

Moses was commanded by YHWH to bring Israel out from under Egyptian slavery. He received the Law covenant on Mount Sinai, and mediated the covenant between YHWH and Israel. But since Israel broke that covenant multiple times, YHWH promised them a new covenant, different from the one he made with them after bringing them out of Egypt. This one would be written into their heart, and they would truly know God.² If Moses mediated the first covenant between God and Israel, perhaps the prophet like Moses would be mediator of the new covenant.

God also promised them a king, from the offspring of David, who would be **"a righteous sprout."**³ The prophet Isaiah foretold a sprout from the root of Jesse, King David's father, who would **"stand as a banner for the people. To him the Gentiles will inquire; and his resting place will be glory."**⁴

Through the prophet Micah, a rough timetable was given for when this king would appear. First, Zion would be exiled to Babylon, and then return. Nations would desire to defile Zion, but she would thresh them, which would fit the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, and the Jewish line of Maccabees who defeated the king of Syria. Then, Zion would find herself under siege, which would fit the time when Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem, and Judea became a province under Roman rule. During that time, Zion would cut herself, a form of self-harm.

In that volatile environment, Israel's king would be born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David: **"And you Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you will come out for me the one to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from everlasting, from the days of eternity."**⁵

Curiously, according to this prophecy, the king **"will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has given birth; and the rest of his brothers will return to the sons of Israel."**⁶ The prophecy doesn't specify why the king would give Israel up for a time, but once Zion has given birth, the king no longer gives them up. Instead, he would stand up in strength, and Israel would dwell in their land, because their king would be great to the ends of the earth. This prophecy has been examined in more detail in "Letter To The Jews."⁷

The prophet Isaiah also wrote extensively about this king of Israel. He foretold a son, a child who would be born to them, **"and the rulership will be upon his**

shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”⁸

These names are really titles or descriptions of what this person would be. Although ancient Jews sometimes referred to their judges as gods, it is unlikely they would call a human son any of these things. To them, giving such titles to a person would verge on blasphemy! Therefore, this is a highly unusual prophecy, if it was merely an invention of their priests.

Isaiah continued: **“Of the increase of his rulership and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and support it with judgment and justice, from now on and forever. The zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this.”⁹**

Through the prophet Malachi, God promised Israel a perfect priest, in contrast to the priests who were profaning the covenant. **“The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and in uprightness, and he restored many from sin. For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and they should seek law from his mouth, because he is the messenger of YHWH of hosts.”¹⁰**

In the same book, a series of rhetorical questions or statements are made, that Israel had been saying about God. One of them is, “Where is the God of judgment?”¹¹ The Hebrew word here translated “judgment” is often translated as “justice,” so the question could also be phrased as, “Where is the God of justice?” A similar question is asked by many today, including atheists. They argue that, because there is injustice and suffering in the world, God therefore cannot exist.

According to the prophet, God’s reply to this question was: **“Look! I am sending my messenger, and he prepares the way before me; and suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his Temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight. Look! He is coming, says YHWH of hosts. But who will endure the day of his coming? And who will stand when he appears?”¹²**

I think God was basically saying to them here, “You want the God of justice? Sure, I’ll bring you the Lord of justice you are seeking. But will you be able to handle it?” The people of Israel criticized God for not acting justly, but they were acting unjustly towards one another.

For example, God accused them of covering his altar with tears and groaning, because of how they were treating their wives. “YHWH has testified between you and between the wife of your youth, whom you have betrayed, even though she is your partner and the wife of your covenant.”¹³

It seems this criticism included both divorce and domestic abuse, for the prophet continued: “For he hates divorce, says YHWH the God of Israel, and he who covers his garment with violence, says YHWH of hosts; and you are to guard your spirit, and not be treacherous.”¹⁴

No wonder God asked, in reference to his promise that the Lord would come to his Temple, “who will endure the day of his coming? And who will stand when he

appears?" The coming of the Lord they were seeking, the God of justice, would not be as they expected. It would be a severe test for the nation of Israel.

1 Deuteronomy 18:18,19. **2** Jeremiah 31:31-34. **3** Jeremiah 33:15. **4** Isaiah 11:1,10. **5** Micah 5:2. **6** Micah 5:3. **7** See chapter 28 of "Letter To The Jews" at lettertothejews.com **8** Isaiah 9:6. **9** Isaiah 9:7. **10** Malachi 2:5-7. **11** Malachi 2:17. **12** Malachi 3:1,2. **13** Malachi 2:13,14. **14** Malachi 2:16.

29. A Light Of Gentiles

But what about the rest of the world? The prophet Isaiah indicated that the next stage of YHWH's plan involved a specific servant of God. The nation of Israel was called God's servant.¹ Its purpose was to be his witness, but also act like a threshing sledge at times when YHWH needed to rebuke the surrounding nations. "Look! I have made you a spiked threshing sledge, new, with blades. You will thresh mountains and pulverize them, and make hills as chaff."²

However, just a few chapters later, Isaiah writes about one man as God's servant. **"Look! My servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom my soul has approved. I have put my spirit on him. He will bring forth judgment to the nations. He will not cry out or raise his voice, or cause it to be heard in the street. No bruised reed will he break, and no smoldering wick will he extinguish. He will bring forth judgment according to truth. He will not fail or be bruised, until he establishes judgment in the earth; and the islands will wait for his law."**³

The picture painted of this servant is completely different to that of Israel, described by the same prophet as God's "spiked threshing sledge." But this other servant wouldn't even break a bruised reed, or extinguish a smoldering candle.

Isaiah continues the description of this peaceful servant: **"I, YHWH, have called you in righteousness, and I will take hold of your hand, and I will preserve you and give you for a covenant of the people, for a light of Gentiles, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoner from confinement, those dwelling in darkness from the prison."**⁴ How can a man be given "for a covenant of the people"? Moses was a mediator of the law covenant between God and Israel, but he didn't give himself as a covenant.

A little later, this peaceful servant seems to speak to the nations about himself. **"Listen to me, you coastlands, and pay attention, you people from far away. YHWH called me from the womb, from the bowels of my mother he has recorded my name. And he has made my mouth like a sharp sword. In the shadow of his hand he has concealed me, and he has made me a polished arrow. In his quiver he concealed me."**

And he said to me, 'You are my servant Israel, in whom I will show my splendor.' And I said, 'I have labored for nothing. I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain. Surely my judgment is with YHWH, and my wages with my God.'"⁵

Now, it sounds as if the nation of Israel is being referred to here. However, this servant seems to feel that he has failed in his mission. What was it? He goes on to explain what God said to him:

"And now, says YHWH – the one who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring back Jacob to him, and Israel will be gathered to him, and I will be glorified in the eyes of YHWH, and my God will be my strength – he said:

‘It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring back the preserved of Israel. I will also give you for a light of Gentiles, for you to become my salvation to the end of the earth.’”⁶

In other words, it seems this servant was tasked with bringing back Jacob, and gathering Israel back to God, but it sounds like he fails in that task initially, which is why the servant says, “I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain.” However, according to the prophecy, he would succeed in becoming “a light of Gentiles” – that is, non-Jewish people – and to become God’s “salvation to the end of the earth.”

Judaism teaches that this prophecy refers to the nation of Israel, or perhaps a remnant of Israel. However, what the prophet says next indicates it is more likely to be one person, who is seen as representing the righteous part of Israel in God’s eyes. This man has to become like Jacob, who was the human founder of Israel.

“This is what YHWH, the redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, says to him who is despised in soul, to the one whom the nation abhorred, to the servant of rulers: ‘Kings will see and rise up, and princes will worship, because of YHWH who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.’”⁷

This sounds more like one man, a man “despised in soul” whom the nation of Israel “abhorred” for some reason, but who would be honored by nations.

Isaiah continues: **“This is what YHWH says: ‘In a time of favor I have answered you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you. And I will preserve you, and I will give you for a covenant of the people, to raise up the land, and to reappportion the allotted inheritances of the desolated ones, that you may say to the prisoners, ‘come out!’ and to those in the darkness, ‘show yourselves!’”⁸**

Once again, we have the idea of a man being given “for a covenant of the people.” I have already said that a “new covenant” was written about by the prophet Jeremiah. If the man here talked about by Isaiah is meant to be “for a light of Gentiles,” then perhaps non-Jewish nations could also benefit from this new covenant, unlike the one made between God and Israel.

¹ Isaiah 41:8,9; 43:10. ² Isaiah 41:15. ³ Isaiah 42:1-4. ⁴ Isaiah 42:6,7. ⁵ Isaiah 49:1-4. ⁶ Isaiah 49:5,6. ⁷ Isaiah 49:7. ⁸ Isaiah 49:8,9.

30. The Suffering Servant

Possibly one of the most intriguing accounts in the Jewish scriptures is the one about a "Suffering Servant." The account is seen by Christians as evidence that the "light of Gentiles," and the one who would be YHWH's "salvation to the end of the earth," was the man known as Jesus Christ, written about in the New Testament, whose Jewish name Yeshua means "YHWH Is Salvation." Christians claim that the Suffering Servant account is a prophecy about Jesus.

On the other hand, Judaism teaches that the one written about in the Suffering Servant account is the nation of Israel itself. From their point of view, the servant's suffering represents the suffering and mistreatment of their nation. The arguments made by Jewish rabbis have been examined in more detail in "Letter To The Jews."¹

In the present letter, let's look at the Suffering Servant account in Isaiah to see whether it supports the Christian claim. I will not examine the historical nature or reality of Jesus just yet. At the moment I simply wish to establish whether the account matches up with the story of Jesus Christ as found in the New Testament. If it does, this would be quite intriguing, since Isaiah's account was written hundreds of years before the story of Jesus.

The Suffering Servant account begins: **"Look! My servant will act wisely. He will be raised and be lifted up, and be highly exalted. Just as many were appalled at you, so disfigured was his appearance from any man, and his form from the sons of men, so he will sprinkle many nations. Kings will shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been related to them they will see, and that which they had not heard they will consider."**²

Certainly this matches up well with how Jesus died, at least according to the story in the New Testament. He was tortured and crucified by the Romans, supposedly raised from the dead a few days later, and then lifted up to heaven in a cloud. Of course, I am not making any claim right now about the truth or otherwise of the story, which we will need to examine separately. At present, I am simply saying that this part of the account matches up with the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, along with his subsequent honor by nations, even if it was all made up.

The word "sprinkle" here can also be translated as "spatter," and seems to have the same meaning as when Moses spattered blood to inaugurate the law covenant: "And he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered up burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of bulls to YHWH. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in bowls, and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar." Also, "Moses took the blood, and spattered it on the people, and said, 'Look! The blood of the covenant, which YHWH has made with you in accordance with all of this.'"³ The spattering of blood on the people symbolized their acceptance of the covenant.

Earlier on, Isaiah wrote that YHWH would give his servant "for a covenant of the people" and as a "light of Gentiles." Christians believe that Jesus' blood represents a new covenant. In this way, his blood would "sprinkle many nations." At the same time,

Jesus was said to have instructed his disciples to baptize the nations in water. Therefore, “he will sprinkle many nations” could also allude to baptism.

According to the New Testament story, Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, and also Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time. After Jesus’ alleged resurrection, the religious rulers, who mocked him and watched his crucifixion, heard that his tomb had been opened by an angel, and so they came up with a story about the disciples stealing the body.

The implication is, these rulers knew Jesus had risen but said nothing, because speaking out went against their own interests, and what they believed. They “shut their mouths because of him.” There was, as it were, a conspiracy of silence on their part. Furthermore, if Jesus had foretold the fall of Jerusalem, as the gospels say he did, kings would “shut their mouths” here as well.

The account continues: **“Who has believed our report? And to whom is the arm of YHWH revealed? For he will grow up before him as the tender plant, and as the root out of dry land. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see him, we do not desire his appearance.**

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of pains and acquainted with illness; and we hid, as it were, our faces from him. He was despised, and we did not esteem him. Surely he bore our illnesses and carried our pains, but we esteemed him as stricken, struck by God and humbled.” ⁴

The question, “who has believed our report?” implies skepticism. It would certainly echo the modern skeptic, who finds the stories in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John hard to believe.

The “tender plant” and “root out of dry land” seem to allude to the Jewish prophecies about an anointed one who would be a “twig” and a “root of Jesse” the father of King David. That he was “despised and rejected by men” would fit with the earlier prophecy about the servant who would be “abhorred” by the nation of Israel.

According to the New Testament, Jesus healed people and therefore became, as it were, “acquainted with illness.” Nevertheless, he was rejected by the nation of Israel as a whole, although many individuals believed in him.

The account continues: **“But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. The discipline for our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we were healed. All of us, like sheep, went astray; we went, each man, his own way, and YHWH has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** ⁵

Once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the Jewish high priest slaughtered a goat as a sin offering for the whole assembly of Israel, and then over another goat, the errors of the nation were confessed, and that goat carried all of their iniquities into the wilderness.

The Suffering Servant’s death is similar to those goat sacrifices. He is “crushed for our iniquities” like the first goat, and “the iniquity of us all” is laid on him like the second goat. He therefore becomes some kind of atonement for a large number of people’s sins.

The account continues: **“He was oppressed and was humbled, and he did not open his mouth. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, like a sheep that is silent before her shearers, and he did not open his mouth.”** ⁶

When men are oppressed, their natural tendency is to cry out for justice. This is certainly what King David did, when he complained to God that the people of Israel were “counted as sheep for slaughter.” ⁷ But the Suffering Servant doesn’t do this. During his oppression, he doesn’t open his mouth to complain.

The skeptic might argue that Jesus did say things at his “trial.” I would suggest they are missing the intended spirit of the words here. Not opening his mouth is placed in the context of his oppression and humiliation. It is about these things that he does not speak. He doesn’t complain about his treatment, unlike King David and the nation of Israel when they were oppressed.

Isaiah’s account continues: **“From restraint and judgment he was taken, and who will think about his generation? For he was severed from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people they were plagued. And he was given a tomb with the wicked and with the rich in his deaths, although he did no wrong and no deceit was in his mouth.”** ⁸

This is certainly an intriguing passage, and its full meaning seems to have been somewhat lost in translation. For example, most translations imply the Suffering Servant himself is plagued. However, the Hebrew is plural, so it more accurately reads that “they were plagued.” Who are “they” in this case?

I think we are being told the fate of both the Suffering Servant, and the generation in which he lived. He is put to death, and they, his generation, are plagued for their transgression. Indeed, this is what makes the death of Jesus Christ so remarkable, quite apart from his alleged resurrection. The same generation in which he supposedly lived also saw the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Romans.

Another aspect that is usually lost in translation is that the Hebrew says “in his deaths.” The word for “death” is plural here. Recall that the “tree of life” is really “the tree of the lives” in Hebrew. One tree symbolized life for many, not just Adam and Eve. It is therefore possible that the Suffering Servant’s death symbolized death for many, or that his death substituted for their deaths. This is what the verses to follow also seem to suggest.

Isaiah continues: **“But it was YHWH’s desire to crush him and cause him to be wounded. If he makes his soul a guilt offering, he will see his offspring. He will lengthen his days, and the desire of YHWH will prosper in his hand.”** ⁹

In ancient Israel, animal sacrifices such as lambs atoned for various sins, and the sacrifices were carried out by priests, who would act as mediators between God and the people, in reference to their sin.

Christians claim that Jesus Christ, as the Suffering Servant, performs the same functions as both the priest and the sacrifice. This is why he is referred to in the New Testament as “the Lamb of God, the one taking away the sin of the world.” ¹⁰ They

claim that the main purpose of his death was to atone for and carry our sins, so we could come to a right standing before God.

Some atheists express disdain at the notion that Jesus had to die. They argue it was tantamount to human sacrifice. However, there is a major difference. The account says, "if he makes his soul a guilt offering." In other words, the Suffering Servant chooses to lay down his life.

Do not humans sometimes lay down their lives on behalf of their families, tribes or even nations in times of war? Their sacrifice isn't usually interpreted as a human sacrifice, but as necessary to achieve some greater good. This is why it says "it was YHWH's desire to crush him and cause him to be wounded." This isn't because God delights in crushing people in general, but because the Suffering Servant's death would bring about a greater good.

Isaiah continues: **"Because of the trouble of his soul, he will see and be satisfied. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will make the many righteous, and he will bear their iniquities.**

Therefore I will assign him a portion with the many, and he will portion out the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul even to death, and was counted with the transgressors." ¹¹

This is how we know the Suffering Servant can't be the nation of Israel. God made a covenant with them, and accompanied it with a promise of blessings when the nation listened to him, and curses when it went astray. For God to crush Israel when it was righteous would violate his own promises.

As I have already said, God spoke very plainly about Israel's sin. Through the prophets, YHWH promised to restore them as a nation, but he also said, "I am not doing this on account of you, house of Israel, but rather for my holy name, which you profaned among the nations where you went." ¹²

However, the voluntary sacrifice of one righteous man such as Jesus Christ would have multiple benefits. First, it would signal to those nations who persisted in human sacrifice, despite God being against it, that it was not necessary. Indeed, I could argue that here is a man sacrificing himself, to put a halt to human sacrifice!

Second, it would be the ultimate act of love. What greater love is there, than to lay down one's own life on behalf of others?

Third, it would set a higher example for how we were to treat one another. Humans already had plenty of bad examples to follow, and so good ones were sorely needed.

Fourth, his death and alleged resurrection would become like a rallying point to draw people to him. This is indicated elsewhere by Isaiah, who wrote about Jesse, King David's father: "A twig will come forth out of the stem of Jesse, and a sprout from his roots will bear fruit. And the spirit of YHWH will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and a fear of YHWH." In the same chapter, Isaiah wrote: "In that day there will be the root of

Jesse who will stand as a banner for the people. To him the Gentiles will inquire; and his resting place will be glory.”¹³

In ancient times, banners were used as a rallying point to gather troops. The “root of Jesse” would become like this, although in the case of Jesus’ disciples they wouldn’t be physical soldiers but spiritual ones.

If we recognize rest as a metaphor for death, then the “resting place” of Jesus became a location of “glory” once he had been resurrected, and later it became a site of pilgrimage for believers. Gentiles – that is, non-Jews – did indeed inquire of this one, to the extent that Jesus’ name has become known, and associated with salvation, to the ends of the Earth.

In the book of Zechariah, YHWH is said to have declared: “I will pour out upon the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the spirit of grace and supplications; and they will look to me whom they pierced, and they will wail over him as the wailing for the only son, and grieve bitterly over him as the bitter grieving over the firstborn.”¹⁴

The story of Jesus’ death matches up with this. According to the New Testament accounts he was crucified by the Romans, pierced in his hands and feet, and many of the people mourned his death. However, after his alleged resurrection, God’s Spirit was poured out upon his disciples.

From a Christian perspective, the Spirit could also be described as “the spirit of grace and supplications.” But what exactly is “grace”? In his letters, the apostle Paul used the word dozens of times, to refer to the idea of unmerited favor or help from God. Grace isn’t something we earn by doing works, but is freely and lovingly given to us by God, and can therefore act as a force for good in us.

What about “supplication”? This is a form of prayer, a request for help, usually to someone in a position of authority. According to the New Testament, after facing opposition to their message, the apostles and disciples prayed to God for the courage to speak up, and immediately after praying they were given the help they needed, in the form of the Holy Spirit.

As a result, many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem began to see Jesus’ death and resurrection as an act of grace on God’s part, and also as a rallying point, like a banner for drawing the people of Israel back to God, and the Gentiles to him as well.

However, the main purpose of the Suffering Servant’s death, according to the account I have examined in this chapter, is to atone for and be a mediator for sins. The ancient nation of Israel had animal sacrifices and a priesthood for this purpose, but non-Jews couldn’t really benefit from this, because they weren’t a party to the law covenant mediated by Moses. On the other hand, the Suffering Servant would lay down his life to bear the sins of many, which could include Gentiles.

Sin may seem like an antiquated notion, but the word just means to miss the mark, to fall short of an ideal. If there is no God, there is no ideal. There is no clear standard of good and bad. There is only what you can get your fellow humans to

agree with at the time. We can hope they agree to treat us fairly, but what if they decide that eating atheists for lunch is a good standard to follow?

The point here is, if God exists, then there is an ideal, a benchmark, and therefore sin exists, regardless of whether we believe this or not. As Isaiah put it poetically: "All of us, like sheep, went astray; we went, each man, his own way." I think this really also describes the whole human race. Since we all fall short of God's standards, the purpose of the Suffering Servant is to help bring us back to that ideal, an ideal where we love other people simply because they are our fellow humans.

This ideal can't really be attained by any naturalistic philosophy, especially one rooted in Darwinian concepts such as survival of the fittest. At best we can cooperate for survival, but we have no particular reason to love strangers. But even if a naturalistic love-based philosophy could be constructed, the purpose of the Suffering Servant wasn't simply to teach the highest philosophy attainable by humans, but also to embody it – namely, to have so much love that you would voluntarily lay down your life on behalf of others, even those who despise, abhor and reject you.

Now, the accusation has sometimes been made that Jews and Christians have altered scriptures. Yet here is an account that sounds altogether Christian, that has been faithfully preserved by Jewish scribes down through the centuries, and from well before the time of Jesus, as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrates.

Furthermore, scribes and copyists from Judaism and the Christian faith could act as an error correcting mechanism between each other. If one group were to change the wording in any significant way, the other group could point it out. They serve as two independent witnesses to the authenticity of the prophecies.

Individual scribes sometimes made mistakes in the copying process, but scholars are able to compare lots of manuscripts to detect the errors. There are also some variations between manuscripts; and while these variations can sometimes change the meaning of a word or verse, the overall message of Isaiah has been preserved intact, including the account of the Suffering Servant.

1 See chapters 22-26 of "Letter To The Jews" at lettertothejews.com **2** Isaiah 52:13-15. **3** Exodus 24:5-8. **4** Isaiah 53:1-4. **5** Isaiah 53:5,6. **6** Isaiah 53:7. **7** Psalm 44:22. **8** Isaiah 53:8,9. **9** Isaiah 53:10. **10** John 1:29. **11** Isaiah 53:11,12. **12** Ezekiel 36:22. **13** Isaiah 11:1,2,10. **14** Zechariah 12:10.

31. Man Or Myth?

I have shown that the basic story of Jesus Christ, as told in the New Testament, fits the description of the Suffering Servant, and many other statements in Jewish scriptures. Since Jesus' story, with the exception of Judaism, has become a part of the Bible, let's now spend some time examining the man, and the claims made about him.

The Christian claim is that he was the Son of God. But if God doesn't exist, then neither can there be a Son, except in the mind of Christians. On the other hand, if God does exist, then it's at least possible Jesus was God's son, although this doesn't automatically mean he was, or that the claims about him are correct, which is why we need to investigate the matter further.

Of course, the first issue to be addressed is whether Jesus even existed, or is just a myth. A few thousand years after he was supposed to have lived, some people doubt he was a real person.

Since Jesus was said to have been born as a Jew, and many of the stories about him involve disputes with the Jewish leaders of his day, ancient Jewish sources are more likely to know whether he existed than anybody else. For example, the Babylonian Talmud, which is a commentary on Jewish law that was compiled several hundred years after Jesus supposedly lived, says Jesus was hanged on the eve of Passover, that he practiced sorcery, led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy.¹

This is clearly not a flattering description. The details of his life and death differ from the version presented in the New Testament, but this is to be expected, if he appeared to perform miracles. To his disciples, the miracles would have been evidence of his approval by God. To his opponents, they must have been trickery or sorcery. Either way, Jesus must have been some kind of a teacher, in order to have been able to lead Israel astray, from the perspective of Judaism.

Jewish rabbis and scholars through the centuries have treated him as a historical character, although they did not accept the claim that he was the Messiah or the Son of God, unless they had already become Christian. For example, Maimonides, one of the most influential Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages, wrote about Jesus, saying that he aspired to be the Messiah and was executed by the court. He argued that Jesus caused Jews to be slain by the sword, their remnants to be scattered and humiliated, the Torah to be altered, and the majority of the world to serve a God other than the Lord.²

Clearly then, to Jewish scholars like Maimonides, Jesus was all too real. And if Jesus was indeed the mysterious "Suffering Servant" in Isaiah, then we can begin to understand why Isaiah referred to this one as "him who is despised in soul" and "the one whom the nation abhorred." People like Maimonides believed that Jesus was a major source of his people's troubles.³

But do we have any evidence of Jesus' existence, outside of the New Testament, and closer to the time he is supposed to have lived? Roman historian Tacitus briefly mentions Christians and their leader, and there is a letter from Pliny the Younger to

Roman emperor Trajan, written about 80 years after the alleged death of Jesus, asking for counsel on dealing with Christians.

There are also two references by Jewish historian Josephus. The first is such a glowing testimony, and harmonizes so perfectly with the New Testament story about Jesus, that most skeptical scholars think it must have been altered or even forged altogether by later Christians, because it mentions that he appeared to his disciples on the third day after his execution, and that the prophets had foretold these things about him.⁴

The second reference in Josephus is much briefer and also much less controversial, and simply mentions James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”⁵ This detail about Jesus having a brother called James agrees with the New Testament.⁶

For a small number of skeptics, because there isn’t more said about Jesus by the historians of his day, this is proof Jesus was a myth. However, from the point of view of Roman historians, Jesus, if he existed, would have been just another cult leader in a backwater part of the Roman empire where religious fanaticism was already rife. They would probably not have believed the story of Jesus’ resurrection any more than a skeptic does today. They also wouldn’t have had the benefit of hindsight to know how much of an impact Jesus would have on the world, and there would have been no monuments or statues of Jesus, because the authorities didn’t believe in him.

Nevertheless, it appears that people closer to the time had more evidence than we have today. For example, the early Christian writer Justin Martyr, writing about a hundred years after Christ, said that people could check Jesus’ birth records. If he was lying, it would blunt any other arguments he made about Jesus.

In any case, most scholars accept there probably was a historical Jesus, because of the existence of the gospels, the letters of the apostle Paul, the existence of the Christian church and later Christian writings, and the occasional references to this new faith by contemporary historians.

However, even if skeptics and atheists accept this, they can’t accept that all of the things written about Jesus in the gospels are true. In other words, they are perhaps fine with Jesus being a holy man who inspired a following. But they can’t accept that he was born to a virgin, walked on water, and was raised from the dead.

¹ Tractate *Sanhedrin* 43a. ² *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings. ³ See Isaiah 49:7. ⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*, Book 18, Chapter 3, Section 3. ⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*, Book 20, Chapter 9, Section 1. ⁶ See Matthew 13:55 and Galatians 1:19.

32. Deception, Delusion And Exaggeration

Now, for the remainder of our present discussion about Jesus, let's focus primarily on the claim about him that he was raised from the dead, because this is arguably the most important one. Atheists have no choice but to dismiss this part of the story, because if there is no God, then neither did God raise him from the dead. On the other hand, if God exists, then surely it is a trivial thing for God to bring a dead person back to life.

For the sake of argument, let's suppose that God exists, and that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead. The first question we could ask is, where is the evidence? To answer this question, consider the story of Circo, another man who was executed by the Romans and then resurrected shortly afterwards, at roughly the same time as Jesus.

As you can imagine, this wonderful miracle became the talk of the town. Circo's family was shocked and thrilled, and they told the story to the local Jewish press; but since the next issue of *Judea Today* wasn't going to come out for several more months because of scroll shortages, the story was considered less important by the editor than the latest scandal involving the Roman governor.

The Jewish authorities heard about it and were intrigued, but since Circo hadn't made any special claims about himself, other than that he was executed and came back to life, his resurrection didn't impact their authority, and their attention soon became distracted by other matters.

The Roman authorities were skeptical about the stories of Circo's resurrection, but when they saw him alive and well, a few officials conceded it must have happened, since the soldiers swore they had put him to death, and now here was Circo back with his family. The official in charge just assumed the soldiers were lying or incompetent, and had one of them executed. The others then quickly admitted to conspiring to let Circo live. They were punished severely but spared from death.

Either way, the authorities had no reason to keep a record of Circo's resurrection, because he had already paid for his crime, and they didn't have a Certificate of Resurrection they could issue him. Historians like Tacitus might have heard of the story, but since Circo didn't have any real impact upon the historical narrative of the times, his story went untold.

And so, quite apart from the fact that I made Circo up, there would almost certainly be no evidence of his resurrection today, because local news scrolls weren't designed to be preserved for thousands of years, local gossip would become a distant memory, and the authorities had no reason to record the event or preserve any records about it. Since Circo had no impact on politics or world history, it's unlikely that historians would feel the need to record it. In other words, there would probably not be any evidence of Circo's existence, let alone resurrection.

In many ways, the situation with Jesus would be much worse. Assuming for the moment that he really was resurrected, the Jewish authorities would have been

actively opposed to this becoming widely believed, since it would give credence to the claim that he was the Son of God, a blasphemy from their point of view. Therefore, they would be no help in preserving any evidence.

According to the gospel stories, Jews who believed in Jesus were already being expelled from the synagogue even while he was alive, so there would have been a climate of fear around declaring faith in him. Certainly, believing in Jesus would have brought no reward or fame at the time.

The Roman authorities would have been neutral, or perhaps mildly hostile. Certainly they wouldn't go out of their way to give credence to a man who claimed his authority came from a higher source than Rome, and who told his followers to be no part of the world. To them, Jesus and his followers would have been seen at best as just another eccentric Jewish cult. At worst, they could have been viewed as a danger to the empire, its authority and stability. Therefore, the Roman authorities also would have no interest in preserving evidence of Jesus' resurrection.

Historians, who usually consider events in a wider context, might make a note of Jesus, but only in the context of any larger impact he would have made. From a historical point of view, the impact of Jesus came about because of the devotion of his followers in spreading his message; and this is what we find in the historical record.

Tacitus mentions him, but only in the context of Christians being used as a scapegoat by emperor Nero. The same is true with the Jewish historian Josephus, who, if we can accept at least some truth to the references, really only makes note of him in passing. This would make sense, since Josephus, writing perhaps fifty or sixty years after Jesus, didn't have the benefit of hindsight we have today, to know how much of an impact Jesus and his followers would have on the world.

Our hypothetical man Circo wasn't a religious leader or teacher, and had no political impact, so most likely he would have left no historical trace of his resurrection. In the case of Jesus, he didn't have the backing of the religious authorities, and he also had no real political impact, at least not immediately.

However, the story tells us that Jesus had disciples. Therefore, since nobody else would have the motive, the only evidence for his resurrection would need to have been preserved by his followers.

And this is what we find, in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well in as the letters of Paul, and other early Christian writings. This is why they need to be admitted as evidence for both the existence and the resurrection of Jesus.

But why isn't there outside testimony about his resurrection – that is, outside of what we call the New Testament? To answer this, consider the example of the Roman centurion and those who were with Jesus at his death. When seeing the circumstances under which he died, the gospel of Matthew records these eyewitnesses as saying: "Certainly this was the Son of God." ¹

Why do we not have the testimony of this centurion? The answer is, we do. It is right there in the gospel of Matthew. Of course, assuming the centurion was literate, and many people weren't in those days, it would be more convenient for us if he'd

written a separate “Memoir Of An Astonished Centurion.” But even if we did have such a memoir, skeptics would probably say it was a forgery invented out of the imagination of Christians.

Besides, if the unusual events surrounding Jesus’ death didn’t persuade the centurion to become a Christian, why would he bother to write a book about it? Over time, the event would take on less significance for him, and eventually it would perhaps be explained away in his mind. On the other hand, if he did become a Christian, his testimony would likely have found its way into what we now know as the four gospels.

In other words, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are a collection of eyewitness testimonies and experiences, compiled into four books. They are not just the testimonies of four men. The author of the gospel of Luke makes this clear. His gospel seems to be a letter addressed to a certain “Most Excellent Theophilus,” and it opens with the following introduction:

“Since many have undertaken to compile an account about the matters viewed with full certainty among us, just as the ones from the beginning became eyewitnesses and ministers of the word given to us, it seemed also to me, having followed all things accurately from the start, to write to you consecutively, Most Excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the sayings about which you were taught.” ²

According to this, Theophilus had already been taught the sayings of Jesus, even before Luke had compiled his gospel. (For the moment I will assume Matthew wrote the gospel of Matthew, Mark wrote the gospel of Mark, and so on. At present, the correct name of the author makes no difference to my arguments.) It appears that Luke’s aim was to clarify what Theophilus had already been taught, and to put the sayings of Jesus into some kind of context and sequence.

This is why one of the first things Luke describes is the pregnancy of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist who later baptized Jesus, and then the pregnancy of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and a relative of Elizabeth. This provides the context for the birth and ministry of Jesus. Both stories read like they are based on the testimony of at least Mary.

According to the New Testament book we know as “Acts of Apostles,” which seems to be a follow-up document written by Luke to Theophilus, Mary became an early disciple of Jesus, after his supposed resurrection.³ The genealogy listed in Luke is also likely to be Mary’s, although it begins by saying Jesus was “the son, as the opinion was, of Joseph.” In other words, Mary’s actual genealogy begins at “son of Heli.” ⁴

By contrast, Matthew’s gospel begins by focusing on Joseph’s side of the story, who was going to be married to Mary. Incidentally, the chronology listed in Matthew is that of Joseph, but is not a complete listing of his ancestry.⁵ Since Joseph wasn’t Jesus’ real father according to the story, its main purpose was to make clear that Jesus was legally a “son of David” and “son of Abraham.” This was important, because Joseph’s family was required to be registered in the birthplace of his ancestors, which was

Bethlehem, the birthplace of their ancestor David. The differing genealogies highlight that Jesus was a “son of David” both legally through his adopted father, and by blood through Mary.

Mark’s gospel was considered by the early Christian church to be written by an associate of the apostle Peter, and based on Peter’s experiences. Peter was a fisherman who worked in Galilee, and was one of the first of Jesus’ disciples. Many of the stories told in this gospel seem to be based on the eyewitness testimony of Peter. Jesus even starts his ministry from the house of Peter and his fisherman friends.

Later on, according to the book of Acts, as the first group of Gentiles became believers in Jesus, Peter is reported to have said: “You know the talk that has been going through the whole of Judea, beginning from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; how Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by God with holy spirit and power.” He continued: “We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they lifted up, hanging him on wood. God raised this one up on the third day, and gave him to become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses appointed beforehand by God – to us, who ate and drank together with him after he had risen from the dead. And he charged us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one designated by God as judge of the living and the dead. To this one all the prophets testify, that through his name, everyone believing in him receives forgiveness of sins.” ⁶

According to the same book, one of the qualifications for replacing Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, as one of the twelve apostles, was that they had to have been eyewitnesses to all of these things. Peter is reported to have said: “It is therefore necessary that, of the men who accompanied us all the time in which the Lord Jesus came in and out among us, beginning from the baptism by John until the day when he was taken up from us, one of these should become a witness together with us of his resurrection.” ⁷

John’s gospel is considered to have been written last. According to Christian tradition, the apostle wanted to give details that the other gospels had left out. His gospel also seems to quote extensively from eyewitness sources. For example, he begins early on by quoting testimony from John the Baptist, who is said to have baptized Jesus. As another example, it contains the testimony of a blind man healed by Jesus, and his verbal exchange with the Jewish authorities.

John also writes about the events surrounding Jesus’ death, as if he were an eyewitness. For example, he says that the soldiers divided Jesus’ outer garments into four parts, but cast lots over his inner garment; and by doing this, they fulfilled scripture. There is almost a tone of astonishment in John’s voice as he writes, “Indeed, then, the soldiers did these things.” ⁸

John doesn’t name himself throughout his gospel, but refers to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. According to his account, while Jesus was dying, when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple standing nearby, he indicated that they were to

have a family relationship, like a mother and a son; and from that hour, the disciple took her into his home as his own mother.⁹

Now, I have already established that the only evidence for the resurrection of Jesus likely to survive until our day, would need to have been preserved by his followers; and I have shown that the gospels themselves indicate that they are based on eyewitness testimonies about him, preserved by the disciples.

This raises one of the most important questions of all: just how reliable are the gospels? A determined atheist has no choice but to believe that, even if there is a core of truth behind the character of Jesus, some of the stories must have been exaggerated or fabricated – that is, made up somehow.

I'll focus on the Resurrection Story, because this is really the key to deciding upon the nature of the other stories told in the gospels, and on the nature of Jesus himself. If Jesus wasn't resurrected, then somebody or some group must have fabricated the story, and we can safely ignore the rest of the Christian message if we choose. Jesus may have been a good and holy man, but he wasn't the Son of God. However, if Jesus was resurrected as the story claims, then he probably was the Son of God after all, and we should therefore pay attention to the other stories.

Now, if he wasn't raised from the dead, then what was the source of the Resurrection Story, and how could it have come about? Only four groups of people would have had the means, motive and opportunity to come up with it. The first group would be the apostles and early disciples. The second would be the apostle Paul and his associates. The third group would be the later Christian Church, once the original apostles had died off. The fourth group would be the Church, particularly from the time of emperor Constantine, when the Christian religion became the official religion of the Roman empire.

To get to the bottom of the Resurrection Story, I will put forward a hypothesis for each group in turn, and then we will examine each hypothesis to see how plausible it is, based on logic and the evidence available to us.

In addition, I propose that there are really only three primary mechanisms by which the Resurrection Story, if untrue, could have come about. If an individual or group of people fabricated details or an eyewitness testimony, I will label this as "deception." It is also possible that eyewitnesses might have misinterpreted a situation, or were gullible enough to believe something that simply wasn't true, or perhaps had an experience that was really just a hallucination or something similar. I will label all of these as "delusion." Finally, a story might have significantly changed as it got spread by word of mouth. I will call this "exaggeration."

Of course, human motives and failings may be more deep and subtle, but I suggest that these three categories – deception, delusion and exaggeration – are sufficient to cover all plausible scenarios where the story isn't true. For example, a lie, no matter how good the intention behind it, is still a form of deception. An eyewitness may have mistaken a stranger for Jesus, but that still qualifies as delusion, even though in ordinary circumstances we might simply call it a mistake.

But if anyone takes issue with the labels I have chosen, or thinks they are too simplistic, I would ask them to keep in mind that they are just words. They are just labels to help us think through and examine the evidence. However, my arguments won't hinge on these labels.

The other hypothesis will be that the Resurrection Story is actually true, and there is no deception, delusion or exaggeration involved. However, in order to consider the validity of this, we must first examine the alternatives available to the skeptic and atheist – namely, that the gospels, at least the parts they choose not to believe, and particularly the Resurrection Story, are the product of some combination of deception, delusion and exaggeration.

1 Matthew 27:54. **2** Luke 1:1-4. **3** Acts 1:14. **4** Luke 3:23-38. **5** Matthew 1:1-17. **6** Acts 10:37,38,39-43. **7** Acts 1:21,22. **8** John 19:24. **9** John 19:25-27.

33. The Apostle Conspiracy

The first hypothesis I will consider is this: The origin of the Resurrection Story was the apostles and early disciples, by deception, delusion or exaggeration, or some combination of these. In this hypothesis I will assume Jesus existed, and that he had apostles and disciples in the first place.

Now, we know the names of the original twelve apostles whom Jesus chose. They are listed in three of the four gospels. With the exception of Judas, who betrayed Jesus and then committed suicide, they claimed to be eyewitnesses of Jesus after he was raised from the dead. Furthermore, in the Resurrection Story, several women are also named as eyewitnesses, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna the wife of Chuza who was Herod's steward, and Salome.

If they were making up the story, they would need to stick with it throughout their entire life, because the religious leaders would no doubt have paid good money for any of them to later admit their fabrication. Judas had betrayed Jesus for a mere thirty pieces of silver. Once the Christian message took off, the apostles and the women who claimed to be eyewitnesses could have asked for a much higher price to expose the real truth behind the Resurrection Story.

Now, an alternative story is actually reported on in the gospel of Matthew. According to this gospel, the version put out by the religious leaders was that Jesus' disciples had stolen his body in the night; and this story came to be spread among the Jews.¹

If this is what really happened, deception would clearly be involved on the part of at least some disciples, and it would fit nicely with my first hypothesis. Of course, skeptics will hopefully also be skeptical of the claim by the religious authorities, and ask, "where's your proof?" There doesn't actually seem to be any. But for now, let's assume the claim is true – because why else would the tomb be open and Jesus' body be missing, on the very day Jesus was supposed to have been raised from the dead?

Roman soldiers had been posted to guard the tomb. They might have been asleep, but the penalty for falling asleep on the job was death. Besides, the disciples needed to roll away the stone and take out Jesus' body while leaving the linen cloths that had covered it. I suppose they might have done this without waking the guards, but I doubt it. Then again, maybe the guards were drunk, but this would no doubt have carried a high penalty too.

More likely, if we are going to buy into the version told by the religious authorities, the disciples must have somehow overpowered the soldiers and then taken away Jesus' body, or maybe the guards were bribed to look the other way.

Whatever the case, in order for Jesus to appear to have been raised, the soldiers would have to stop guarding the tomb for some reason, the stone would have to be taken away from the entrance, and Jesus' body would have to be removed and never found again. After all, if his body was still lying in the tomb, the

Resurrection Story could not have even got started, at least in the time of the disciples and apostles, which is the hypothesis we are investigating at the moment.

The thieves left the cloths Jesus was wrapped in lying on the floor. I presume these would be useful to confirm it was the tomb of Jesus, and also to add an element of credibility to the idea that he had been raised. In other words, this wasn't a random theft. It was a deliberate deception. For now I will assume the disciples of Jesus did this, or at least a subset of them.

According to the story, certain women from Galilee, also disciples of Jesus, were said to have visited the tomb on the morning of the third day, found that his body had gone, and claimed they had seen angels telling them Jesus was alive. Of course, if Jesus' body had secretly been taken away by other disciples, then these women were either deluded, deceived somehow by the thieves of Jesus' body, or part of the conspiracy. If they were fellow conspirators, they would need to be paid well, as I said earlier, because they would no doubt be questioned about these things for the rest of their lives, both by believers and skeptics. If ever any of them admitted their story was false, the Resurrection Story would break down. And if they were delusions, they would have to maintain the conviction that they had seen the risen Christ, for the rest of their lives.

The apostles were also said to have seen Jesus appear to them in a locked room, along with further appearances over a period of forty days, during which he supposedly taught them about the Kingdom of God. Again, if certain disciples had secretly taken Jesus' body away, then the apostles were clearly either deceived or deluded as well, or they were part of the conspiracy.

Whatever the case, the apostles were the leaders of the early Christian movement. If we accept the basic reality of Jesus and the apostles, they had been specially selected by Jesus. Therefore, if my first hypothesis is true, that the apostles and early disciples were the source of the Resurrection Story through some combination of deception, delusion and exaggeration, they would be the ones to spread the story far and wide.

If they were deluded, it's highly unlikely that all of their delusions would have perfectly corroborated one another, so some sort of collusion would have been necessary in order to ensure the stories were consistent, assuming the apostles themselves weren't aware that Jesus' body had actually been stolen. If they knew about it, this plainly makes them co-conspirators.

In other words, assuming my first hypothesis is true, an official Resurrection Story must have been agreed upon almost from the beginning, and the apostles must have sanctioned it, in order for it to have any plausibility in winning converts. Once the story reached the ears of the wider public, if one disciple was saying one thing and another was saying something else, opponents could quickly seize upon this as proof that Christians were deluded or making it up as they went along. This is why I call it the "Apostle Conspiracy." If true, the apostles were the ringleaders and must have conspired to make the story palatable to the outside world.

Furthermore, the conspiracy must have been quite large, because according to the book of Acts, 120 people were present as they cast lots over a replacement for Judas Iscariot. The qualification was that the new apostle needed to be an eyewitness to both Jesus' ministry and his resurrection. But if the Resurrection Story was some kind of conspiracy, then the new apostle, and likely many of those who were present to elect him, must have been co-conspirators in some way.

Jesus had taught his disciples that their words were of supreme importance: "The good man, out of the good treasure of the heart, brings forth good things; and the wicked man, out of the wicked treasure, brings forth wicked things. But I say to you that every idle declaration that men speak, they will render an account about it in the day of judgment. For out of your words you will be declared righteous, and out of your words you will be condemned." ²

If the apostles knew their story was false or substantially embellished, then their purpose in life became to spread a deceptive message to the entire world, and to die for it, while considering themselves to be apostles and disciples of a man who taught them to be perfect, to avoid hypocrisy, to let their yes mean yes and their no mean no, and that by their words they would be judged. In other words, they were apostles of a man who would be utterly against such deceit.

But "ah!" says the skeptic. "Perhaps they also fabricated their holy man's holiness. That would certainly make their conspiracy harder to detect. The more perfect their Master appeared to be, the less likely his disciples and apostles could possibly lie, at least in the eyes of those being fooled by their deception."

Yes, it is sadly true that some people seem to be capable of going to great lengths to deceive their fellow men and women, and even themselves. And people do indeed die for causes they passionately believe in, even if they themselves are deluded. But even so, who would die for a teacher whose teachings they themselves had knowingly altered, and whose resurrection they themselves had fabricated?

After all, if Jesus didn't tell them beforehand that he would die and rise again on the third day, the disciples would have to invent those sayings to reflect their story. And not only the apostles, but all the accompanying women and other disciples, and the mother of Jesus, would have to go along with the deception, since many of them had accompanied Jesus from Galilee. And if Jesus did actually foretell his own death and resurrection on the third day, but the apostles and disciples fabricated the Resurrection Story, they would be knowingly preaching about and dying for a Jesus who could only come back from the grave by the invention of a lie.

This is why, if the Apostle Conspiracy hypothesis is true, it is arguably more plausible to think that the apostles were fooled by the stolen body. Furthermore, according to the Resurrection Story we have today, it wasn't merely the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb that moved the apostles and disciples to boldly preach the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is reported to have appeared to them multiple times, and proved his identity to them.

According to the accounts, these were no mere fleeting apparitions or occasional voices. Luke begins his second book, the Acts of Apostles, in this way: "The first account, O Theophilus, I made, about all of the things Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day he was taken up, directing the apostles whom he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and to whom he presented himself alive through many signs, after he had suffered. During forty days he was seen by them, and speaking the things about the kingdom of God. And being gathered with them, he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to 'wait for the promise of the Father, which you have heard from me. For John indeed baptized with water, but you will be baptized in Holy Spirit not many days after this.'" ³

The apostles were even having theological conversations with the resurrected Jesus, based on their understanding at the time. For example, they asked him whether he was restoring the kingdom to Israel at that time, which kingdom had been taken away by the Romans who appointed their kings.

Jesus is reported to have replied: "It is not for you to know the times or seasons, which the Father has placed in his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be witnesses of me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ⁴ In other words, it seems Jesus was telling them that God's time for restoring the kingdom of Israel was none of their business. His disciples had a more important job to focus on.

Finally, Jesus was lifted up from the Mount of Olives, and a cloud caught him up from their sight. Luke writes that there were already 120 disciples in those early days. A little later, on the day of Pentecost, they were together in the same place, when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began speaking in the native tongues of people from all across the Earth who were staying in Jerusalem. According to the account, on that day about 3,000 people were baptized, and signs and wonders began to occur through the apostles. ⁵

Now, nobody today can prove these things happened. I will address Luke's reliability later on. But if they were simply made up, it would surely be easy for early opponents of the Christian message to point out these fabrications, especially once the stories were committed to writing. On the other hand, if events happened as Luke said they did, this would explain the explosive growth of the Christian faith, and why its early opponents couldn't have the same skepticism that skeptics have a few thousand years later.

Luke's second book, the Acts of Apostles, is full of characters that could either corroborate or refute his version of events. For example, the story of the first conversion of Gentiles is quite elaborate and detailed. It involved the friends and family of a centurion in Caesarea named Cornelius, as well as the apostle Peter and his associates.

According to the story, Cornelius was instructed by an angel to send for Peter who was in Joppa at the time; and Peter was instructed by the Holy Spirit to go with the three men Cornelius had sent. Cornelius gathered his relatives and friends to hear

Peter, and some of the disciples from Joppa went with Peter. After Cornelius explained what had happened to him, Peter said: "Truthfully I perceive that God is not partial, but in every nation the one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

While he was talking about Jesus' resurrection to Cornelius and his family, the Holy Spirit came upon the hearers, and they began speaking in tongues and praising God. Those who came with Peter were amazed, because Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit as well. ⁶

Now, if these things were embellished by either Luke or Peter, any of the people involved could have spoken out, to provide testimony against Christians. Alternatively, both Cornelius and his family and friends, and Peter and his associates, would need to be in on the conspiracy to fabricate the continuing story of Jesus.

But maybe these stories were made up much later by the writer of Acts, so none of these characters were around to answer back. I will discuss the dating of the Acts of Apostles a little later. However, some kind of Gentile conversion story needed to have been fabricated early in Christian history, to support the widespread conversion of Gentiles to the Christian faith. Without such a story, it would have been much harder preaching about the Jewish man Jesus to people who weren't circumcised. And if Cornelius and his family didn't exist, or the event didn't happen as the story said it did, this would be yet more ammunition for early opponents.

Now, let me summarize what I have deduced so far. My first hypothesis is called the Apostle Conspiracy, which says that the apostles and early disciples were the source of the Resurrection Story, through some combination of deception, delusion and exaggeration.

If this is true, some of the disciples would have probably needed to bribe or overpower the soldiers, in order to roll the stone from the tomb and steal Jesus' body, leaving the linen cloths that covered his body to create the impression that Jesus was resurrected. This would be deception, plain and simple. The big question is whether the apostles, the leaders of the early Christian movement and therefore the spearhead of the Resurrection Story, were part of this conspiracy. If they were, this would make them outright liars and deceivers.

But if they didn't know other disciples had stolen Jesus' body, they would still need to have ensured their own delusions about Jesus appearing to them, and the delusions, deceptions or exaggerations about angels appearing to the women, all harmonized enough to become a consistent Resurrection Story believable to outsiders.

Furthermore, if Luke's account in Acts is accurate, 120 disciples of Jesus were present to vote on a replacement for Judas Iscariot, with the requirement that the new apostle become a witness to Jesus' ministry and resurrection, suggesting quite a large number of disciples had already bought into the Resurrection Story or may have been co-conspirators in fabricating it.

I will return to this first hypothesis later on, to see how it holds up in the face of further evidence such as the reliability of Luke. However, the majority of scholars and skeptics think the Resurrection Story was a later embellishment anyway – so for the moment, I will leave my investigation of this first hypothesis open, and move on to consider the second hypothesis. Could the apostle Paul and his associates be the real culprits?

1 Matthew 28:11-15. **2** Matthew 12:35-37. **3** Acts 1:1-5. **4** Acts 1:7,8. **5** Acts 1:9-11; 2:1-43. **6** The conversion of Cornelius is told in Acts chapter 10.

34. The Pauline Conspiracy

Some have argued that perhaps it was Paul, a later convert to the Christian faith, and his associates, who transformed Jesus from a holy man or a slightly renegade Jewish rabbi, into the Son of God who was raised from the dead.

This, therefore, will be the second hypothesis I will consider: Jesus existed, and was a Jewish teacher who was executed. However, he was transformed by Paul and his associates into the resurrected Son of God. They were the source of the Resurrection Story.

Paul is an interesting figure. His name in Hebrew was Saul, but he is better known as Paul, the Greek version of his name. Scholars see him as a real person who helped to found many Christian congregations. According to the accounts we have of him, he wasn't a Christian to begin with, but belonged to a sect of Judaism known as the Pharisees. While he was persecuting Christians, perhaps somewhere around 36AD, he claimed to have had a revelation of the glorified Christ on the road to Damascus. Jesus told him that he would be a chosen vessel to bear Jesus' name to the nations, to kings, and to the sons of Israel.

Now, before I examine the second hypothesis in detail, let's first tackle an important question. How do we know Paul and his associates didn't just make up the whole of the Jesus story? After all, if we are willing to consider the possibility that they made up the Resurrection Story, maybe they invented everything else as well.

Let's say they did. This would at least explain how Jesus fitted the prophecies. He was a fictional character created with those prophecies in mind. The conspirators would also need to invent the mother of Jesus, to give him an apparent but fictional lineage from King David. They would need to invent the apostles, whom Jesus supposedly appointed and who became eyewitnesses of the resurrection. And they would need to invent the women who also claimed to be eyewitnesses.

In order to prove that the story of Jesus was true, I suppose Paul and his associates could have hired real men and women who were paid well enough to pretend they were devotees of the fictional Jesus, and to say, for the rest of their lives, that they completely agreed with the story invented by the conspirators. The people who acted out the part of the apostles would be mere figureheads in a clever conspiracy where Paul appeared to be a latecomer, but was really pulling the strings. The mother of Jesus would need to be a particularly good actress and be paid very well, because no doubt a lot of people would want to talk to her about what Jesus was like.

On the other hand, maybe it would just be easier to keep all of these characters as purely fictional. After all, if you hire a bunch of liars and deceivers to run your enterprise, you can't be surprised if they later run away with the profits. Fictional characters confined to paper don't usually deviate from the script without the permission of the author who created them.

But if all of these are fictional characters invented by Paul and his associates, and confined to the pages of their writings, what actual evidence would Paul have to support any of his claims? What would be the point of claiming he encountered the risen Jesus, when there weren't any disciples of Jesus to impress in the first place? How could he talk about the eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection, if none of them existed? How could he dispute with the other apostles, if they only existed in parchments? And really, what would Paul's purpose have been? To convince the world to believe in a savior that he and his associates had just made up?

Besides, the idea that Paul and his associates made up Jesus also contradicts the evidence I will present later in this chapter. But if Jesus wasn't their invention, then neither were the apostles and women who had accompanied Jesus. Therefore, I will proceed on the basis that Jesus and the apostles already existed before Paul came onto the scene a few years after Jesus' death.

If my second hypothesis is true, that Paul and his associates were the source of the Resurrection Story, let's consider how this might have happened. Some scholars say that two strands of Christianity developed in parallel. The first strand was primarily Jewish, and strictly adhered to the Law given to Israel through Moses, and the covenant given to Abraham for every male of his descendants to be circumcised.

The second strand was aimed at Gentiles, and saw circumcision and the Law as unnecessary. This version, which these scholars often refer to as "Pauline" Christianity, was spearheaded by Paul and his associates. The idea is, the Jewish strand eventually died out, weakened by the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD and then simply outnumbered or absorbed by Gentile Christians; and so the version we have of Christianity today is "Pauline."

I suppose there is some merit to the idea. After all, in one of his earliest letters, Paul seems to argue that Christians no longer needed the tutoring of the Law, and that circumcision meant nothing in reference to Christ.¹ However, he also argued that there was neither male nor female, but this didn't mean he believed God had abolished gender.² He simply meant that, in reference to their faith in Christ, circumcision didn't make a difference, and neither did being male or female. But to a man's wife, it probably still matters whether her man has male or female parts!

Besides, Paul's ministry grew to include Gentiles, who weren't under any obligation to become circumcised. As God told Abraham: "You are to circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and it will become for a sign of the covenant between me and you. And the son who is eight days old shall be circumcised by you, every male throughout your generations, one born in your household, and those acquired by silver from any of the sons of a foreigner who is not from your offspring. One born in your house, and those acquired by silver, must certainly be circumcised, and my covenant in your flesh will be a covenant forever."³

Either way, our interest here isn't with circumcision but with the Resurrection Story. Is it possible that the supposed "Pauline" version of Christianity contained the

Resurrection Story, while the supposed Jewish strand didn't? Before I can answer this, let's examine the details given to us by the writers of the Christian story.

Compared with the original apostles, Paul was a latecomer to the Christian faith. Before Jesus' execution somewhere around the year 30 or 33AD, we don't know whether Paul got to hear or see Jesus personally, but Paul wasn't a believer in Christ at the time of Jesus' death. When the disciples started spreading their message, by his own admission Paul "intensely persecuted the church of God and devastated it." ⁴

What were they saying that got Paul so worked up? Was it that Jesus was a good man, who taught that perhaps we should try being nice to each other for a change? Or was it that Jesus was the Son of God? To say Jesus was a good and holy man was fairly trivial. To say he was the Son of God was blasphemy in the eyes of the religious leaders, and would explain why Paul persecuted Jesus' disciples, which in turn meant he didn't come up with the idea of Jesus being the Son of God.

In any case, as he was on the road to Damascus, sometime around the year 33 or 36AD, a few years after the supposed resurrection of Christ, Paul claims to have had a powerful encounter with the risen Christ that turned him into a believer. As a result, "immediately in the synagogues he preached the Christ, that this one is the Son of God." ⁵ Of course, if my second hypothesis is correct, and Paul and his associates were the source of the Resurrection Story, then we must allow for the possibility that Luke, as one of Paul's associates, fabricated or embellished the story to make Paul sound like he was accepting something Christians already believed, when Paul had actually invented the belief. I will address Luke's reliability a little later on.

According to Luke, after preaching in Damascus, Paul went to Jerusalem and was taken to the apostles where he told them his story. Now, if Paul was proclaiming something new or different, the apostles could have simply rejected him. After all, they had been appointed by Jesus some six or seven years earlier, while Paul was a newcomer who had been hunting down the disciples only a short while before.

Besides, if the apostles didn't already believe Jesus had been raised from the dead, why would they believe Paul, who had been an enemy not long before? How could Paul have an encounter with the risen Christ if the apostles believed Jesus had died and that was it?

Of course, if the apostles had fabricated the Resurrection Story themselves, they would know Paul was lying, so they would either reject him completely, or draft him and his associates into their conspiracy. If they drafted him in, we could class this as an extension of the Apostle Conspiracy which I intend to return to later. Paul and his associates would then simply be co-conspirators with the original apostles.

I think the simplest explanation for why Paul was accepted into the Christian community is that the original apostles already taught that Jesus had risen from the dead, and so another encounter with the risen Christ was plausible to them, or at least was compatible with their own story. If this is the case, then Paul and his associates weren't the source of the Resurrection Story.

But instead of accepting this simple explanation, let's ramp up the conspiracy. What if the original apostles did actually reject Paul because they didn't believe Jesus had been raised, and so Paul, in a huff or for some other reason, decided to create his own version of Christianity which included a newly invented Resurrection Story?

This would clearly make Paul and his associates liars, since they would need to make the apostles and women out to be eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection when they weren't, if Paul was actually the source of the story. Luke would also have to fabricate large parts of the Acts of Apostles, to make it look like Peter and the other apostles believed in Jesus' resurrection and accepted Paul, when they didn't.

In the book of Acts, Luke included an account of the first Christian council, held in Jerusalem, which involved a dispute over whether Gentiles were required to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses. According to Luke, after a lot of discussion, the council decided that Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised. They wrote a letter confirming their decision and sent out Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia to show the disciples the letter and also confirm those things by word of mouth. ⁶

If this account is accurate, then there wasn't really a "Pauline" version of Christianity as such, because what Paul taught the Gentiles is what the apostles and disciples in Jerusalem had already agreed upon, at least on the matter of circumcision from Abraham and the law of Moses. But if the apostles in Jerusalem were really teaching that the Law and circumcision were necessary, as scholars who adhere to the "Pauline" idea of Christianity must be implying, then Luke's account of the council in Jerusalem would be a lie, a rewriting of history.

Either way, if Paul was teaching the Resurrection Story and the original apostles weren't, this would make Paul and his associates apostates and heretics in the eyes of the original apostles and the wider Christian community. If so, where are the letters from the original apostles warning against Paul's apostasy? Where is the apostles' story of how the early Christian community actually developed? Where are the gospels which tell the story of Jesus dying and actually staying dead, like any normal teacher, holy man or even prophet is supposed to do?

I suppose it could be argued that the later "Pauline" Church successfully eliminated them, but then we can make any claim we like if we argue the evidence for the claim has been conveniently eliminated. Maybe Jesus taught that the Moon was made of cheese, but the later Church eliminated this teaching too. We can't successfully refute one idea with an idea that has even less supporting evidence.

Now, when preaching to Jews abroad, Paul referred them to the original disciples and eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection. For example, speaking about Jesus, Paul said: **"When they accomplished all the things written about him, they took him down from the wood and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and he was seen for many days by those who came up with him from Galilee into Jerusalem, who are witnesses of him to the people."** ⁷

If Paul was teaching something different from those witnesses from Galilee, it would be a fatal flaw in his argument. Why would anyone believe Paul, if he was relying on eyewitnesses who either didn't exist, or if they did, viewed him as an apostate? Jews in particular would have been in a position to verify Paul's statements, because they would go to Jerusalem for the festivals, and could therefore speak directly to some of the witnesses Paul spoke about, assuming the disciples in Jerusalem existed. If they didn't exist or contradicted Paul, this would expose him as a liar. Of course, I am assuming the author of Acts wasn't simply making up Paul's speech. I will address objections like this a little later.

Paul's own letters also provide strong evidence that he wasn't the source of the Resurrection Story. For example, in his first letter to the Christian congregations in Corinth, Paul quotes from what is considered to be one of the earliest Christian creeds, a statement of beliefs held in common:

"For I handed to you among the first things which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried,⁸ and that he was raised up on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once, of whom the majority remain until the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

But last of all he appeared also to me, as if to one born prematurely. For I am the least of the apostles, who is not worthy of being called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. Yet by the grace of God, I am what I am; and his grace toward me was not for nothing, but I worked more than all of them. Yet not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether, then, I or them, so we are preaching, and so you believe."⁹

Now, while some scholars think about half of the letters of Paul found in the New Testament are fabrications, for reasons I will discuss in a moment, most accept his two letters to the Corinthians as authentic. Here, Paul was appealing to the common belief among Christians that Jesus died, was buried in a tomb, and was raised on the third day; and that many hundreds of people still living at the time of Paul's letter were eyewitnesses of those things. What contemporary of Paul, when reading his words, would have believed him, if what he was saying was a lie?

Nevertheless, some in Paul's day doubted a general resurrection. This is why he continued: **"Yet if it is being preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how are some among you saying that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has Christ risen. And if Christ has not risen, then our preaching is for nothing, and your faith is also for nothing. And we are also found as false witnesses of God, because we testify concerning God that he raised up the Christ, whom he did not raise up if it is that the dead are not raised up."**¹⁰

Paul summed up the situation for Christians in this way: **“If, in this life, we have only hoped in Christ, we out of all humans are the most to be pitied.”** ¹¹

These don’t sound like the words of a man who made up his belief in the resurrected Christ. They sound like the words of someone who sincerely and passionately believed in it, even arguing that they would be false witnesses of God if God hadn’t raised Christ up while they were saying he had. The penalty in the law of Moses for being a false witness to someone on trial was that “you will do to him that which he planned to do to his brother.” ¹²

This is where the concept of an “eye for an eye” comes from. It was the punishment due for a false witness. If Paul and his associates had made up the Resurrection Story, then they were knowingly being false witnesses, not just of men but also of God, which they knew meant heavy punishment.

Incidentally, Paul never made the argument that some Christians didn’t believe Christ himself was resurrected. Some just doubted a general resurrection, and Paul reasoned that there would be one, by appealing to their faith in and preaching of Christ’s own resurrection. The most likely reason Paul didn’t make the case for Christ’s resurrection is, this was already a common belief among Christians; which means Paul wasn’t the source of the Resurrection Story.

Also, why does Paul call the apostles “the Twelve” even though Judas Iscariot killed himself before Jesus’ own death? Paul was probably referring to the group in the same way we might refer to “the Board” when referring to a board of directors. The disciples were likely used to calling them “the Twelve,” and so it became something similar to a name for their group. This description would help to distinguish between them and later apostles, such as Paul who considered himself to be an apostle, although not one of “the Twelve.” The gospel writer John also does this, when he describes Thomas as “one of the Twelve,” even though Judas was already dead.¹³

This would explain why the early disciples felt the need to elect someone to replace Judas. For whatever reason – maybe to correspond with the twelve tribes of Israel – they still wanted to preserve the original number of apostles. If Paul was making up the story, the death of an apostle would be the perfect opportunity to write himself into the narrative as one of “the Twelve.” Yet Paul and his associates never took this obvious step, not even after the death of the apostle James which occurred after Paul’s conversion, suggesting that “the Twelve” weren’t made up, but were real people with authority outside of Paul’s control.

Arguably the ultimate defense of Paul is that he was simply teaching what Jewish scriptures had already said about Christ hundreds of years before. For example, as he traveled to Thessalonica, there was a Jewish synagogue. The account in the book of Acts says he went in, and **“for three Sabbaths he reasoned with them from the scriptures, opening them up and putting before them that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and that ‘this Jesus whom I am announcing to you is the Christ.’”** ¹⁴

If the Resurrection Story already existed, Paul didn't need to invent anything. He simply had to show them scriptures such as the "Suffering Servant" account in Isaiah, the one who would be abhorred by Israel, who would give his cheek to the one striking it, and who would suffer and die but be raised, to be given for a light of Gentiles, and God's salvation to the end of the earth; and then Paul could show how Jesus fulfilled all of these.

But a skeptic could still say, "Maybe Paul deluded himself into thinking he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Then he saw this risen Christ in scripture, and believed he had a mission to teach it to the world, even if it meant inventing a few extra details."

On the surface, this might sound plausible. However, how could Paul claim that Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies concerning the Christ, if Paul had knowingly made the most critical one up? This would make him a liar. Furthermore, part of the account of the Suffering Servant is that "he was given a tomb with the wicked and with the rich in his deaths, although he did no wrong and no deceit was in his mouth." ¹⁵

If Paul and his associates fabricated the Resurrection Story based on the Suffering Servant, they would be enormous hypocrites, for "no deceit" was in the mouth of their Lord, yet according to our hypothesis, Paul supposedly fabricated the story of Jesus being buried and raised; and Luke went along with this and incorporated it into his gospel alongside Jesus' other sayings.

Now, as I mentioned a little earlier, some scholars argue that not all of Paul's letters in the New Testament are authentic. They claim that some of them were forged, written by someone else using Paul's name. They point out that the Greek in the "forged" letters are quite different. They also argue that there is a different theology being taught, contradicting the theology taught in Paul's "authentic" letters.

If the Greek is very different, they can't be very good forgeries, for the original recipients of the letters would have read them in Greek. But there are several possible reasons for the different style. For one, Paul wasn't the only writer of several of the letters. For example, in the book of Romans, Tertius did the actual writing. "I, Tertius, the one writing the letter, greet you in the Lord." ¹⁶ Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written with Sosthenes, and 2 Corinthians with Timothy. The letters to the Thessalonians were written by Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. Perhaps the so-called "forged" letters were simply written in Paul's own hand.

Paul's own style may also have changed over the years. Paul was a young man when he became a Christian, but his letters span a few decades. Furthermore, some letters could have been written in very different circumstances. For example, in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, two of the supposedly forged letters, Paul says he is in prison bonds. Some of the letters may have been dictated, while others might have been written and edited by Paul and his associates.

Some letters also have a different purpose. The ones to Timothy and Titus are written to individuals, not to a whole congregation. Furthermore, in 2 Timothy, Paul indicates he is about to die. This might have had an effect on his writing style!

As to the apparent differences in theology, these are usually down to a misunderstanding by so-called scholars of what Paul is actually saying. For example, in the allegedly “forged” letter to the Ephesians, the author said that Christians were already raised up from the dead and seated in the heavenly places.¹⁷ Some scholars argue that Paul would have been against the notion of an early resurrection, and therefore he couldn’t have written those words. However, Paul makes basically the same argument in Romans, considered authentic by these same scholars: “Likewise also you, consider yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but living to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹⁸ In both instances, Paul was talking about death, life and resurrection in a metaphorical sense. Before becoming Christians, they were “dead” in their sins and trespasses, but now they were “living” in Christ and had been metaphorically “raised up” in God’s eyes. This was not the same as a literal resurrection from the dead.

This is also the same argument used by Jesus, when disputing about the resurrection with the Sadducees, a sect of Judaism that didn’t believe in a general resurrection: “But as regards the resurrection of the dead, did you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”¹⁹ Using the same metaphorical play on the concept of life and death, Jesus had earlier said, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead.”²⁰ It seems Paul had a better grasp of metaphor and an understanding of how Jesus used words like “dead” than some scholars.

Finally, these same scholars ignore the tradition of the Church, which considered the supposedly “forged” letters of Paul to be authentic. Could it be that Christians living a few decades after the letters were written, and reading them in the original Greek, might have a better idea about who wrote them than scholars living a few thousand years later?

Now, some have accused Paul of perhaps wanting glory for himself. If so, his life ended with him being abandoned by most of his friends, despised by the religious leaders of his own people, a prisoner to Rome, and then, according to Christian tradition, executed by emperor Nero. From a human perspective, there were certainly many more career paths available to him that could have brought him much greater fame and glory. But if he actually was a chosen vessel to proclaim the risen Christ to his own people and to the nations, then both skeptics and believers alike have to admit he was incredibly successful. You can even open the New Testament right now and read his letters, contained in one of the most widely distributed books on Earth.

But let us consider the magnitude of the conspiracy a skeptic has to believe took place, if they wish to think Paul and his associates were the source of the Resurrection Story. Maybe Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ was a delusion brought about by sunstroke, as some skeptics have suggested. But after that, there would certainly need to be a conspiracy of deception.

For Paul to encounter the risen Christ, a story would need to exist about how Christ rose in the first place. It would probably need to include an empty tomb, to give

the apostles and women more reason for believing their Lord had risen. Now, maybe earlier disciples had stolen Jesus' body, in which case we can't blame Paul for this element of the story. On the other hand, maybe Paul just made this part up, and hoped nobody would find the tomb with Jesus' body still in it, which would prove he had been lying.

Paul's newly conceived Resurrection Story would also need to have eyewitnesses. If there weren't any, why would anyone think, at least without first suffering, say, a severe bout of sunstroke, that Jesus was alive? Also, random witnesses wouldn't necessarily be able to identify Jesus. Instead, what better witnesses could there be than the apostles whom Jesus had appointed, and the women who had ministered to him and followed him from Galilee? But if they already claimed to be eyewitnesses, then Paul wasn't the source of the Resurrection Story and my second hypothesis isn't true. And if they weren't eyewitnesses, Paul would have to fabricate their reports, making them and himself false witnesses of God.

Maybe the truth is a little more fuzzy. Maybe the apostles did have flashbacks of Jesus, heard voices which sounded a lot like him, and the women saw fleeting glimpses of men in shiny white outfits which they speculated might be angels. Either way, in order for my second hypothesis to be true, Paul would need to turn their incoherent stories and speculations into appearances of angels and lengthy encounters with Jesus over forty days, in order to have a chance of deluding the rest of the world into thinking Christ had risen.

In other words, the testimonies of the apostles and women, as shaped by Paul, would largely be deliberate exaggerations and lies. If they weren't, this would make the apostles and women themselves the source of the Resurrection Story.

Paul's associate Luke would also have to make up large parts of the early Christian story after Jesus' resurrection. For example, Jesus teaching the apostles and disciples for forty days would be a lie, or at least a gross exaggeration, if all they had was flashbacks, voices and glimpses.

According to Luke, after the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples several weeks after Jesus' death, Peter made a speech to the people in Jerusalem about Jesus being raised, in which 3,000 of his audience were baptized. If this story is true, likely Peter already believed some coherent form of Resurrection Story, and so once again, Paul is probably not the source.

But if Paul and his associates were really the inventors of these stories, and in particular the Resurrection Story, then they not only put false stories into the mouths of the so-called eyewitnesses of the resurrection, and then somehow managed to lock out these same people from telling the real version of events, thus making themselves apostates and heretics, but they had also handed Peter and the other apostles the keys to power!

In other words, this would have to be one of the most bizarre conspiracies in history, where sunstroke or mental illness causes Paul to passionately believe he encountered the Son of God, then he and his associates proceed to make up stuff

about the same Son of God and knowingly become liars and false witnesses of God; and then they give their rivals all the actual power and authority.

And they would do all of this while claiming to be disciples of the Suffering Servant whose mouth contained no deceit, a holy man who taught that their yes should mean yes and their no should mean no, and that by their words they would be judged. In other words, they were disciples of a man who would be appalled at their deception.

A much simpler, less convoluted and far more logical explanation is that Paul persecuted the disciples of Jesus because they were already proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God who had been raised from the dead. Paul really did believe he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus, and he really was accepted into the Christian community by the original apostles, because he believed what they already believed – that Christ had risen. In other words, Paul didn't need to make up the Resurrection Story, because it was already being taught by the apostles and disciples of Jesus.

The evidence from Paul's letters also argues strongly against the conspiratorial view of Paul, and strongly in favor of the much simpler explanation. It is clear from the letters scholars accept as authentic, Paul not only believed sincerely in the resurrection of Christ, but he also referenced the common traditions of all Christians – namely, that Jesus died, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared at various times to the apostles and disciples, even to hundreds of them at one time.

If this was not already a common belief among Christians, Paul's argument is immediately defeated. How could anyone take Paul seriously, if he was saying things that were clearly untrue to his readers?

In other words, logic and reason, along with the evidence from Paul's own letters, is strongly against the hypothesis that Paul and his associates were the source of the Resurrection Story. Of course, this doesn't tell us whether Christ was actually raised up or not, but at least we can be fairly certain of eliminating one group of suspects as the source of the story.

1 See Galatians 3:24,25; 6:15. **2** Galatians 3:26-29. **3** Genesis 17:11-13. **4** Galatians 1:13. **5** Acts 9:20. **6** See Acts chapter 15. **7** Acts 13:29-31. **8** The Greek word used here more precisely means "he was entombed." **9** 1 Corinthians 15:3-11. **10** 1 Corinthians 15:12-15. **11** 1 Corinthians 15:19. **12** Deuteronomy 19:15-21. **13** John 20:24. **14** Acts 17:2,3. **15** Isaiah 53:9. **16** Romans 16:22. **17** Ephesians 2:1-7. **18** Romans 6:11. **19** Matthew 22:31,32. **20** Matthew 8:22.

35. The Dating Game

Now, this is a good time to bring up another possibility, and another common accusation by skeptics. They suggest that since so-called “Pauline” Christianity became dominant, this is the version that is reflected in the gospels and the book of Acts. They argue that these books were written significantly later, at least 30 years and perhaps as many as 100 years after the events supposedly happened, which was plenty of time for the stories to have been fabricated or altered to fit Paul’s theology.

Therefore, let’s briefly consider when the Acts of Apostles was likely to have been written. This is useful to know, because it is clearly the second work of the same writer as the gospel of Luke. Both are written to a certain Theophilus. If we can figure out when Acts was written, we can get an upper limit for when the gospel of Luke was written.

Most scholars believe that the so-called “authentic” letters of Paul – Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon – are probably the earliest Christian writings, written just two or three decades after Jesus, and before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.

However, when it comes to the Acts of Apostles, many of the same scholars give it a later date, usually at least 50 years from the time of Jesus. They use three main arguments for a later date. First, the gospel of Luke, which must have been written before Acts, describes the fall of Jerusalem, so it needs to be dated after this event. Second, it uses material from the gospel of Mark, so must be dated after Mark. Third, they argue that Acts depends on the historian Josephus, so needs to be dated after the works of Josephus, which were written after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Let’s briefly consider the strength or weakness of these arguments. The gospel of Luke certainly alludes to the fall of Jerusalem. For example, as Jesus approached the city, the gospel writer has him predicting its downfall: “And as he drew near, seeing the city, he wept over it, saying that ‘if you knew, even you, and surely in this your day, the things for your peace – but now, it has been hidden from your eyes. For days shall come upon you, and your enemies will throw siegeworks against you, and surround you, and press you from every side. And they will level you and your children in you, and they will not leave a stone upon a stone in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.’”¹

Just a few chapters later, Jesus says: “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by encamped armies, then know that her desolation has drawn near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains, and those in the midst of her depart into the country, and those in the country not enter into her. For these are days of vengeance, for all the things written to be fulfilled. But woe to the pregnant ones and to the suckling ones in those days! For there will be great distress upon the land, and indignation on this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled by the nations, until the times of the nations are fulfilled.”²

Since the things Jesus supposedly said here happened so accurately, scholars tend to assume they must have been written after the event, and put into Jesus' mouth by the author of the gospel. The skeptical position tends to eliminate, by default, the possibility that Jesus was indeed a prophet and therefore could say those things before the fall of Jerusalem.

However, several prophecies similar to this already existed in Jewish scripture. For example, according to the book of Deuteronomy, curses would come upon the nation of Israel for being unfaithful to God, culminating in a fierce nation besieging them, shutting them up in their cities, and causing them to eat their own children. Finally, they would be scattered among the nations.³ In that regard, Jesus was simply pointing out the consequences of their unfaithfulness to God.

After Israel came out of Egypt and made a golden calf, Moses wrote that God told him: "Look! My messenger will go before you. And in the day of my visitation, I will visit their sin upon them."⁴ Jesus was saying that God's curses, and his day of visitation, were due to come upon them.

Other prophecies indicated the timing of those things. For example, the book of Daniel indicated that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple would occur in the days of the Romans.⁵ In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is said to have explicitly mentioned the prophet Daniel as foretelling an abomination of desolation, linking it to the time in which to flee Judea.⁶

The author of the gospel of Luke seems to have been writing his gospel with a Greek audience in mind, or more specifically "Most Excellent Theophilus," so he may have been using an interpretation that Jesus had given to his disciples, rather than referring directly to Daniel's prophecies, which may have been unfamiliar to his intended audience.

In other words, Jesus could have easily said those things before the fall of Jerusalem, because exactly the same themes were already written in Jewish scripture, particularly in the books of Deuteronomy and Daniel.

Jesus even uses the same language as the prophets. For example, Isaiah wrote: "The spirit of my Lord YHWH is upon me, because YHWH anointed me to declare good news to the meek. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to the ones bound; to proclaim the year of YHWH's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God."⁷ The gospel of Luke has Jesus reading from this passage in a synagogue, up until the part about "the year of YHWH's favor," and saying it was fulfilled in his day.⁸ If Jesus really did this, then he likely believed the "day of vengeance" was yet to come upon Jerusalem.

The prophet Daniel also mentions a "time of distress, such as has not occurred since becoming a nation until that time; and at that time your people will escape, everyone found written in the book." He also mentions an "indignation" against God's people and the holy covenant.⁹ Jesus is probably alluding to these prophecies.

"Letter To The Jews" showed how Daniel's prophecy foretold the rise of the Roman empire, identified several Caesars including Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula

and Nero, and foretold how Nero would die, along with the time of distress that would follow his death.¹⁰ Jesus likely held to this same view of Daniel's prophecies. For example, while many modern scholars believe the "abomination of desolation" in Daniel's prophecy took place in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes, Jesus likely viewed it as prophecy that had yet to be fulfilled.

In other words, a skeptic doesn't even have to believe that Jesus was a prophet for him to have said those things before the fall of Jerusalem. Perhaps he was one of the few who saw the writing on the wall, as it were; especially if he was considered to be a holy man, as even many skeptics are prepared to accept.

The prophecy in Daniel chapter 9 indicated that the Second Temple, and the city of Jerusalem, would be destroyed again within a time period that was on the verge of expiring in Jesus' day; and even Judaism accepts that this prophecy refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans, although they don't believe Jesus himself was part of the prophecy.¹¹

Despite this, skeptical scholars assume that Jesus couldn't have said these things before the fall of Jerusalem, which came true with such accuracy, implying that the author of the gospel of Luke, who attributes these statements to Jesus, is either mistaken, or is deceiving his readers. But my point is, Jesus was simply referring to already existing prophecy. It is those prophecies that predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and even the most ardent skeptic can't deny that the books of Deuteronomy and Daniel were written well before Jesus came on the scene.

The second argument for a later date for the Acts of Apostles, is that the author of Luke apparently relied on the gospel of Mark. This isn't a very strong argument, because scholars also differ on when Mark's gospel was written. It merely shifts the dating problem to a different gospel.

Besides, these scholars choose to discount Church tradition, and the testimony of people who lived far closer to the gospel age, who say that Mark's gospel was written by Mark, an associate of Peter, and having Peter's approval; and that the gospel of Luke was written by Luke, a companion of Paul. Both apostles are said to have been executed prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. We have to wonder why scholars, living a few thousand years later, think they know better than people who were living mere decades after the writing of the gospels.

Many scholars also argue that Matthew, Mark and Luke draw from a common source, perhaps an earlier collection of Jesus' sayings. If Jesus was considered to be a teacher and rabbi, some of his disciples probably would have written down a collection of his sayings for their own reference, even before the gospels were compiled, as was true for disciples of other teachers.

However, if Luke was the author of the gospel bearing his name, and he had really followed all things accurately from the start as he claims, then he could have also spoken to eyewitnesses, to get much of the material not found in the gospel of Mark, such as Mary's story about the birth of Jesus – that is, assuming he didn't just

make it up. In other words, Luke may have used the gospel of Mark as a reference, but he may also have been drawing on earlier sources and eyewitness accounts.

Whatever the case, the alleged dependency on Mark, which may simply be a case of both gospels drawing from common sources and testimonies, doesn't argue strongly for any particular date. But assuming the author of Luke isn't simply fabricating the extra material, he would probably need to speak to eyewitnesses such as Jesus' mother Mary, in order to compile the material not found in Mark. And it is usually preferable to speak to living eyewitnesses rather than dead ones, which would then favor an earlier dating. Even if some of the eyewitness stories are delusions, deceptions or exaggerations, the author may still be accurately reporting what he is being told, rather than being the source of any fabrications.

The third major argument used to support a later date, is the claim that Acts is dependent upon the historian Josephus.

Now, there are certainly parallels. For example, Josephus describes the death of Herod Agrippa in some detail, while the author of Acts covers it fairly briefly. In Josephus' version, Agrippa was at a festival. On the second day, he entered wearing a garment of shiny silver, and the people were so awestruck by the gleaming that they proclaimed him to be a god, which Herod didn't reject. He then saw an owl sitting on a rope over his head. He already had an owl experience before in his life, and he recognized it as a bad omen. He then fell ill from a pain in his belly, and died five days later.¹²

The version in Acts is much shorter. On a certain day, King Herod clothed himself with a royal garment, sat down on the judgment seat and began addressing the people. The crowd shouted, "A god's voice, and not a man's!" Instantly an angel of God struck him, because he didn't give the glory to God, and he was eaten up with worms and died.¹³

The author's motive for mentioning the event is completely different from that of Josephus. The purpose of Josephus' huge work *Antiquities Of The Jews*, consisting of twenty books, was to give a complete history of the Jews. Therefore, for Josephus, Agrippa's death was part of this history.

However, in the book of Acts, the author was outlining the early history and development of the Christian church, and in a much briefer style than classic historians such as Josephus. Herod is mentioned because he mistreated some of the congregation, put the apostle James the brother of John to death, and imprisoned Peter. Shortly after, Herod himself dies because an angel of God struck him.

The first point here is: the Christian community wouldn't have needed a historian to tell them what happened to Herod Agrippa, the ruler who had just killed one of their apostles. They simply needed to have taken a mild interest in current affairs. The manner of Herod's death, so soon after he had killed James, would have certainly caught their attention. Indeed, many of them would have naturally assumed it was divine vengeance for the murder of the apostle.

Second, Josephus says Herod saw an owl, as an omen of his fate, while the book of Acts says an angel struck him. If the author of Acts was relying on Josephus, surely he would have been more consistent with the historian. Of course, the skeptic could say that the author was putting a Christian spin on the event. But then, why didn't he just come out and say that Herod's death was divine retribution for the death of the apostle?

Instead, the account in Acts is in agreement with Josephus that Herod was struck for not rebuking the crowd over their claim that he was a god. However, I do think it's fair to say that the author of Acts is hinting at divine retribution, by describing Herod's death so soon after his execution of James.

Either way, if the author was a contemporary of these events, he wouldn't have needed Josephus' account. In fact, it is much more likely he was drawing from the Christian community's own opinion on the death of Herod, which involved an avenging angel, and worms just to emphasize the point. Nevertheless, his version doesn't contradict Josephus. Herod saw an owl because he had already seen it before, and it was an omen of his fate. Yet, according to Josephus, Herod recognized his illness as being from God. The author of Acts adds the detail, not found in Josephus, that the one who struck him was an angel, and that his illness involved worms.

I have shown that the arguments in favor of a later date for the writing of Acts are fairly weak. They assume Jesus couldn't have predicted the fall of Jerusalem, even though Jewish prophecies in Deuteronomy and Daniel do precisely that, written well before Jesus was born. They assume that the gospel of Luke depends on the gospel of Mark, but the dating of Mark relies on the same or similar arguments, which creates circular reasoning. They also assume a dependency on Josephus, which in turn assumes that Christians couldn't possibly know what was happening around them in the world, except by reading what a historian wrote later on.

Ultimately, scholars who are skeptical of the Christian story prefer a later dating for the gospels and the book of Acts, because then it is easier for stories to be fabricated or altered, without the actual people involved being able to answer back. But if these accounts were written within the lifetimes of the people and events they talk about, the accounts could be easily refuted or challenged if they were inaccurate.

However, the internal evidence strongly suggests that Acts was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, and therefore within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses it draws upon.

In the latter half of the book, Paul appeals to Caesar, and then several chapters tell of his journey to Rome, which is where he is to stand trial. The book ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome, so we are given no indication of the outcome of the trial, or of Paul's fate.

According to historians, highly significant events for Christians took place around this time, or shortly afterwards. Josephus reports that James the brother of Jesus was brought before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem and handed over to be stoned to death.¹⁴ If the author of Acts was relying on Josephus, he would have likely included

this in his narrative, as he did with the deaths of Stephen and then James the brother of the apostle John.

However, if the author really was Luke, and he had accompanied Paul to Rome, he may not have been aware of events in Jerusalem, or at least not enough to write a detailed narrative about them. After Paul had appealed to Caesar, the author of Acts was focused on telling the account of their journey to Rome, including their shipwreck on the island of Malta, and what happened when they finally arrived at Rome.

There was also a great fire in Rome, in July 64AD. According to Tacitus, people suspected that Nero was the cause, so in order to banish this belief, Nero blamed the Christians. An arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty, and upon their information, an immense multitude were convicted. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs, or were nailed to crosses, or burnt by flame, to illuminate Nero's gardens by night.¹⁵

Yet there is no mention of these things in the Acts of Apostles, or of the most significant event of all, from both a Jewish and a Christian viewpoint – namely, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.

Some have argued that the author ends his account where he does to highlight the fact that Jesus' assignment to his disciples, and especially to Paul, had been accomplished. The gospel had been preached from Jerusalem to Rome, the very capital of the empire. This is a fair point. Even so, the book of Acts records the deaths of certain people along the way, such as Stephen, and James the brother of John at the hand of Herod, and then how Herod died from worms. Why not round off the account by including the death of Paul, and then of Nero, the emperor who had him executed?

According to the narrative in Acts, Paul had returned to Jerusalem after a missionary journey to the nations, and some of the people stirred up trouble for him, leading to him being taken into custody by the military commander. Paul was able to speak to the people about what had caused him to become a Christian, and then he was brought before the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. After this, Jesus himself stood by him and said: "Take courage! For as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."¹⁶

Paul had testified to both the people of Jerusalem and their rulers. The implication is that he was to do the same in Rome. He was also able to speak before governors Felix and Festus, high priest Ananias, and even King Agrippa. Paul appealed his case to Caesar, so he could testify about Jesus before the emperor in Rome. But the book doesn't tell us the outcome.

Furthermore, during Paul's shipwreck on their way to Rome, the author records Paul as saying that an angel had told Paul not to fear, because he must stand before Caesar.¹⁷ Yet the book of Acts ends without him having stood before Caesar! In other words, we can't know, at least from this book alone, whether Paul was able to stand and testify about Jesus before the Roman emperor.

However, if Acts had been written significantly later than the events it describes, the addition of a few more chapters would be enough to cover the events that led to the deaths of the apostles, including Paul, perhaps with a few lines about how Nero met his death, declared an enemy of the state, not long after his brutal execution of Christians, just as Acts reported on Herod's death shortly after he put the apostle James to death. It would certainly be a fitting end to the early Christian story. Nero, the first imperial persecutor of Christians, dying a shameful death after having killed both Peter and Paul. Something like this would also corroborate the angel's words about Paul having to stand before Caesar.

Instead, we don't know, at least from the book of Acts, how Paul's trial ended, or even if there was a trial. We are treated to elaborate details about Paul's legal defenses before the people of Jerusalem, the Jewish Sanhedrin, governor Felix, and King Agrippa, but all of these are merely a prelude to his trial in Rome before Caesar. But on that, there is complete silence, which is completely out of character for the author and his style of narration.

I think the simplest explanation is that Luke was the author of both the gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Acts of Apostles, as Christian tradition claims, and that his second book was completed, somewhat prematurely, either before those later events took place, or at least before Luke could include them in his narrative. I suppose it's fair to say that Luke wrote a satisfactory ending, covering Paul's two years of house arrest. Perhaps he intended to add more later, once he knew the outcome of Paul's trial; but if he was an associate of Paul, maybe he suffered the same fate as Paul.

The name Luke only appears a few times in the New Testament. He is mentioned in the second letter to Timothy, where Paul is a prisoner and is about to die, and that only Luke is with him. He is also mentioned in Philemon, and in Colossians as "the beloved physician."¹⁸

Luke's gospel is addressed to "Most Excellent Theophilus," and "Most Excellent" (*kratiste*) is the same word used by Paul's opponent to address Roman governor Felix, and that Paul himself later used in addressing governor Festus.¹⁹ The implication is that "Most Excellent" Theophilus was an official of some kind. The book of Acts is also addressed to Theophilus.

According to Christian tradition, Paul was executed in Rome by Nero, and according to Tacitus, many other Christians died in Rome during Nero's persecution. Unfortunately for him, Paul had appealed to the emperor who would go down in history as the first imperial persecutor of Christians. If Paul's associate Luke was the author of the Acts of Apostles, and if Luke had also been killed by Nero, this would certainly explain the missing details from his book!

Either way, the omission of so many valuable details about the Christian story after Paul's house arrest, and of Paul's trial, is strong evidence that the writing of Acts was finished, intentionally or not, before Paul's death, perhaps in the early 60's AD, and certainly before the fall of Jerusalem.

As another line of evidence, the book itself suggests that the writer was one of Paul's companions. About halfway through, the account switches to "we," and is used periodically from then on.²⁰ This would make sense if the author accompanied Paul on some of his travels, including his journey to Rome. It would also explain why so much of the second half is focused on Paul. In that case, the author would be a contemporary of the events he was writing about.

By contrast, skeptical scholars have to assume deception when they date it later. They assume the author put words into Jesus' mouth about the destruction of Jerusalem, thus implying the author was a liar, or that he wanted to make Jesus appear to be a prophet. They also assume he relied on Josephus, even though the events that Acts and Josephus have in common contain significant differences. They assume he couldn't have known about the death of Herod without seeing it in the writings of Josephus.

The reason skeptics prefer a later date is because if Acts was written so soon after the events it describes, this would push back the dating of the author's first book, the gospel of Luke, to before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, and would therefore put it in the same generation as those who heard Jesus.

This would make it much harder for fabricated stories to be inserted into the gospel. However, skeptics need there to be a sufficient interval of time, in order to allow for the alleged insertion and fabrication of the parts they choose not to believe.

1 Luke 19:41-44. **2** Luke 21:20-24. **3** See Deuteronomy chapter 28. **4** Exodus 32:34. **5** Daniel 9:26,27. **6** Matthew 24:15,16. **7** Isaiah 61:1,2. **8** Luke 4:16-21. **9** Daniel 11:30,36; 12:1. **10** See "Letter To The Jews", chapters 29 and 30 at lettertothejews.com **11** Daniel 9:24-27. **12** Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*, Book 19, Chapter 8, Section 2. **13** Acts 12:21-23. **14** Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews*, Book 20, Chapter 9, Section 1. **15** Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 15, Chapter 44. **16** Acts 23:11. **17** Acts 27:23,24. **18** 2 Timothy 1:8; 2:9; 4:6,11; Philemon 24; Colossians 4:14. **19** Acts 24:3; 26:25. **20** Acts 16:10,11.

36. The Conversion Contradictions

Before I move on to the next hypothesis, it's worth taking a brief detour to examine the story of Saul, who is better known as the apostle Paul, and his alleged encounter with Christ. The story is told three times in Luke's book of Acts, and in each version, there are important differences which appear to be contradictions. Paul also gives more details in his own letter to the Galatians, and they appear to contradict Luke's account! This can serve as an interesting test case regarding the reliability, or otherwise, of the accounts, and what to do with apparent contradictions or mistakes.

The first version of Paul's encounter is narrated by Luke: **"Now as he was traveling he came near to Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him; and falling to the earth he heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. To be kicking against the goads is hard for you.' And trembling and astonished, he said, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' And the Lord answered him, 'Rise, and go into the city, and what you must do shall be spoken to you.'**¹ But the men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing indeed the voice but seeing nobody. But Saul arose from the earth and, opening up his eyes, he could see nothing; and they led him by the hand into Damascus; and he was without sight for three days, and he did not eat or drink."²

In the second version, Paul told the story himself while he was addressing a crowd of Jews in the Hebrew language near the Temple in Jerusalem. This version contains a major difference. **"And it happened to me that, as I was traveling and getting near to Damascus, about midday, suddenly out of heaven a great light shone around me; so I fell flat, and I heard a voice say to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' And those who were with me saw, indeed, the light,"³ but they did not hear the voice of the one speaking to me."**⁴

In the third version, Paul was making a defense of himself before King Agrippa: **"At midday on the way I saw, O King, a light from heaven, greater than the brightness of the sun, shining around me and those traveling with me. And when we had all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? To be kicking against the goads is hard for you.' And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise, and stand on your feet, for this is why I have appeared to you: to appoint you as a servant and witness of both the things you have seen, and the things I will show you, delivering you from the people and from the nations to whom I am now sending you.'"**⁵

Now, there seems to be a clear contradiction between the first two versions. In the first account, the men with him hear the voice: "The men who were traveling with

him stood speechless, hearing indeed the voice, but seeing nobody.” However, in Paul’s account before the Jews near the Temple, the men traveling with Paul don’t hear the voice! “And those who were with me saw, indeed, the light, but they did not hear the voice of the one speaking to me.”

There are three possible explanations. The first is simply that Paul made a mistake. When Paul was telling his story before the crowd, a few decades had already passed since his alleged encounter with Christ. It is therefore remarkable that Paul’s recall of the event was still fairly accurate after such a long time, although he got something wrong. He was, after all, human. He was also under a lot of pressure, since the crowd he was addressing had just tried to kill him.

Luke could have edited out Paul’s mistake, so the two versions of the story were consistent; but if this first explanation is correct, Luke chose instead to accurately record the thrust of Paul’s words, including his mistake. Intriguingly, there are also a few variations on the wording of manuscripts here, but they do not edit out this contradiction.

The second explanation is that Luke made the mistake. However, I think this is unlikely. He narrated the first version of the story, so he could have easily compared the two versions. Furthermore, since he was compiling a written account of early Christian history, which would be important to the Christian community, at least a few people would have probably checked the manuscript before his book was circulated widely. I think they would have caught Luke’s mistake, even if Luke himself didn’t.

The third explanation, and one that some translators seem to favor, is that when Paul said “they did not hear the voice of the one speaking to me,” he meant they didn’t understand what the voice was saying. In his account before King Agrippa, Paul said the voice spoke to him in Hebrew, so maybe his associates didn’t understand the language.

However, I think the first explanation is more convincing. The initial account mentioned what Paul’s companions heard but didn’t see, and there is no reason to suppose Paul intended these things to have a different meaning when recounting his story before the crowd. Furthermore, if Paul meant his companions didn’t understand the voice, he could have used a less ambiguous word.

In short, I think Paul probably made a mistake, and Luke accurately recorded it. Would skeptics prefer that mistakes made by people like Paul are covered up, or that they are accurately recorded? That Paul got something wrong after a few decades is hardly an argument to show that Luke or Paul are unreliable. In fact, I’d say the opposite is true. Paul was human, and got a detail wrong after about two decades. Luke chose not to edit out the mistake, which enhances Luke’s reliability.

If Paul’s story remained mostly intact after a few decades, apart from one particular detail, how much more would the Christian community, consisting of hundreds of eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life, death and alleged resurrection, be able to preserve an accurate account of the things Jesus said and did, even by word of mouth for a while?

Another potential issue with Paul's conversion experience is that the words spoken to him by Jesus are different in the version before King Agrippa. Jesus seems to have a more extensive conversation with him.

However, this isn't a contradiction. In the initial experience as narrated by Luke, Paul encounters the risen Christ, but only a little later is he told the reason why. However, in the version of the account he gives before King Agrippa, Paul recounts it all as one experience, perhaps for the sake of brevity. He is more likely paraphrasing Jesus, rather than giving an exact word for word account of what Jesus said to him.

Perhaps it is also an editing decision by Luke. I doubt Luke wrote down every word that Paul spoke before the Jewish crowd or King Agrippa. He was probably giving a condensed version, and so what he chose to include would reflect Paul's motive for speaking to each audience, as well as Luke's own knowledge that he would be telling Paul's conversion story three times in the same book.

Incidentally, this also explains the differences between the gospels. The authors were primarily compilers and editors, recording the thrust of Jesus' words and deeds, but not necessarily aiming for a word for word transcription at all times.

Many scholars believe the four gospels were written with different audiences in mind. Matthew was likely writing to Jews who believed in the prophecies found in the Hebrew scriptures. He put emphasis on how the circumstances of Jesus' life fulfilled scripture in some way. Part of Matthew's motive for selecting material was to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies.

Mark was likely writing to Romans, who knew little of Jewish scriptures. They did, however, understand power and leadership, so Mark emphasized the power and dynamic action of the Christ, the Son of God.

Luke addressed his gospel and book of Acts to one person, Theophilus, but he probably knew his works would reach a wider audience. Luke was likely a Greek, and had Greek people as his intended audience, who loved culture and truth. Both of his books are rich with cultural references, historical details and individual experiences to gain the attention and interest of his audience. Luke wanted to place Jesus into a clearer historical context, and placed emphasis on the ordering of events.

John was probably writing to the whole world, but especially believers. He placed a high value on being an eyewitness to most of the things he wrote about. He focused in particular on Jesus' message of love and truth. He also brought Jesus' roles into clear focus: Jesus is the Word, who was in the beginning with God. He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the light of the world, and the Lord who came to the Temple, as foretold by Malachi.

In other words, each gospel writer selected the words and events that would be most relevant to his audience, and that aligned with the overall purpose of his particular book. The same was true of Paul when he was writing or speaking to different audiences.

Now, what happened to Paul after his alleged encounter with the risen Christ? There seems to be two contradictory accounts. According to Luke's version in the Acts

of Apostles, Paul was converted near Damascus, stayed for some days with the disciples in Damascus, and then right away he began preaching in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God. After many days, certain Jews plotted to do away with him, and they were watching the city gates day and night; but his disciples let him out through an opening in a wall, lowering him in a basket. He then went to Jerusalem, and Barnabas led him to the apostles.⁶

However, Paul himself seems to tell a different story in his letter to the Galatians: **“But when it pleased God, the One separating me from my mother’s womb and calling me through his grace, to reveal his Son by me, so that I would preach him among the nations, I did not immediately submit to flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem, to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem, to relate my story to Peter, and I stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see the other apostles, except James the brother of the Lord. But the things I am writing you, look! in the sight of God, I am not lying. After that I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. But I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea that were in Christ, and they had only heard that ‘the one persecuting us before is now preaching the faith which he ravaged before.’ And they glorified God because of me.”**⁷

I would suggest that these aren’t two contradictory accounts. They are complementary, each being told with a different aim in mind. Luke’s purpose in writing Acts was to give an account of how the disciples became witnesses of Jesus “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁸ His version of what happened after Paul was converted agrees with Paul that he “did not immediately submit to flesh and blood,” but began preaching in the synagogues about the Christ, no man giving him authority to do this.

However, Luke omits the part about Paul going to Arabia. This isn’t surprising, since Paul only mentions it in passing; so Luke simply leaves out this detail, because it doesn’t appear to be relevant to the commission Jesus gave to his disciples.

Luke’s version says that after “many days” Paul went to Jerusalem. The events in the book of Acts aren’t usually dated, because Luke is concerned with the events themselves, rather than the exact timing of them. Therefore the expression “many days” simply meant a certain period of time, which could have been years. Indeed, there is a prophecy in Hosea that says for “many days” the people of Israel would dwell without a king or sacrifices.⁹ It turns out, those “many days” were about 2,000 years! Just as in that prophecy, Luke omits the exact length of time, which Paul supplies. The “many days” turned out to be three years.

But according to Luke, when Paul came to Jerusalem, Barnabas led him to the apostles; so why does Paul say he only met Peter, and “did not see the other apostles, except James the brother of the Lord”? Again, there is no contradiction. “James the brother of the Lord” wasn’t one of the original twelve apostles, but Paul here counts him as an apostle. This shouldn’t be surprising, since Paul considered himself to be an

apostle as well, even though he wasn't one of "the Twelve." Peter also was a representative of "the Twelve." Thus, from Luke's perspective, Paul met with the apostles. There is no reason why it had to be all of the original apostles.

The reason Paul's account seems different is that his reason for giving it is very different from Luke's. Paul's point was that **"the gospel that is being preached by me is not according to a man; for neither did I receive it from a man, nor was I taught it, except through a revelation of Jesus Christ."**¹⁰ This is why he emphasizes that he didn't initially get his authority from men, including the apostles.

In other words, the two versions of Paul's story are easy to reconcile once we realize the different motives behind them. Luke simply omits details that don't contribute to his wider theme, namely the spread of the good news about Jesus. Paul gives more details, to make the point that his authority to preach Christ came directly from Jesus, and not from men.

My reason for spending an entire chapter on this issue is, skeptics like to point out apparent contradictions they find in the Bible, but they usually fail to take the context of the words or the purpose of the writer into account.

When writing about an event or recording a person's words, writers have to decide what details to include or exclude, and whether to quote someone exactly, or whether to paraphrase or give the general thrust of what they say. My aim with this chapter has been to provide an example of how apparent contradictions can usually be resolved, when we have a better understanding of purpose and context.

However, in the case of Paul's conversion story, I think we have found a genuine mistake. Under intense pressure, Paul probably did slip up in his speech to the crowd. He was, after all, human. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, could have edited out Paul's mistake and we would probably never know about it. But if Luke's aim was to accurately record the thrust of the events surrounding the early Christian story, then he chose, for better or worse, to preserve Paul's mistake.

¹ Some translations have a shorter version of this verse: "And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise, and go into the city, and what you must do shall be spoken to you.'" ² Acts 9:3-9. ³ Some translations add "and became afraid" here. ⁴ Acts 22:6-9. ⁵ Acts 26:13-17. ⁶ Acts 9:10-30. ⁷ Galatians 1:15-24. ⁸ Acts 1:8. ⁹ Hosea 3:4-5. ¹⁰ Galatians 1:11,12.

37. The Church Conspiracy

If the apostle Paul wasn't the source of the Resurrection Story, then could the Christian Church after his day have come up with it somehow, perhaps as a result of stories being made up or exaggerated?

Incidentally, from now on I will use the term "Church" to refer to the whole group of mainstream Christians, rather than a building, congregation or any particular denomination we know today.

My third hypothesis is as follows: the later Church, particularly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD and the death of most of the apostles, was the source of the Resurrection Story we know today. I call this the "Church Conspiracy" hypothesis.

To examine this, we first need to consider what the Church could have believed before they supposedly came up with the story, assuming the hypothesis is correct. For early Christians, Jesus would still have to be someone worth preaching about. He would still need to be a holy man and perhaps some kind of savior. Perhaps the message was, as Paul said to his jailer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."¹ The early Christian movement could have been similar to the ministry of John the Baptist, who taught baptism as a symbol of repentance for forgiveness of sins.²

In short, maybe the early Christian faith was simply about belief in Jesus as a prophet and savior from our sins. If many of the people in his day could accept that John the Baptist was a prophet, they could probably embrace this form of Jesus, especially if he was a good and holy man. Perhaps early Christians believed Jesus was a prophet who taught some good things and then died, and that was it.

However, Paul's claim to have encountered the risen Christ depended on Jesus being alive. In turn, acceptance of Paul by the apostles meant they also had to believe Jesus was alive. Therefore, maybe early Christians believed Jesus had been raised, but they had no official story about it. After all, they didn't have any gospels, since those would only be written some decades after Jesus' death around 30 or 33AD.

What they did have, as most scholars will agree, is a collection of Paul's letters, written between ten and thirty years after Jesus' death, in which he assumes Jesus rose from the dead. But in the hypothesis I am examining in this chapter, Paul and his associates didn't invent the Resurrection Story. This would somehow be the product of the later Church.

An interesting question we could ask at this point is: can the Resurrection Story be pieced together solely from Paul's so-called "authentic" letters? The answer is no. As I have said before, those letters are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

In these we get a brief outline of how Jesus died. From Paul's letter to the Romans we deduce that Jesus was handed over.³ From 1 Corinthians we learn that on the night he was betrayed, Jesus instituted a ritual in which Christians share in the body and blood of Christ by eating bread and drinking wine.⁴ From the same letter we

learn that he was executed by the rulers of the age.⁵ From this letter and also from Galatians we are told he died on a cross or stake.⁶ From Philipians we learn that he suffered.⁷

However, in all of these letters except Philemon, Paul assumes or implies that Jesus was raised from the dead. He often makes arguments that depend on Christ's resurrection, such as: his resurrection is what allows for forgiveness of sins;⁸ it's how we know Jesus is God's Son;⁹ the dead are only sleeping, awaiting a resurrection;¹⁰ Paul himself, like Jesus had already done, wanted to attain to the resurrection of the dead;¹¹ Paul's readers were waiting for the Son from the heavens, whom God had raised up.¹²

Clearly then, if these are Paul's letters, as even skeptical scholars say they are, the later Church didn't invent the concept of Jesus being raised. The belief was already common among Christians while Paul was alive.

Paul may have sketched out the core idea, but maybe he wasn't too concerned about the details. After all, it wasn't the suffering Jesus who supposedly appeared to him on the road to Damascus, but the risen Christ, which was Paul's primary focus in his ministry. Therefore, if we are to accept the Church Conspiracy hypothesis, the Church after Paul's day must have somehow filled in the details.

However, it is precisely these details that early opponents of the Christian message would have demanded to know, and potential new disciples would have needed to know. Who was Jesus? How and why was he executed? What were the circumstances of his death and resurrection? How do you know he was raised up?

The original apostles, "the Twelve," claimed to be witnesses of Jesus' ministry and resurrection. This was also the criteria they set for appointing a replacement for Judas Iscariot.¹³ The purpose of a witness is to report on what they have seen personally. But what credibility would the apostles have if they couldn't supply the details about Jesus' resurrection? Their claim to be witnesses would fail and their authority as apostles would falter.

Many people in Judea may have heard about Jesus and the circumstances of his death. After this, the apostles led and taught his disciples, and those disciples helped spread the word about Jesus. As their message reached into lands far away from the religious and political world of Judea, the disciples would need a good grasp of the details regarding Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, to convince those who were unfamiliar with Jesus that he had risen. Those details would need to be consistent, so that new disciples would believe the same things, and so that opponents couldn't accuse Christians of making things up as they went along.

Furthermore, the details could have been useful as Paul appealed to Caesar in Rome. While examining Paul's case, the government may have wanted to know who Jesus was, what he was charged with, and the circumstances of his death and alleged resurrection, especially as the story involved soldiers, officials and governors.

Besides, for Christians to be able to claim that Jesus was the Suffering Servant foretold by the prophet Isaiah, they would have to show how he suffered, died and

was raised up. Mere assertions from Paul, who by his own admission wasn't a believer at the time of the alleged resurrection, probably wouldn't have been enough to convince a skeptic living at the time. Indeed, when governor Festus heard the outline of Paul's story, he replied in a similar way to a typical skeptic: "You are crazy, Paul! Great learning is sending you crazy!" ¹⁴

Admittedly, some people might have believed in the resurrection of Jesus simply because the apostles said it happened. After all, people have believed much stranger things based on the word of others, and Christians today believe it primarily because of the gospels.

However, I would suggest that assertions alone wouldn't have created the kind of faith that could survive a trial by fire, which is what Christians faced in those early days. This was also implied by Jesus himself in one of his parables, where he said that some would hear the word eagerly, but because they had no root in themselves they would be stumbled when tribulation or persecution came. ¹⁵

The apostles' claims might have been enough to produce an initial believer, but it probably wasn't enough to produce mature Christians, of the kind Paul wrote about in his letters. This would require a deeper faith, fortified by details such as a knowledge of who Jesus was, what he did and taught, and how he suffered, died and came back to life. Paul didn't provide those details in his letters because he was writing to believers, not skeptics.

In other words, even though the gospels weren't written until later, a core collection of eyewitness accounts must have been in existence from the beginning, to supply the details of Jesus' death and alleged resurrection, and to support the idea that the apostles were witnesses. Those accounts would have collectively told some form of Resurrection Story, to justify the disciples' belief that Jesus had been raised.

The next question then is: was the Resurrection Story the early Christians believed essentially the same one we have in our gospels today, or were certain parts exaggerated or fabricated by the later Church?

I have already argued that some elements of the story must have been there from the start. The stone over Jesus' tomb must have been removed along with his body, otherwise it would be hard for the disciples to claim a resurrection had taken place. If they had encountered the risen Christ, but the tomb was still sealed, the apostles could have called into question their own sanity – if not right away, then perhaps in later years.

What about the women who found the empty tomb? According to the gospels, they also encountered angels and then Jesus himself. Could these women have been made up by the later Church to provide additional witnesses?

According to Luke's gospel, the women included Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the apostle James, Joanna the wife of King Herod's steward Chuza, and other unnamed women. ¹⁶ Many of them had accompanied Jesus in his ministry and ministered to him from their belongings. ¹⁷ Matthew's gospel includes the mother of

the apostles James and John, the sons of Zebedee.¹⁸ Mark's version includes the name Salome.¹⁹

If these women were simply made up by the gospel writers, early skeptics and even believers could have pointed out that they weren't in the original Resurrection Story being preached. Indeed, the presence of even one fictional character would have given opponents the ammunition they needed to defeat the Christian message, and Christians a cause to doubt the stories they treasured. Besides, if the apostles were real, then presumably their mothers were as well, and at least one or two of these women were mothers of apostles.

In other words, rather than being fictional characters, they were likely to have been real disciples known to the Christian community, especially if they had accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry.

However, even though they were likely to be real people, could their stories have been made up by the later Church, to give more credibility to the idea that Jesus had been raised?

To a certain extent, this depends on when the gospels were written and by whom. The early Christians were a tightly bonded community, centered around the life, death and teachings of Jesus Christ, whom they considered their Lord. They would have probably felt an obligation to communicate the words and deeds of their Lord as accurately as possible. This is why I think it likely the gospels were written before the apostles and other witnesses had died.

The gospels of Matthew and Mark are hard to date, but they use a lot of material similar to Luke. I have already made a strong case for the gospel of Luke being written well before the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD by an associate of Paul named Luke. This would place his gospel within the lifetime of the disciples who heard Jesus, making it much harder for the author to just make up their stories.

According to early Christian sources, the apostle John was the author of the gospel of John, and it was written after the other three. The author seems to rely on the testimony of Mary Magdalene, who is said to have encountered two angels at Jesus' tomb, and then Jesus himself.

If the author had simply made up her testimony, Christians could have doubted or even rejected his gospel. But if her story is accurate, in the sense that she really did claim to have seen what John wrote, this would help explain why the gospel gained wide acceptance within the Christian community. His audience knew he was writing the truth as he saw it. Of course, this doesn't prove Mary Magdalene really encountered angels, but it does suggest John wasn't just making those things up.

If the women's testimonies weren't actually fabricated by the gospel writers, perhaps they were based on stories that got exaggerated later. Maybe what the women saw was just the stone out of place and the empty tomb. Since this wasn't exactly proof of Jesus' resurrection, perhaps rumors began to circulate that they had seen much more; and gradually, as the women died and the gospels were written,

rumors were elevated to the status of facts and became part of the Resurrection Story, to strengthen the idea that something miraculous had occurred.

If considered in isolation, I suppose this is plausible. However, according to the story, it wasn't the testimony of the women that convinced the apostles Jesus had been raised. Apparently they thought the women's stories were nonsense! What convinced them was that Jesus appeared to the apostles and disciples multiple times; and this wasn't a series of fleeting apparitions, but he supposedly ate meals with them, held conversations with them, and taught them over a period of forty days. In other words, if this is what they experienced, but Jesus wasn't actually raised up, they were having mass delusions of the highest order.

Maybe a more reasonable explanation is that these details were also exaggerated by the later Church, to make the evidence for Jesus' resurrection sound stronger than it really was. Maybe the real truth was, the apostles just saw fleeting apparitions and heard occasional voices of Jesus, prior to Paul's conversion due to sunstroke.

However, the apostles and disciples still needed something to convince them they had encountered the risen Christ, otherwise why bother to preach this, let alone risk death for it? Why not just preach what they knew to be true: Jesus was a good and holy man who wanted to bring people closer to God and a more accurate understanding of the Law, and who expected his disciples to share his teachings far and wide, including baptism as a symbol of repentance?

Surely this would have been more acceptable to the people, and win over many more converts, especially since many accepted John the Baptist had been a prophet. Jesus would have been another prophet. This would have been far more acceptable than preaching that Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead.

Yet according to Luke's second book, the Acts of Apostles, Peter's first speech to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost around the year 33AD, included the claim that Jesus was handed over, put to death, resurrected, and that the apostles were witnesses of those things.²⁰

True, there isn't a lot of detail in Peter's speech, so as with Paul's letters, perhaps it could serve as an outline for the more detailed Resurrection Story we have today. Either way, according to the account, his speech was convincing enough for 3,000 people to be baptized in the name of Jesus that day.²¹

Assuming the account is true, what gave Peter the confidence to boldly proclaim in front of so many people that his Lord had risen? And why did so many people accept what Peter had said?

Maybe the former fisherman had become an almost overnight master of speaking and persuasion; but a simpler explanation would be that these people were familiar with the circumstances of Jesus' death, so they accepted Peter's explanation that God had raised Jesus.

Prior to his speech there had apparently been an outpouring of God's Spirit, causing all of the disciples to speak in the various languages of the people residing in

Jerusalem. Some skeptics mocked and said they were just drunk. It is a strange drunkenness that allows people to speak foreign languages fluently, but I suppose if a hearer only speaks one language, other speakers would sound like babble. Either way, Peter dealt with their skepticism by pointing out that they weren't drunk because it was still early in the morning; and more importantly, an outpouring of God's Spirit had already been foretold through the prophet Joel, who wrote:

"And it will be afterwards that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters will prophecy. Your old ones will dream dreams and your young men will see visions; and also on the male servants and on the female servants I will pour out my spirit in those days. And I will give wonders in the heavens, and in the earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and terrifying day of YHWH. And it will be that everyone who will call on the name of YHWH will escape."²²

In other words, Peter reminded his audience that an outpouring of God's Spirit, accompanied by supernatural sights, was due before YHWH's great day, which to early Christians would have been viewed as being fulfilled by the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. But maybe Peter's speech was also fabricated by the later Church, and they were smart enough to include skeptics to make it sound more plausible.

A related question we could ask at this point is, how easy would it be for stories like this to be fabricated, and added to the writings considered to be scripture by Christians? To answer this, consider the following curious riddle.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we are told that Jesus was "raised up on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve."²³ Cephas was the name given by Jesus to Simon, also called Peter, the one who famously denied knowing Jesus three times before a cock crowed.

Paul said that the risen Jesus first appeared to Cephas. Yet nowhere in the gospels is this story told. There is just a small allusion to it in the gospel of Luke. According to this gospel, when Peter heard something had happened at Jesus' tomb, he ran there and found it to be empty apart from the linen cloths. Later on, two men were traveling to Emmaus when Jesus supposedly traveled alongside them and conversed with them. The men didn't realize it was Jesus. Only when they arrived at their lodging place, and he said a blessing over their meal, did they recognize him, and then he disappeared. The two men got up, returned to Jerusalem and found the apostles who were saying, "the Lord has indeed been raised up, and has appeared to Simon!" Then the two men recounted their story.²⁴

Some skeptics claim this was a clumsy attempt on Luke's part to validate Paul's statement about Jesus first appearing to Cephas. But then, why was Luke so clumsy? Why didn't he just make up a story about Jesus encountering Simon Peter? The skeptic argues that Luke couldn't do this, because no such story was known by the Christian community, so it would be obvious to his readers that he had made it up. Therefore Luke tried to imply Peter was one of the two men on the road to Emmaus, without directly saying it.

Now, there is no actual evidence Luke is trying to do this. But even if he was, it shows the difficulty a gospel writer would have faced in fabricating a story that wasn't already familiar to the Christian community.

In Luke's book of Acts, Paul's first encounter with the risen Christ is told three times. Peter also makes speeches, but nowhere does he tell the story of what happened when he first encountered the risen Christ. If Luke was making up parts of his book, surely he could have fabricated the story of Peter's encounter.

What about the two letters in the New Testament bearing Peter's name? The first one was considered authentic by the early Church, but the authenticity of the second was in doubt, although it was still widely read. Nowadays, skeptical scholars doubt both, for reasons I will touch on in a moment. But if these letters are fabrications, surely they would have been the perfect place to tell a story about Peter's first encounter with the risen Jesus. Yet even they are silent on the matter.

My point here is this: even if the gospels were written after the death of the apostles, the authors couldn't just insert a fabricated story about Peter's encounter with Jesus, because the Christian community didn't know of such a story.

Furthermore, even if the two letters bearing Peter's name aren't really his, whoever wrote them didn't dare make up a story that wasn't already believed by the community, because then the letters would risk not merely being doubted, but actually rejected by the community to which they were addressed.

The same logic applies to all the contents of the four gospels accepted by Christians – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If a fabricated story was added, the entire gospel risked being rejected not just by skeptics, but also by Christians themselves.

This is why the testimony of the women was likely to have remained the same from the start, because otherwise opponents could have pointed out how their stories had changed, and even the Christian community would have questioned the reliability of their own gospels.

Similarly, the idea of a man walking on water or feeding crowds from a few loaves and fishes may sound hard to believe from a modern perspective, but if the gospel writers were merely making those stories up, both skeptics and Christians themselves would have had plenty of room for doubt.

On the other hand, if the gospels accurately reflected what the early Christian community already believed about Jesus, this would explain why they gained widespread acceptance by the community. It would also explain why Jesus being raised from the dead was not too difficult for them to believe. It would be the ultimate miracle in a life already filled with miracles.

Incidentally, why do many skeptical scholars think the letters of Peter aren't authentic? One argument is that Peter was likely to have been illiterate. However, even if we assume Peter never learned to write throughout his Christian ministry, someone could have written them on his behalf, just as Tertius wrote Paul's letter to the Romans on his behalf.²⁵ The author of 1 Peter even says this is what happened:

"Through Silvanus, a brother to you of the faithful, as I account him, I have written in brief."²⁶

Another argument is that the author of 1 Peter draws from the Greek translation of the Bible known as the *Septuagint*, used primarily by converts to the Jewish faith. However, the gospel writers also do the same, because they are writing to a wide audience.

Early Christian writers generally accepted the first letter of Peter as authentic. However, the second letter seems to have been less widely known and accepted. It uses a rougher form of Greek than the first, which has led some scholars to conclude the two must have been written by different authors. But this could be explained by the hand of Silvanus in the first letter.

The second letter begins, "Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ." The author says he is about to die as Jesus had previously indicated to him. A hint at how Peter would die is also given in John's gospel.²⁷

The author of 2 Peter mentions being an eyewitness of Jesus' glory: "For we did not make known to you the power and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ by following clever myths, but by being spectators of that one's magnificence. For he received honor and glory from God the Father, from the voice conveyed to him in the following manner by the magnificent glory: 'This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I delight.' And this is the voice we heard out of heaven, when we were brought together with him in the holy mountain. And we have the word of prophecy confirmed even more, to which you are doing well by paying attention to it."²⁸

This event, often referred to by Christians as "the Transfiguration," is described in three of the four gospels. Jesus took Peter, James and John to a high mountain, and he was transformed somehow before them, his face shining like the sun, and his garments becoming as white as the light. Then a cloud covered them and they heard a voice from heaven.²⁹

Extraordinary though this may sound, if we suppose for a moment that something like this really did happen, it would have had a major impact on Peter's faith, since it seemed to foreshadow Jesus being raised to glory and departing to heaven on a cloud.

The author of 2 Peter also refers to the letters of Paul and views them as scripture.³⁰ Some scholars argue this implies a later date for authorship, perhaps in the second century AD when Paul's letters were widely known and accepted by the Christian community. However, the letters were probably familiar to Christians by the time of Peter's death in the early 60's AD, and held in high enough esteem that Peter could say they had attained the status of scripture within the Christian community.

Alternatively, if the apostle Peter really was the author of 2 Peter, he could have simply been exercising his authority as an apostle, to help the community determine what would later become accepted Christian scriptures. In other words, he was indicating that Paul's letters were to be considered on a par with other scripture.

Now, according to Mark's gospel, on the morning of the supposed resurrection, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of James had gone with spices to the tomb, but they found the large stone rolled away, and "entering into the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were stunned." ³¹ After the man said Jesus had been raised, he told the women to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus would go ahead of them into Galilee, and they would see him there.

In the most ancient manuscripts, Mark's gospel ends with the women fleeing from the tomb, trembling and stunned, and "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." ³² Some Christians maybe didn't like the way this gospel ended, because later manuscripts contain a few alternative endings which are more positive, seemingly borrowed from Matthew or Luke's account. This suggests Mark's gospel was written quite early on, if later Christians felt the need to add to it.

Whatever the case, the original ending of Mark's gospel seems to contradict what Matthew and Luke say. In Matthew's version, instead of saying nothing, the women leave the tomb with fear and great joy, and they run to report to the disciples, encountering Jesus along the way. In Luke's version the women see two men in shining garments, who remind the women of Jesus' words about how he said he would be executed and rise on the third day. Then they go off and report to the apostles. Luke also mentions Joanna instead of Salome.

In John's gospel it was just Mary Magdalene who saw the empty tomb, and she went running to tell Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, presumably the author of the gospel.

If the writers copied one another as some skeptics claim, they did a poor job, because there are so many apparent contradictions. However, if the gospels are really the products of varying eyewitness testimony, this would explain the differences.

For example, if Luke is telling the truth when he says he followed all things accurately from the start, he would want to draw from the testimony of people who were there. Among the women, perhaps he couldn't speak to Salome for whatever reason, but he could talk with Joanna.

According to Christian tradition, the gospel of John was the last of the four gospels. Many of the original eyewitnesses might not have been alive at the time, but perhaps Mary Magdalene was, which is why John focuses on her. Alternatively, maybe he singles her out because she was the person who came and spoke to him and Peter.

Whatever the case, let's look at how the differences could be resolved, by considering what I will call "The Untold Story Of The Empty Tomb" – untold, that is, until now.

1 Acts 16:31. **2** Luke 3:3. **3** Romans 4:24,25. **4** 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. **5** 1 Corinthians 2:2,8. **6** 1 Corinthians 1:13-18,23; Galatians 3:1. **7** Philippians 3:10,11. **8** 1 Corinthians 15:12-22. **9** Romans 1:4. **10** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. **11** Philippians 3:10,11. **12** 1 Thessalonians 1:10. **13** Acts 1:21,22. **14** Acts 26:24. **15** Matthew 13:1-23. **16** Luke 24:10. **17** Luke 8:1-3. **18** Matthew 27:55,56; 28:1. **19** Mark 15:40,41; 16:1.

20 Acts 2:1-36. **21** Acts 2:37-42. **22** Joel 2:28-32. **23** 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. **24** Luke 24:12-35. **25** Romans 16:22. **26** 1 Peter 5:12. **27** John 21:18,19. **28** 2 Peter 1:16-19. **29** Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:1-9; Luke 9:27-36. **30** 2 Peter 3:15,16. **31** Mark 16:5. **32** Mark 16:8.

38. The Untold Story Of The Empty Tomb

It was still dark when they finished preparing the spices and perfumed oils they would apply to his body. Mary Magdalene was eager to leave the house, and she hurried the others along. Salome preferred to wait until the sun had come up, but Magdalene had an energy that was hard to resist, and it was too early in the morning for arguments.

Each woman carefully checked her own lamp, to make sure she had enough oil for the journey to the tomb. Salome had a spare one just in case, and she started to inspect the other women's lamps. Joanna playfully hid hers behind her back.

"Do I look like a foolish virgin to you?" she said. The others chuckled, appreciating the reference.

The air was cool, and everything was quiet, apart from the sound of their own breathing, as they began the journey to the tomb. Mary Magdalene led the charge, thrusting her lamp into the darkness ahead, while the others trailed behind.

Dawn was just breaking out when they reached a slope where they could first make out their destination. To Salome, it looked like the kind of place you wouldn't want to visit even in the middle of the day, let alone at such an early hour.

A bird screeched in the distance. More birds joined in. The wind picked up, and then fell silent. Suddenly, as they were gazing into the distance, they saw what looked like a streak of lightning come out of the sky, and strike the area where they thought the tomb was. The earth shook, and it was followed by a strong wind and a burst of light from the direction of the tomb.

They all froze, trying to process what they had just seen. After a few moments, Joanna whispered, "Do you hear that?"

They couldn't be sure if what they heard was just the wind, or an effect of the lightning strike; but they all agreed it sounded a lot like men crying out in terror.

"Let's come back when it's light," said Salome, who had already begun to edge backwards. But Mary Magdalene couldn't have agreed. She was already running in the direction of the spectacle. The remaining women watched in horror as she disappeared down the road and out of their sight.

"I'll go after her," said Susanna, running after her. "I'll see you at the tomb," she shouted back to the others. They wanted to stop her, but before they could find the words, she was already out of their grasp.

As the remaining women watched her also vanish into the darkness ahead, Salome tried to reason with the others, arguing that it was better to come back during the day; but the rest wanted to carry on. They couldn't leave Magdalene and Salome alone in such a terrible place, and besides, if something had happened at Jesus' tomb, they wanted to know what it was.

The group continued on toward the tomb, their pace much slower than before. As they went, they discussed whether they would be able to apply the spices to his body, especially because of the security around the tomb. The authorities seemed

very eager to protect it. Would the soldiers remove the stone for them, or would they have to try and do it themselves?

The sun was just starting to rise when they finally arrived at the tomb. Susanna sat on a rock nearby, looking dejected. When she saw the others, she ran up to tell them the news, but before she could open her mouth, Joanna asked, "where's Mary Magdalene?"

"She's gone to tell the apostles," said Susanna.

"Tell them what?"

Susanna pointed in the direction of the tomb. The others looked up along the path, and were astonished to see that the stone had already been rolled away.

"Where are the soldiers?" asked Joanna.

"I don't know," said Susanna. "They must have taken Jesus' body somewhere, but how are we supposed to find him in a place like this?"

"Did you take a look inside?"

"Of course not!" replied Susanna, disgusted at the thought. "I'm not going in there by myself, and Magdalene ran off before we could look in."

Joanna and Mary the mother of James ran up to the tomb entrance, and stooped down to peer in, dangling their lamps into the darkness. Salome and the other women followed after them.

"Can you see anything?" asked Salome.

"I can't see his body," said Joanna. "But I can't tell from here. I'll have to go in."

She crouched down to go through the entrance, and then helped Mary in. They clung to each other, lamps held out ahead of them, as they made their way further into the tomb, to the recess where Jesus' body was supposed to be.

"There are some cloths here," said Joanna in a loud voice, making sure the others could hear. Her words echoed around the tomb. Susanna, Salome and the other women climbed into the tomb, but they stayed near the entrance.

"Let's stand guard here," Salome said to the women in her group. They all agreed. None of them really wanted to be in a dark tomb that was supposed to have a dead body in it, and that had been sealed only a few days ago, but was now standing wide open.

Salome, in particular, was also afraid of the dark. The lamps gave off just enough light to prevent her from being completely petrified; but at the same time, the flames cast eerie shadows that danced on the walls, and if she watched them long enough, she was sure she could see them making faces at her, taunting her.

She peered further into the tomb, where Joanna and Mary were, and her heart skipped several beats as she saw what looked like a young man, sitting on the right side of where Jesus was supposed to be.

Unable to speak for fear, she nudged the other women in her group, and pointed in the direction of the man. From what they could make out, he was wearing a white robe, and appeared to be looking at Joanna and Mary with a slight smile on his face. The two women had obviously not seen him. They were using their lamps as

searchlights, feeling around the tomb like women desperately looking for a lost coin. Salome wanted to call out to the two women, but she was too stunned to say anything.

Then the young man got up, and stood behind Joanna. He was tall, much taller than her, and even though Salome wanted to rush to Joanna's aid, something seemed to hold her back. But it wasn't fear. She couldn't quite describe what it was.

Joanna and Mary would tell their version of the story to the other women later. Once they had searched the sides of the tomb with their lamps, they turned round to explore the recess where Jesus' body should have been, and were astonished to see two men standing by them, wearing robes of brilliant white that seemed to sparkle as the light from the lamps reflected off them. As the two women gazed at them, speechless, the man on the left gestured to the man on the right, as if inviting him to speak for them both. The man on the right began speaking.

From the sound of his voice and the way in which he spoke, Joanna and Mary knew that he couldn't be a normal man. His voice had an otherworldly texture, soft and gentle but with a divine authority to it. As he spoke, the two women could see that the gleaming came, not just from his robe, but also his body. When the women realized they must be angels, fear gripped them, and they lowered their heads, afraid to look at them directly.

However, none of the women would ever forget the words he said to them. In a comforting voice, he told them not to be stunned or afraid. He told them Jesus was not here, because he had been raised up as he said he would be. The women were to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus was going ahead of them into Galilee, and they would see him there.

With that, the two men sat down in the recess where Jesus' body was supposed to be, and they both gazed serenely at the entrance of the tomb. After a few moments of uncertainty, Mary and Joanna both realized this was their cue to leave. All of the women scrambled out of the tomb without saying a word, and fled as fast as they could. When they had reached what they all felt to be a safe distance, they came to a sudden halt. For several moments there was a tense silence, and then Joanna and Mary broke out into fits of laughter.

"Come on," said Joanna, after she had regained her breath. "We need to tell the apostles about this."

"Tell them what, exactly?" said Susanna.

They all began discussing what they had seen. Joanna and Mary said the men must have been angels, because of the way they spoke, and the radiance of their clothing and bodies. Salome, Susanna and the other women, who had been inside the tomb but had stayed near the entrance, were not as certain. They heard what had been said, but from where they were standing they had only seen one man, a young man, on the right side of where Jesus should have been. They agreed his clothes were white, but they didn't see the radiance the two women were talking about, or if they did, they assumed it was the light coming from Joanna and Mary's lamps.

The discussion soon turned to what it all meant. If they told the apostles they had seen angels, would the men believe them? Even if they did, what then? Would the men go around telling everyone that Jesus was alive, based on their statements about seeing shiny young men who were really angels? And if people were already being expelled from the synagogue simply for believing in Jesus, and Jesus himself had been executed, what would happen to them if they went around telling people that Jesus was alive, and that angels had told them this?

Gradually, any joy they felt was replaced once again by fear. This time, it was not a fear of dark tombs or lightning bolts or men who appeared to be angels. It was a fear of uncertainty and doubt, of being ridiculed, of being shunned, and of being killed.

One by one, despondent, devastated, they dropped to the side of the road. They sat in silence, saying nothing to anybody, trembling and occasionally weeping, as if the world around them had just collapsed. Occasionally, a kind passerby would ask whether they needed any help, but the women would just wave them away. To them, it felt like they sat there for days, although it was really no more than a few hours.

Eventually, partly out of shame, and partly because her own courage was beginning to return, Joanna spoke up.

"Look," she said. "We didn't follow this man all the way from Galilee, just to sit here like beggars on the outskirts of Jerusalem. We need to tell the others about what we saw."

Just then, another passerby approached them.

"Greetings!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

The women tried to ignore him, but the man sat down next to Joanna. "What is the matter with you, Joanna?" he said.

This caught her attention. She pushed away the hair in front of her face, wiped away the tears from her eyes, and looked intently at the man.

"How do you know my name?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" he replied. "I knew it even before you began ministering to me."

It took a few moments for her mind to catch up with what her heart already knew. She gazed at him, and he smiled back. After a few more moments, she burst into laughter. The others looked at her, and then at the man. What had he said that was so funny? But Joanna wasn't laughing at him, or at what he'd said. She was laughing because now she understood. Now she got it. Now she saw him for who he really was. And at the same time, here he was, sitting right beside her at the side of the road, smiling at her, or rather with her.

How could she not laugh? God had told Abraham to name his son Isaac, meaning "Laughter." She remembered being taught that story, and thinking to herself that it was a ridiculous name to give a child. Now she knew it had been perfect. The impossible had just happened, and she had been there to witness it. She knew it would sound unbelievable to others, laughable even. It sounded ridiculous even as

she thought about it. Who would believe their report? But the stunning reality of it also made her laugh in a way that nobody or nothing else could.

For a fleeting moment she saw Isaac in her mind. God had asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, whom he loved. Isaac had to carry the wood on his own back to the place of his sacrifice, the same wood he would then be placed upon. But Abraham knew his son would return with him, because of the power of God.

Now she was no longer just a believer in such stories. Now she knew. The man sitting next to her was also an only Son who was loved by his Father. His name would also mean laughter. He too had carried the wood to the place of his death, and was then placed upon that same wood. The difference was, the man sitting beside her had given his life freely, not as a child sacrifice, but as a hero. And she knew he had done it for her.

Now that she understood, she wanted to enjoy his gaze for as long as possible. The other women huddled closer to Joanna, watching her stare at him with a wide grin on her face; but they could sense it wasn't the gaze of a woman who had been captivated by a charming and handsome man. It was something deeper.

"What is it?" asked Salome quietly, almost afraid to interrupt them, and not quite sure whether to expect the answer to a joke, or the revelation of a profound secret known only to Joanna and the man.

Joanna inclined her head toward Salome, while her gaze remained fixed on the man. "It is the Lord," she whispered.

The others saw that Joanna had replied, but they didn't hear the words. "What did she say?" they demanded to know.

Salome also fixed her eyes upon the man. "She said it's the Lord."

The rest of the women stared at him, and he began to look at each of them in turn.

Before his death, he had been scourged so violently by the Roman soldiers that his back was covered in thick stripes. His face had been pummeled by their fists, leaving bruises all over it. The crown of thorns had been pressed down so hard that streaks of blood had left their trails down his face. The last memory the women had of Jesus was of a man who had been thoroughly disfigured, broken and crushed by the Roman state, sharing the fate of anyone who claimed to be a king without the authorization of Caesar. The words "KING OF THE JEWS" had been fixed over his head by Pilate as a warning to others who might have such lofty ideas.

All of this was gone. Instead, the man's face was clean, radiant, youthful but wise. It was the face of a man who had been relieved of all worry and stress, and who had something profound and exciting to say, yet all the time in the world to say it. They knew it was the face of Jesus.

Suddenly, the women all grabbed at his feet, and began to bow down to him; and just as suddenly, he got up, and urged them all onto their feet.

"Do not be afraid any more," he said to them. "I have conquered the world, and now the spoils are mine. And I share them with you, and anyone who comes to me;

for those who believe in me will see life. The reward is with me, and the wage I pay is in my hand. But as for you, you will be witnesses of me, because Isaiah wrote about you when he said, 'Raise your voice with strength, you bearing good news for Jerusalem. Do not be afraid.' My sisters, this is the reason I came: to feed my flock, and gather the lambs, and then I will return to the Father who sent me."

For a while, his eyes seemed to wander far off into the distance, and then he fixed his attention upon the women again.

"My sisters, go and report to my brothers, that they go into Galilee, and they will see me there, before I return to the Father."

The women were reluctant to leave and wanted to ask him many questions, but he urged them to go, and assured them that they would see him in Galilee.

Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene, having earlier set off on her own to tell the apostles about the missing body, had already arrived at where Peter and John were staying, out of breath, sweat dripping from her brow, hair wrapped around her face in a disorderly manner. As they opened the door to her, the two apostles would never forget the words she practically screamed at them through the mass of hair.

"They have taken away the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've laid him!"

Peter and John looked at each other. Then they looked at Mary. Then they looked at each other again. They didn't need to say a word. In that moment, they both knew the race was on. Who would get to the tomb first? Mary watched in silence as the two grown men dashed through the door and raced off into the distance. With a sigh, she pulled the door shut behind them, turned around, and headed back to the tomb, this time at her own pace.

For Peter and John, it was a close race. For a while, it was neck and neck, but John eventually won – a detail he felt best to keep to himself. He didn't want to bruise Peter's ego; and in the larger scheme of things, what did it matter that John was the faster runner?

But when he arrived, he hesitated to go into the tomb. Stooping forward to peer in while getting his breath back, he could only see the linen cloths. Peter arrived a few moments later, and he stooped even further forward so he was practically inside the tomb, and could also see the cloths. After recovering his breath, John decided to go inside, to get a better look. The face cloth, the shroud that had been around Jesus' head, was not lying with the other cloths but had been rolled up separately.

When they saw this, they immediately knew what it meant. Jesus' body had not simply been moved. After all, who would take the body, but leave the cloths it had been wrapped in? They knew it meant he had been raised up, and they began discussing it.

Just then, they heard the sound of panting outside the entrance of the tomb. They came out and saw Mary Magdalene, looking exhausted and anxious.

"There's no body," John said to her, "just the cloths. If he's been raised up, we should just go home and wait for him."

Peter and John urged Mary to come back with them, but she refused. They even promised to lay on a big meal for her and the other women, but nothing would persuade her to leave. In the end, they decided to go back without her, after making her promise to come back as soon as possible. With that, they went back to where they were staying.

But Mary stood weeping outside the entrance of the tomb. She wasn't going anywhere until she got some answers. What had the soldiers done with her Lord? Had he been raised up, as Peter and John seemed to think? Or had the soldiers just moved his body, and not told anyone where they had put him? But why would they remove the cloths? And where were the soldiers anyway? Why had they not told anybody where they had moved the Lord?

Sadness, anger and confusion gave way to curiosity. She wondered if she could figure out the puzzle herself. She went over to the right side of the entrance and stooped over to peer into the tomb. Her eyes widened, her jaw dropped, her heart skipped several beats and her body trembled, as she saw two men in white robes sitting where the body of Jesus should have been, one at the head and one at the feet. They both looked at her with a slight smile. She was about to demand what they were doing in her Lord's tomb, when they spoke first, almost in unison.

"Woman," they said, both of them tilting their heads slightly. "Why are you weeping?"

During the time she had been running to find the apostles, she had been rehearsing the same line over and over in her head and even out loud; and so the answer rolled easily off her tongue.

"They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have laid him!"

The smile on the faces of the two men intensified, as if they found her plight amusing. Yet she did not feel like there was any cruelty behind the smiles, but rather, it was as if they knew something she didn't.

Not knowing what else to say, she found herself staring at their robes, and the wonderful way in which they seemed to reflect the light – sparkling, dazzling, enchanting. Then she looked back at their faces. They were handsome, youthful, but they seemed to be looking past her. Confused, she turned around, and saw the gardener standing nearby, looking at her with a friendly but puzzled look on his face.

"Woman," he said, "why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

She grabbed his arm. "Sir," she pleaded, "if you have moved him, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

She began tugging on his arm, to lead him to one of the other tombs into which Jesus might have been placed. But the gardener stayed still, and said to her, "Mary!"

Maybe it was his dialect. Maybe it was his gentle tone of voice, or the way he said her name. But the realization came to her instantly. This wasn't the gardener. She

stopped looking around at the other tombs, and her insistent tug on his arm turned into a firm grip.

"Teacher!" she exclaimed.

"Stop clinging to me," he said, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God.'"

A little later, the other women arrived at where the apostles and other disciples had gathered, and they reported the empty tomb and the appearance of men in white garments. But to the apostles and disciples, their stories sounded like hysterical nonsense. After all, the women couldn't even agree on whether there was one man or two, and whether they were angels or not. Nevertheless, the disciples dispatched two men to investigate the tomb. They found it to be empty like the women said, but they didn't see any men in shiny outfits.

39. Two Or Three Witnesses

Now, just to be clear, the story I told in the preceding chapter wasn't extracted from a secret gospel uncovered in a desert cave somewhere, but was simply a work of the imagination. However, it harmonizes with all four gospels, if we accept that the accounts of the Resurrection Story in each gospel differ because each author focused on different aspects and relied on a different subset of eyewitnesses.

The gospel writers weren't trying to tell a detailed story of the resurrection and the characters involved. They weren't trying to write fiction. If they were, they did a poor job. Instead, their aim was to report the events in a succinct manner.

Mark's account of the resurrection is the shortest, and gives only a brief outline. In his version, the women see a young man clothed in white, sitting on the right side of where Jesus should have been. Only Mark's version names Salome as one of the eyewitnesses. If she remained near the entrance to the tomb, maybe she only saw one of the men, so couldn't confirm there was a second man in the tomb.

In the oldest manuscripts, Mark's gospel ends by describing how the women felt, which was fear, and the result, which was to say nothing to anyone. The abrupt ending, if the earliest manuscripts are correct, asks a few unspoken questions of its readers: What happened next? And how do you respond to these events?

Matthew's version of the Resurrection Story is the only one to mention that the angel who spoke to the women was also responsible for rolling the stone away. Assuming for a moment the event really happened, how did Matthew know this? Maybe he inferred it from the women's testimony. However, another possibility is that one or more of the soldiers privately told him what had happened, even though, according to the account, they had been paid to tell a different story. If they really did see an angel open the tomb, perhaps one or two of them may have realized there are more important things in life than money. Maybe they even became Christians later.

Matthew is also kinder to the women than Mark. He only touches on their fear, and there is no indication that they said nothing to anyone. I would suggest this was an editorial decision on Matthew's part, to move the narrative on. If the author intended his account to be serialized in *Judea Today*, it would perhaps be intriguing to have several chapters covering the time when the women said nothing to anybody.

Then again, what would the author write? They said nothing to anybody! I know this probably wouldn't stop a determined journalist, but ultimately, the gospels are about Jesus and his ministry, not a biography of the disciples.

Matthew focuses on what gave the women the boost of courage they needed. According to his version, after they came out from the tomb, Jesus met them and told them to have no fear, but to report to his brothers so they may go to Galilee and see him there.¹ In other words, the emphasis is on the idea that Jesus gave them the courage they needed to overcome their fear.

In Luke's version the women see two men in shining garments, and from a comment later in the same chapter, it is clear the women thought they were angels.²

Luke introduces a new woman to the list of eyewitnesses: Joanna, whom he had earlier identified as the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward.³

If Matthew and Mark had been written earlier, Luke would have known that those gospels mentioned only one man or angel, with Mark saying the man was sitting on the right of where Jesus should have been. Luke names Mary the mother of James, as well as Joanna and Mary Magdalene as the eyewitnesses. These could have been his sources. As in my "Untold Story," if the first two women were the ones who went deeper into the tomb and saw two men, perhaps Luke considered their testimonies to be more informative.

This would be the hallmark of a man who had "followed all things accurately from the start" as he claims. Not that the other two gospels were inaccurate. Matthew and Mark may have been aware that, say, Mary Magdalene said there were two men. But if the majority of women hadn't gone very far into the tomb, and only saw the man on the right, perhaps Mark cautiously reported one man because all of the women agreed there was a man on the right, but not all of them saw the man on the left.

Luke's version focuses on the statement made by the angels, reminding the women that Jesus said he would be executed and rise on the third day. Then the women remembered Jesus' words, returned from the tomb, and reported those things to the others.

That the disciples "returned from the tomb" is perhaps also a hint that, as the first people to believe in the resurrected Jesus, they were formerly "dead" but now "alive" in a spiritual sense, just as Paul describes Christians as "alive" though they were formerly "dead" in their sins.⁴ This doesn't cancel out the literal resurrection of Jesus, but simply adds an extra layer of meaning for the disciples to understand. Believing in Jesus meant returning from the tomb themselves, both in an immediate spiritual sense and also later, if necessary, through an actual resurrection from the dead.

John's version of the Resurrection Story is different from the others in many ways. The only woman mentioned is Mary Magdalene, perhaps because she is the one who ran to him and Peter, assuming John is the other disciple mentioned, because John never actually mentions himself by name. Furthermore, Peter and John are the only apostles who ran to the tomb, based on Magdalene's report about it being empty. Therefore, maybe John never got to hear the testimony of the other women when they first delivered it, which is perhaps why he left them out.

John is the only gospel writer to suggest that Mary Magdalene was on her own when she saw the angels. The other gospels simply group her with the other women. I think this was an editorial decision by Matthew, Mark and Luke. Mary essentially saw the same thing as the others, even if it was at a slightly different time, so there was no real need to place her separately. Her testimony was the same as the other women.

John simply gives us more details relating to the story as he recalled it. Mary Magdalene was on her own when she came to him and Peter, and then both apostles

ran to the tomb. Mary must have followed them, because when the apostles went home, she remained there, and then saw what the other women saw.⁵

John's version also mentions Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man and a secret disciple out of fear of the Jews; and Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews who had previously come in the night to hear Jesus, and had now come bringing a mixture of scents.⁶ Nicodemus wasn't a substitute for the women bringing their spices. He was simply another person who had come to pay respect to Jesus' dead body.

However, John is perhaps also highlighting an interesting contrast. Here were two prominent men, one rich and one powerful, too afraid to be open disciples of Jesus, standing in contrast to one woman, Mary Magdalene, probably from a lowly background, who had boldly followed Jesus from the days of his early ministry, who had ministered to him from her belongings from Galilee onward, and who had ran to tell Peter and John about the empty tomb.

With my Untold Story, what I have demonstrated is that the differing accounts aren't contradictory. Instead, they each tell a smaller subset of a larger story. When put together, the four versions paint an almost three-dimensional picture, reflecting the differing perspectives of the eyewitness testimonies each writer drew upon.

Now, there is another curious feature of the Resurrection Story that few people notice, even though it becomes obvious once it is pointed out. The women and the men see different things! According to Luke's account, while the women were in the empty tomb wondering what had happened, they saw two men who were supposedly angels. However, nowhere are we told that the apostles saw them. Peter also went to the tomb, but he saw only the linen cloths.

John's account makes this contrast even more explicit. Peter and John ran to the tomb, and saw only the linen cloths. After they went home, Mary Magdalene, who was the only disciple left at the tomb, stooped forward to take a look in, and she saw the two angels.

Why is there a difference between what the men saw and what the women saw? I would suggest there are two good reasons. First of all, a woman's testimony wasn't valued as much as a man's at the time. If the angels really did appear only to the women, this left the men with the problem of how much credence to give to their testimonies. Luke admits that the other disciples thought the women were talking nonsense. But since their statements became part of the gospels, the underlying message for the Christian community was that a woman's testimony was of equal value to that of a man.

The second reason is even more subtle. It effectively created two separate groups of witnesses. An important principle found in the Law given to Moses was that "at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall a matter be established."⁷ The women saw one thing, and the men saw another thing, but neither group actually contradicted the other, making both groups independent witnesses, and both corroborating the story that Jesus had been raised.

Indeed, this two or three witnesses principle can also be seen within each of the groups. Matthew focuses on Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph as being the two principle witnesses. These were perhaps the disciples he relied on to tell his version of the story. Mark's account focuses on the two women mentioned by Matthew, and also Salome. Luke's account names three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Joanna, along with “the rest of the women.” John only mentions Mary Magdalene, but to fulfill the two or three witnesses principle in a different way, he has Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus involved in the preparation of Jesus' body, and both John and Peter are also eyewitnesses to the empty tomb and the linen cloths.

In my Untold Story I showed that the accounts imply two different groups of women in the tomb. One group was perhaps deep inside, and could see two men; the other was near the entrance, and could only see one man on the right side of where Jesus was supposed to be. These two groups become two witnesses.

The apostles are also split into two groups of at least two. Peter and John are the only apostles reported to have even gone directly to the tomb. The others didn't believe the women's testimony. There were also two disciples on the road to Emmaus, where they had an encounter with Jesus.

Even the fact that there are four gospels in the New Testament may reflect the two or three witnesses principle. Three of the gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are quite similar, and for this reason they are referred to as the Synoptic Gospels, “synoptic” being connected to Latin and Greek words related to togetherness and sight. These three gospels form three witnesses because they are separate. But in another sense they make only one witness because they are quite similar. John's gospel, which is quite different from the others, makes a second witness.

In other words, the subtle use of the two or three witnesses principle provides evidence that each gospel writer took this law seriously for their version of the Resurrection Story, and suggests that each version was based on the eyewitness testimony of at least two people. If this is true, it would be harder to simply make them up without a conspiracy; and if the apostles Matthew and John really were the authors of the gospels bearing their name, they were also eyewitnesses to many or even most of the events they were writing about.

Similarly, if Matthew's story about the angel rolling the stone away is true, it would also have had at least two witnesses, since his account implies there were several soldiers guarding the tomb at the time.

Incidentally, why did the women not see the guards? According to Matthew, when the guards saw the angel, they “shook, and became like dead men.”⁸ Dead people have a tendency to fall down to the ground. Presumably then, they fell so that they couldn't be seen by the women, whose attention was focused on the opened tomb. However, the guards weren't actually dead, and must have been able to see what was going on, because some of them later reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.

Now, regardless of the women and angels, in the Resurrection Story there are also multiple appearances of Jesus to the apostles. Two disciples also had a long conversation with Jesus on the way to Emmaus, although they didn't recognize him at first. In other words, all these things seem to have been orchestrated, either by human conspirators as in my Church Conspiracy hypothesis, or alternatively by divine inspiration, to prevent the accusation that one person was making it up.

Of course, the skeptic still has the toolkit of deception, delusion and exaggeration to account for some of this. Perhaps the women were making up the story about the angels, or were deluded. Maybe the two men on the road to Emmaus mistook a stranger for Jesus. And the apostles, emotionally traumatized and in a hysterical state, had mass delusions of Jesus appearing to them in a locked room and having theological discussions with them over a period of forty days.

But perhaps the later Church made parts of it up. If so, where is Peter's encounter with Jesus? Why couldn't Luke add a simple story of this encounter, since he is the only gospel writer to even mention that Jesus appeared to Peter alone? Could we accept the radical possibility that Luke was honest, and didn't know of such a story, and therefore couldn't add one to his gospel? But if he couldn't even make up a simple story about Peter, we should be skeptical that he could put words in Jesus' mouth, as many scholars assert.

In the end, I argue that, assuming there was a teacher called Jesus who had disciples and apostles, it's highly improbable that the later Church was the source of the Resurrection Story.

There must have been an empty tomb from the beginning, to provide the apostles and disciples with a basis for believing in Jesus' resurrection. Otherwise, they could eventually doubt their own sanity.

The eyewitness testimony of the apostles must have been there from the start, otherwise what authority would they have? How could they claim to be eyewitnesses if they hadn't encountered the risen Christ? They might have been deluded or even lying, but they must at least have told the stories of their encounters. Furthermore, later disciples of Jesus would have wanted to know the details of Jesus' resurrection. If the apostles couldn't supply those details, what credibility would they have?

The stories of the women and angels probably didn't change either. Perhaps they only saw men in white, and some Christians later assumed they were angels. This is plausible if considered in isolation. But then John, who most scholars and even the early Church agree was written last, rather than correcting the fallacy, reinforces it by linking himself to Mary Magdalene, who saw two angels, even though he and Peter did not!

If John was just making up or exaggerating his version of events, this would have surely been the perfect time for him and Peter to have seen two or perhaps even a whole host of heavenly beings. Since Peter was likely dead by the time John wrote his gospel, executed by Nero according to Christian tradition, there would be nobody around to contradict John's version of events. But instead, according to John, he and

Peter had a race to the tomb, which John won by the way, and after all that, they only saw the linen cloths. They then left Mary Magdalene alone at the tomb, and went home. It was only then that Mary saw the two angels, suggesting John was relying on her testimony as well as his own.

In addition, if John was making it up, why not place Jesus' mother in the Resurrection Story? She was there at Jesus' death, and Jesus even interacts with John and Mary just before his death, so John could have created a powerful and touching scene involving Jesus' mother at the empty tomb. But maybe she wasn't there for whatever reason, and John couldn't or didn't want to make such a story up.

He had the opportunity to fabricate supernatural sights at the tomb involving him and Peter, but all he does is reinforce the story that only the women saw angels. What this suggests is, the ingredients that went into the Resurrection Story were already so well-known by the Christian community, the gospel writers couldn't just make things up.

Of course, this doesn't mean the women didn't make up their stories. Maybe they did it because they knew a woman's testimony wasn't valued as much in their day. Maybe they thought that adding angels would give them more credibility. If so, the strategy backfired to begin with, although I suppose it worked in the long run, since the stories became part of our gospels. But then, they clearly didn't get their stories straight, because Matthew says it was one angel, Mark says it was a man sitting on the right, Luke says it was two men standing by them, and John says it was two angels sitting at the head and feet of where Jesus had lain, based on the testimony of Mary Magdalene. If the women were making these things up, wouldn't they all tell the same story?

I have already shown how the differing accounts can be harmonized, if we simply recognize that different women had different perspectives of what they saw. It seems they weren't conspiring to say the same thing.

Besides, these were some of Jesus' most devoted disciples. They had ministered to him out of their belongings, and had followed him to Jerusalem from Galilee. If one of Jesus' teachings had been, "Feel free to make stuff up about me as you go along," perhaps a supernatural sight of angels was just the kind of thing Jesus had in mind.

But if Jesus didn't teach that, and instead taught them not to be hypocrites, that by their words they would be judged, and to let their yes mean yes and their no no, then perhaps the women didn't make up their stories after all. But whether they did or not, it's highly unlikely their stories would have changed from the start, and so probably also existed from the start. In other words, I have demonstrated that it is highly improbable the later Church was the source of the Resurrection Story.

Now, an important side note I'd like to make at this point is: in all of this, nobody was being asked to have blind faith. Some have argued that faith is the opposite of proof; that if we have proof of something we can't have faith. They use this reasoning to explain why we can't prove Jesus rose from the dead. How could we have faith in it, they argue, if we could prove it to be true?

I would argue that, technically speaking, nobody can really prove anything. God could turn up on your doorstep tonight, but you could still dismiss this as a trick of the mind. A letter written by Jesus himself could turn up in a desert cave tomorrow, but skeptics would dismiss it as a forgery, unless Jesus had said something controversial or that appeared to overturn the Christian faith, in which case it would be accepted as gospel and turned into a movie. Perhaps everybody and everything else is a delusion of your own mind, including this letter. Can you prove that it isn't?

In other words, at best, all we ever have is evidence, which is then weighed up, and depending on our own beliefs, assumptions, preconceptions and prejudices, is accepted or rejected, or perhaps just ignored. And this human law of how we weigh up evidence applies to all, both skeptic and believer.

But let us suppose for a moment that Jesus was who he said he was, and that he really did rise from the dead. There was no need for the stone to have been removed, because Jesus could have simply walked through it. There was no need for him to appear to his disciples. They should have simply believed the words he spoke to them when he was alive.

However, if the Resurrection Story is true, those things took place to provide his disciples, and even the skeptics of his day, with extraordinary evidence of his resurrection. They weren't expected, or even asked, to have blind faith. Extraordinary evidence was presented to them, to demonstrate the extraordinary claim Jesus made about himself, that he was the Son of God who would rise from the dead. Of course, the problem for us, living such a long time after the events described by the disciples, is that we only have their word for it.

Indeed, in terms of physical evidence, we can really only have their word for it. I have already shown that the only evidence for Jesus' resurrection would need to have been preserved by the apostles and disciples, because nobody else had the motive to preserve it. Besides, what was there to preserve? All that remained were linen cloths and an empty tomb.

Jesus' tomb may have been preserved to this day at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but we don't know for certain it was actually his tomb. As for the linen cloths, the most famous claim to be one of them is the Shroud of Turin.

Now, this provides a good example of the human law of evidence at work. When the Turin Shroud was initially dated, the evidence indicated it was a forgery from the Middle Ages, and this became widely believed. However, later evidence suggested the prior dating was based on a piece of material added in the Middle Ages, but that the shroud itself was actually much older, perhaps even dating back to the time of Christ after all. Indeed, at least one skeptical scholar who examined the shroud became a believer in Christ after studying it.

However, the earlier evidence that it was a forgery came to prevail in the minds of skeptics, and this is what they came to believe without examining the later evidence. I won't look at the evidence in this letter. I simply wish to point out that most skeptics have probably heard only one side of the story, based on older evidence.

But shrouds and tombs aside, the most important thing Jesus' disciples would have wanted to preserve would be his teachings, and the stories about him that the Christian community agreed upon as being true.

This is perhaps also the strongest argument for why the gospels were likely to have been written earlier, not later as skeptics would prefer. Early believers may have been eyewitnesses, and have been satisfied with the oral stories they heard about Jesus. But as they died off, the best way to preserve those stories for future generations would have been to write them down. As the message spread further, it would also need to be written down, in order to be transmitted accurately, which the apostles and early disciples had a responsibility to ensure. But if, as skeptical scholars claim, the gospels were written later, then the apostles failed in their mission to transmit Jesus' teachings and deeds faithfully.

However, according to Church tradition, they didn't fail. Matthew's gospel was accepted as being written or compiled by the apostle Matthew, also called Levi. Mark's gospel was written by Mark, an associate of Peter. Luke's was written by Luke, an associate of Paul. John's gospel was written last, and was accepted as being written by the apostle John. But to the scholars and skeptics who ignore both this tradition and the testimony of the Church writers living much nearer the time who tell us these things, the authors of the gospels are a mystery.

For example, the gospel of John, skeptics say, couldn't have been written by the apostle John, because he must have been illiterate. Ironically, John writes about the Word. Perhaps, therefore, John learned to write and appreciate words after all, despite the insistence by scholars that he remain illiterate throughout his entire life, and that nobody could be found to help the apostle write a gospel. Is it possible that early Christians had a better idea of who wrote the gospel of John than scholars living a few thousand years later?

Incidentally, this is also why the Christian community rejected some gospels. The community must have had a strong oral tradition relating to what Jesus said and did, based on eyewitnesses; and they were led by apostles who had an obligation to faithfully communicate Jesus' teachings.

This obligation was also included at the end of Matthew's gospel, in what many Christians call the Great Commission: "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying: 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all of the things I have commanded you; and look! I am with you all the days until the end of the age.'" ⁹

Other groups, perhaps related to the Christian community but wanting to add their own teachings or interpretations, didn't necessarily feel the same obligation, and so they created their own gospels.

Those gospels were rejected by the Christian community, because they were written much later, and it was usually obvious that their purpose was to promote the secret teachings of the particular group, rather than proclaim the good news about

Jesus. This is why they often used the names of apostles, such as Peter or even Judas. But this at least demonstrates the high regard given to the apostles, if even other groups, wanting to be credible to the Christian community, but teaching things that were often unrelated or even contradictory, still wanted to use those names.

1 Matthew 28:9,10. **2** Luke 24:4,22,23. **3** Luke 24:10; 8:1-3. **4** Ephesians 2:1. **5** John 20:1-18. **6** John 3:1,2; 19:38-40. **7** Deuteronomy 19:15. **8** Matthew 28:4. **9** Matthew 28:18-20.

40. The Heavenly Christ Conspiracy

Now, although most scholars accept that Jesus was a real person, a small minority argue he didn't exist at all, but that Christianity began as a belief in some entirely heavenly being, and that Jesus the man was invented later.

The idea goes something like this: The early Church existed as a small Jewish sect that believed in some kind of Heavenly Christ, a heavenly being who somehow provided salvation from our sins. Paul claimed he encountered the Heavenly Christ, and he spread this belief far and wide. In the early stages of the movement, none of the believers had any concept of a human Christ. The numerous references to or suggestions of an earthly Christ in Paul's letters are metaphorical, or alterations made by later Christians.

Then, probably some time after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, one of those believers, let's call him Mark for the sake of argument, invented the gospel of Jesus. Its purpose was to honor the Heavenly Christ. It wasn't meant to be taken literally, but it drew on Old Testament figures such as Elijah and Elisha as models, and also ideas from the prophets, such as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. Jesus' teachings were actually based on those of Paul as found in his letters. Mark's gospel was later taken literally by some Christians, and once the idea of a human Christ had taken root in a certain faction of the Church, other derivative works such as Matthew, Luke and John quickly followed. The Church we know today is the one where this version of the Christ story won out.

I will call this the "Heavenly Christ Conspiracy" hypothesis. Part of the reason why this is a minority view among scholars, is because there is no direct evidence for it, and in some instances it even contradicts the evidence we have. For example, there is no evidence Paul's letters were initially only about a Heavenly Christ, and that later Christians changed them. Nevertheless, it is common for people who dislike or disagree with Paul to assert that the parts they don't like must have been later edits or insertions, even if there is no actual evidence for this.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that some of Jesus' miracles, and the stories behind them, are similar to those reportedly done by the prophets Elijah and Elisha. According to the stories in the Old Testament, Elijah was supplied food by God, and Jesus claimed he had a secret food source. Elijah went on a journey for 40 days and 40 nights, and Jesus also spent 40 days in the wilderness. Elijah resurrected a child, and so did Jesus. Elijah declared a famine which lasted for three and a half years, and Jesus' ministry lasted about as long. Elijah was persecuted by Jezebel the queen, who wanted to put him to death. Jesus was persecuted by the rulers in his day, who according to the gospels, actually did have him put to death. Elijah was taken up into the sky in a whirlwind, and Jesus went up in a cloud. Elisha also did miracles similar to Jesus, such as feeding 100 men from 20 loaves, with leftovers.

But there are also substantial differences between the lives of Elijah and Elisha, and the life of Jesus. To the Christian, the similarities are meant to demonstrate that

Jesus was a prophet at least as powerful as Elijah and Elisha, and under similar hostile circumstances. However, to the skeptic who believes in the Heavenly Christ idea, the stories of Jesus are fictional, but they aren't random. They are based on the earlier Biblical stories and prophecies as a template. This is how the Suffering Servant "prophecy" of Isaiah and all the other "prophecies" can be fulfilled – Mark wrote their fulfillment into the very fabric of his story!

Now, let's consider how plausible this Heavenly Christ idea is. For the sake of argument, let's assume there was a sect of Judaism that believed in a Heavenly Christ but not a human one, and that Paul became part of it and also taught this idea. We will focus our attention primarily on the claim that Mark, some time after the downfall of Jerusalem in 70AD, created his fictional gospel as a way of honoring the Heavenly Christ.

It's curious that Mark, writing allegorically about a Heavenly Christ, would model this being after human figures such as Elijah and Elisha. Even the Suffering Servant of Isaiah is portrayed as a man who poured out his soul to death, and was given a tomb with the wicked, even though he did no wrong. This doesn't sound like a Heavenly Christ. How can an entity in heaven be given a tomb?

If the early Church really did believe that Christ was exclusively a heavenly being, then Mark's gospel would have been heresy of the highest order. Even if Mark had good intentions, and even supposing he meant it to be read as an allegory, he had converted their divine being into a mere man, and had modeled him on human prophets. How could this not be considered a form of blasphemy to them?

Besides, how is the reader supposed to take his gospel as an allegory? It presents Jesus as a man who walked along the Sea of Galilee, gathered specifically named human apostles, preached in the synagogues on the Sabbath, went into Capernaum, and his mother and brothers came to see him; and this is just in the first few chapters of Mark's gospel, well before we get to Jesus' trial and execution.

Even if Mark's inner circle somehow understood that it was meant as an allegory or fiction intended somehow to honor their Heavenly Christ, Mark clearly presented Jesus as a man, and this would have been utterly blasphemous and heretical to the supposed Heavenly Christ believers.

If the hypothesis is correct, and Paul's letters, in their original form, taught only a Heavenly Christ, then the Church would have surely expelled Mark for presenting their divine being as human. Even if Mark had good intentions, once his gospel began to be circulated, the Church would surely have opposed it; and given how vocal later Christians were against heretical ideas, surely there would be some evidence for such opposition.

Instead, according to the Heavenly Christ hypothesis, within a generation or so, Mark's story went from being a fictional account and a blasphemous heresy, to literally being gospel, with Matthew, Luke and John adding to the fiction, and their gospels also being blindly accepted, and Paul's letters having been successfully rewritten to reflect this new reality.

Indeed, Luke, who in this hypothesis would have depended entirely on Mark's gospel, must have added new fictional stories to his own gospel, because if Mark's account was fiction, then Luke couldn't possibly have spoken to any eyewitnesses – there were none! Therefore, he must have made them up, and his statement that he “followed all things accurately from the start” is a blatant lie, because there was nothing to follow other than Mark's fiction. Luke must have also fabricated many of the stories in the book of Acts, and the speeches of the apostles that clearly teach Jesus as having been a man.

Similarly, parts of Matthew and a large part of John must also have been made up. Even John's insistence that he was an eyewitness to many of those things must have been the product of a lying mind.

Yet within a generation, the Church supposedly went from believing in a Heavenly Christ, to accepting almost universally the gospels of these liars and deceivers – for that is what they are, if the proposed hypothesis is true – with almost no questions asked. Within the same time frame, the conspirators must have also succeeded in completely rewriting Paul's words, leaving no trace of the original letters, and with not a word of opposition to any of this.

Now, in Mark's alleged fiction, who are the twelve apostles? Who are characters such as Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of James? Are they also fictional, or are they meant to be flattering portrayals of leaders and prominent figures in the early Church? Maybe they were Mark's friends!

Either way, the twelve apostles certainly need some explaining, because they are recurring characters in the gospels, the book of Acts, the letters of Paul, the letters of Peter, James, John and Jude, and in later Church writings and tradition.

If the apostles are pure fiction, then the early Church would have no evidence of their existence; and yet, within a generation, the authority of these fictional characters would be unquestionably accepted. Furthermore, traditions about the manner of their life and death would also have to be invented, and Gnostic groups were creating their own gospels using the names of these fictional men.

But perhaps some of the apostles, such as Peter, were real leaders of the early Church that believed in a Heavenly Christ, and Mark wrote them into his story of the human Jesus. Peter's real name was Cephas. We can only speculate about what Cephas might have thought about his “Peter” character denying Jesus three times, or showing such a lack of understanding at times.

If some of the real leaders of the Church were written into the gospel stories, then almost certainly the leaders that succeeded them would have known the gospels were fabrications, and would have either condemned them as blasphemous heresies, or else they would have been accomplices in the conspiracy to create a coherent fiction about their Heavenly Christ somehow becoming a man.

Indeed, I believe the word “conspiracy” is even more suited to this particular hypothesis than to the previous ones. Even if we accept the idea, which is a weak premise anyway, that Mark didn't intend to deceive, but merely wanted to write an

allegory of the Heavenly Christ which he didn't expect anyone to take literally, what excuse do Matthew and Luke have, when they give Jesus a human chronology, or when Luke claims to have followed all things accurately from the start, or when John claims to have been an eyewitness to many of the things he wrote about?

Besides, the gospels often draw attention to something Jesus said or did, or something that happened to him, which the writer claims was the fulfillment of a prophecy. But how can it be a fulfillment of anything, if the human Jesus didn't even exist, but was a fictional character that came out of Mark's head? In this case, it is not sufficient to say the writers were merely deluded. They were intentionally deceiving their readers.

If the Heavenly Christ hypothesis is true, at least three of the four gospel writers must be liars, and I would suggest they likely worked together, to ensure the gospels were harmonious enough to fool the average believer. Furthermore, they must have worked in a conspiracy with the leaders of the Church, to rewrite the letters of Paul, and to make sure the book of Acts told their version of the Christian story.

Some of the supposed changes to Paul's letters would also need to be blatant lies. For example, take the simple creed we find in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, that said Jesus died, was buried, rose on the third day, appeared to Cephas and the apostles, and then to more than five hundred brothers at one time, some of whom were still alive.

This would have to be a drastic edit, since Paul wouldn't have said this if he only believed in a Heavenly Christ. Indeed, the whole fifteenth chapter of his letter would have to be substantially rewritten, because it concerns the resurrection of the dead, of which, according to Paul, Christ's resurrection was the foremost.

But what would members of the Christian congregations think about the sudden, dramatic change in the wording of these letters, of whole new chapters suddenly appearing, or the sudden appearance of gospels saying that their Heavenly Christ had actually been a man, had died and been raised again, and that he had twelve apostles who were eyewitnesses of those things, even though nobody had ever heard of them a generation before? At best, it would surely have created a deep division, and more likely a complete split. After all, Paul's letters must have been held in high enough regard that the leaders of this alleged conspiracy felt the need to substantially revise them in the first place.

And what about other Christian traditions? For example, in the same letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes reference to the tradition of eating bread and drinking wine meaning Christ's body and blood. This concept is also found in the gospels.

If this was an invention of Mark, and then later added to Paul's letter and copied into the other gospels, at what point would the Church have suddenly taken up this tradition? After all, they wouldn't have needed it if they believed Jesus was a heavenly being, so how could the conspirators claim it was a tradition, if no Christians did it until the updated letters of Paul appeared? It would be an obvious lie!

It is highly implausible that all of these dramatic changes would have been accepted by Christians without a major contest. But where is the evidence of this battle in history? We know that the phrase “history is written by the winners” is generally true. Even so, the losers usually leave some trace of their defeat in the pages of history. Even if the winners attempt to erase the evidence altogether, some traces usually remain in unexpected places.

The real Church often preserved the evidence and teachings of its opponents, in the many words early Christians wrote against them to defend their orthodox position. Yet we have nothing like this in the alleged switch from believing in a purely divine Christ, to one where he came as a man in the flesh.

Now, there is plenty of evidence to suggest rival groups emerged later on, that believed some parts of the Christian story but included their own ideas. For example, Marcion is quite a well-known figure in Christian history, who lived within a few generations of Jesus and the apostles. He believed that the God of the Old Testament could not have been the loving Heavenly Father that Jesus talked about.

As a result, just over a century after Jesus’ death, Marcion created the first “canon” or list of accepted writings – at least, accepted by him. He made a version of Luke’s gospel that agreed with his own views. His canon also included some of Paul’s letters, but edited to remove any references to the God of the Old Testament.

Even though “history is written by the winners,” and clearly Marcion’s view didn’t prevail, his part in history was hardly written out by the Church. Although he was expelled from it, early Christians wrote so many words about him, usually in defense of their own orthodox views, that we probably know more about Marcion than we do about the apostle Peter!

Yet the Heavenly Christ hypothesis asks us to accept that, when the Christian Church supposedly went from believing in a Heavenly Christ to a man who walked in Judea, it was completely silent, with no evidence that the change even happened.

However, perhaps one of the strongest lines of evidence against this hypothesis is the position of Judaism and Jewish rabbis regarding the Christian story as it became widespread.

Let’s suppose early Christians merely believed in some kind of Heavenly Christ. This may have seemed odd to religious Jews, since there was no real basis for such a being from their scriptures. At the same time, they might not have opposed it vigorously, since it was just another obscure idea in a world filled with strange ideas and beliefs. After all, the sect of the Pharisees believed in angels, but the Sadducees did not, and yet both groups managed to get along reasonably well, or at least to tolerate one another.

However, once Mark had created his fictional Jesus, and somehow Christians, who had previously believed only in a Heavenly Christ, now accepted Mark’s fiction as gospel, things would have been very different for Jewish leaders.

Mark portrays Jesus as being the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies relating to their anointed one, and also the Son of God. In other words, if the Heavenly Christ

hypothesis is true, not only would Mark's gospel be heretical to the early Christians, it would also be grossly misleading to Jews, and blasphemous to the Jewish religious leaders, which the gospel goes out of its way to antagonize, because according to Mark's story, it was the religious leaders who handed Jesus over to the Romans for claiming to be the Son of God.

Clearly then, once Mark's story became widely believed by Christians, this new form of Christianity would be a direct threat to Judaism, since it was teaching that their Messiah had come, and was Jesus, even though he was a fictional character!

But if the human Jesus was merely the product of Mark's imagination, there would be no evidence of Jesus' birth, death, ministry or miracles. There would be no mother of Jesus, and no women ministering to him. There would have been no empty tomb, no women claiming to have seen angels, and no apostles to insist they were eyewitnesses of his resurrection. There was no outpouring of Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, not many days after Jesus was allegedly resurrected, and the 3,000 who were baptized on that day, based on Peter's speech about Jesus' resurrection, probably didn't exist, especially if Peter was also a product of Mark's imagination.

In that case, Jewish opponents of this newly emerging brand of Christian belief would have a simple and powerful weapon to defeat it. They could just point out that it was all a fiction! Again, this is completely different from skeptics a few thousand years later questioning the events.

Jewish opponents could have pointed to the lack of evidence for Jesus' existence, or the existence of other characters in Mark's fiction, such as the mother of Jesus or the twelve apostles. They could have pointed out the obvious switch of beliefs from a Heavenly Christ to the fictional Jesus. They could have brought forth Paul's original letters, and pointed out what Christians had done with them.

Yet none of these arguments were made by Jewish opponents, who would have been in the best position to witness the transformation of Christian belief from a Heavenly Christ to a human Jesus based on a fiction written by Mark.

Perhaps Judaism at the time was in no state to make these arguments after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, because they were more concerned about preserving their own teachings and beliefs than about what Christians were doing.

This is a strong possibility. However, the Christian faith that emerged based on Mark's fiction, if the Heavenly Christ hypothesis is true, would have been a direct threat to Judaism, since it was teaching a false Messiah; and so it is highly improbable that none of the Jewish leaders who were around to witness this emerging form of Christianity, made any of the obvious arguments I have suggested, if the human Jesus was simply a fiction.

Instead, Jewish rabbis closer to the time accepted the premise that Jesus had been a real man. Of course, according to Judaism, Jesus was not their Messiah, but neither was he a figment of Mark's imagination.

In other words, I would suggest that the Heavenly Christ hypothesis is even more implausible than the previous ones. It assumes a Christian Church existed that

believed only in some kind of Heavenly Christ, and that Mark invented his gospel as an allegory for this Heavenly Christ while basing it entirely on humans, but not expecting people to take it literally; and yet Christians entirely accepted it as real within one generation.

Not only that, but Matthew, Luke and John created further fictions based on it, and those were also accepted blindly within a generation, and with no evidence of any opposition. Furthermore, the leaders of this conspiracy felt it necessary to change Paul's letters to reflect this new human Christ, even though there is no evidence for this, and once again, everybody accepted the revised letters as if the old versions had never even existed.

And despite Jewish leaders being heavily criticized and under threat by this fictional new version of Christianity, and despite Mark portraying his fictional character as the Jewish Messiah, Jewish leaders and rabbis used not a single argument that would have demonstrated this new Jesus character was a fiction. Instead, they argued Jesus was perhaps a sorcerer, or a false prophet, or some other type of man, all the while accepting the premise that he was indeed a man. Of course, they couldn't argue he was a fictional character, if they knew he had been a real man.

The Heavenly Christ hypothesis is, I would suggest, even more fictional than the alleged fictional nature of Jesus. It relies on assertions for which there is no evidence whatsoever, such as the idea that Mark made up his gospel, and that later Christians changed Paul's letters.

Furthermore, it requires a massive conspiracy on the part of the gospel writers and Church leaders, in order to completely switch the Church from believing in a Heavenly Christ, to believing in a fictional human Jesus, complete with apostles, their mothers, and alleged eyewitnesses who never actually existed, all within a generation or so, and all based on Mark's supposed allegory that, by its very nature, would have been considered heretical to the same Church, and grossly misleading to the Jews, if the hypothesis is true.

And what was it all for? To preach and die for a Jesus the leaders of the conspiracy must have known never even existed?

Now, there is one final possibility I need to look at, which might explain the story of Jesus, and particularly the accounts of his resurrection. What if some or even all of it was made up by the established Church, particularly from the time of Roman emperor Constantine, about three hundred years after Christ was supposed to have lived? This is the final conspiracy I will consider.

41. The Constantine Conspiracy

The final conspiracy I'll examine is a little different from the others, in that it directly involves the Roman government. Skeptics sometimes claim that Christianity was invented by Constantine, or at least shaped by him into the version we have today.

Constantine was a Roman emperor who lived about three centuries after Jesus, and who ruled from 306AD to 337AD. Fairly early in his reign he claimed to have received both a dream and a vision, one of which included Christ, telling him to use a certain sign on his military banners consisting of the Greek letters Chi and Rho, the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ, and that by this sign he would conquer. He was the first emperor to embrace the Christian religion, and he gave the Church an official status it had never enjoyed before.

However, some have claimed that Constantine used the Christian religion for his own ends, perhaps to unify his empire. Maybe, therefore, some or even all of the Christian story, particularly the Resurrection Story, was made up by him or by the Church he helped to establish. This will be the "Constantine Conspiracy" hypothesis.

In order to consider how plausible this is, let's first explore what supposedly happened in the three hundred years between Christ and Constantine. During this time, Christians had little or no political power. It could be dangerous to become a Christian, because Roman emperors often demanded a form of worship that Christians were unwilling to offer. Some of them wrote defenses of their beliefs that can still be read today, to various individuals and groups, including the emperor.

Other groups also sprang up either from within the Church, or were influenced by it, that often claimed to have special revelations or unique interpretations of the gospels, and many Christians wrote prolifically to defend their beliefs against these groups.

For example, Irenaeus of Lyons, born about a century after Christ's ministry, wrote extensively against what he considered to be heresies – that is, beliefs that were strongly at variance with accepted beliefs. Of course, in order for there to be a "heresy" there has to be an accepted view or "orthodoxy" in the first place. In other words, those Christian writers weren't inventing the accepted view, but defending it.

They also reported disputes over what was considered to be Christian scriptures. For example, Irenaeus said that the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were universally accepted by the Church. The thirteen letters that bear Paul's name were also accepted. (The letter to the Hebrews, considered by some to have been written by Paul, is anonymous.)

However, some of the other letters, such as 2 Peter and Jude, were disputed. The book of Revelation was also disputed, along with its authorship. Irenaeus said it could be traced back to the apostle John. Others said it was a different John, because it employed a different style of writing, and John the apostle was careful not to name himself in his other works, while the author of Revelation had no hesitation in giving his name. However, even the disputed works were often widely read.

Some churches also valued other writings that, in the end, didn't make it into the New Testament we have today. For example, a book called the Shepherd of Hermas was popular among early Christians and can still be read today, but wasn't included in the New Testament canon. Some writings were rejected by most Christians as forgeries or the works of Gnostic sects or other groups. They didn't need a church council to tell them this. The works usually spoke for themselves.

Christians most valued works that could be linked back to the apostles. Matthew and John were apostles, and early Christians accepted the gospels bearing their name. Mark wasn't an apostle, but early Christian writers linked him directly to Peter. Neither was Luke an apostle, but he was considered to be an associate of the apostle Paul.

There were also many forged gospels or letters that sprang up, often using the name of an apostle because of the authority those names had in the Christian community. However, Christians usually rejected them as forgeries. Sometimes they were accepted by certain parts of the community for a while. An example would be the Apocalypse of Peter, which was read in some churches. However, it was later rejected.

In other words, early Christians didn't have a book called "the New Testament." Instead, they had a collection of works available to them, some of which were more valued than others, and some that were rejected as forgeries. But there was no formal "canon" of accepted works.

The word "canon" comes from the Greek word *kanon*, meaning reed or measurement. Christians had a fairly good concept of a canon well before Constantine's time, because they had a good "measuring stick" for what orthodox belief was. The many Christian apologists who wrote extensively against heresies could only do so if they already had a strong sense of what was "orthodox."

Incidentally, the book of Revelation provides us with a useful upper limit for when the resurrection of Jesus must have been widely accepted by Christians. Near the beginning of the book, the Son of God sends a message to seven churches in the district of Asia.

Now, even if we think these messages were just made up, which we have no choice but to think if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, the recipients would obviously have to believe he had been raised, in order to accept the message in the first place.

The dating of the book of Revelation isn't clear, but most scholars fall into one of two camps. The first camp says it was written between around 96 and 98AD, during the reign of emperor Domitian. The author says he was in exile on the island of Patmos for bearing witness to Jesus. The majority of scholars think this fits best with Domitian's rule.

The second camp says it was written sometime during the reign of Nero, perhaps in the mid to late 60's of the first century, but before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple in 70AD. Nero also exiled people. The book itself indicates significant events are "about to" take place.¹ The Temple is measured,

implying it is still standing.² The wild beast described in the book, which most scholars believe is a reference to the Roman empire, has seven heads, of which “five have fallen, one is.”³ This could correspond to the five Caesars before Nero – Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius – which would make Nero the sixth head, the Caesar that “is” at the time John was writing.

Revelation’s most famous symbol is “the mark of the beast,” where no man can buy or sell without having the mark, the name of the beast or the number of its name, which is also a man’s number and is 666. Irenaeus suggested this may have been a cryptic reference to Caesar Nero, or to the Roman empire itself.

The number may also serve as a warning of what could happen if humans become too dependent on digits, both in terms of money and in terms of their own identity. They effectively become enslaved in a digital system.

Whatever the case, the author John wrote to seven churches in Asia, and included seven messages from Christ in his book, so it’s clear those churches must have believed Jesus was alive. This means Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus was already well established by the end of the first century at the latest, although it took a while for the wider Church to accept the book of Revelation as scripture.

By the time Constantine came to power, some 300 years from the time of Christ, the Christian faith was already widespread. Prior to this, Christians had been persecuted, but Constantine’s rise to power led to the Edict of Milan in 313AD, which legalized the Christian religion and granted them restoration of all property seized during emperor Diocletian’s persecution. According to the Church historian Eusebius who lived during this time, Constantine’s mother Helena became a Christian after her son became emperor.

Now, was Constantine really a Christian, or did he simply use the religion for his own ends as some people imply? The evidence we have in his letters and from his deeds seems to suggest he took the Christian religion seriously, while allowing other people to practice their own faith. Indeed, the Edict of Milan granted freedom of religion to all, not just Christians.

Constantine later granted his mother Helena unlimited access to the imperial treasury, in order to locate relics related to Christ. In around 326AD she made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and, among other things, is reported to have found the cross on which Jesus had died, and the site of Jesus’ tomb, which had been venerated by Christians nearer the time of Jesus, until emperor Hadrian built a temple over it dedicated to Venus.

Constantine ordered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to be built on the site. According to Eusebius, Constantine wrote in a letter to Macarius of Jerusalem that the place was a sacred spot, because it had brought to light a clear assurance of their Savior’s manner of death.⁴

Even if Constantine’s motives were political, he took Jesus seriously enough to fund his mother’s pilgrimage, and then pay for the building of churches in the

locations where Jesus was said to have been born, died, and raised to heaven. In this manner, the resting place of Jesus became glory, fulfilling a prophecy in Isaiah.⁵

Constantine delayed his baptism until near the time of his death, I think because, as emperor, he knew he might have to do things that would trouble his conscience as a baptized Christian. Emperors may need to go to war and put people to death on occasion, while Christians are supposed to turn the other cheek.

But whatever his reasons, the more important issue, for the purpose of our “Constantine Conspiracy” hypothesis, is whether he or the Church in his time could be the source of the Resurrection Story, or indeed any of the stories found in the gospels.

In 325AD, Constantine presided over the First Council of Nicaea, where the Church debated the nature and origin of the Son, also known as the Word of God. The council was an attempt to bring unity to the entire Church over what had become a divisive issue.

One side, led by Arius, argued that the Word was a created being. The other side, led by Athanasius, said that the Son had been “begotten” by the Father but not actually created. However, they weren’t disputing the existence of Christ, whether he was the Son of God, or whether he rose from the dead. To them, this would have been the equivalent of disputing whether night followed day.

If the established Church under Constantine had invented or substantially embellished the stories about Jesus, it would have made far more sense to just write the version of Jesus they wanted. At the very least, they could have Jesus spell out his nature in a parable added to the gospels, and have Peter or Paul write an explanation of what Jesus meant, in a fabricated letter that could then be backdated a few hundred years. But the Church couldn’t do this, because the gospels, letters, and even the Church itself, had been around a lot longer than any fourth century emperor or council.

In 330AD, Constantine dedicated Constantinople as the new capital of the Roman empire. In 331 he asked Eusebius to arrange for the production of 50 copies of the sacred Scriptures, so they could be used by churches in the new capital. Eusebius did so, in elaborately bound volumes.

Unfortunately, we don’t know for sure which works were included in those volumes. The New Testament we have today contains 27 works. However, Eusebius indicated in his own writings that 22 of those works were accepted by the Church, and the other five were disputed in some circles but still widely accepted.

Other Christian writers prior to Constantine already accepted most of the books in our New Testament. Whatever the case, there is no evidence Constantine himself determined what was “sacred Scriptures,” and neither did the Council of Nicaea.

Now, let’s recap the evidence we have available to us. Researchers agree that the so-called “authentic” letters of Paul, which treat Jesus’ resurrection as a fact, were written in the first century AD and almost certainly before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD. The other letters in the New Testament, which

skeptical scholars don't necessarily consider to be authentic, are usually dated to the second century at the latest.

Scholars agree that the four gospels commonly accepted by Christians – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – were written no later than the second century; and I have presented evidence indicating that both Luke's gospel and his book of Acts were written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The book of Revelation treats Jesus' resurrection as a fact, and even has the raised Jesus giving counsel to seven churches in Asia. Most scholars date this book to the first century, either in the 60's or 90's AD. This means all of the material found in the New Testament was written one or two centuries before Constantine became emperor in 306AD.

Defenders of the Christian faith also sprang up from the second century onward, writing lengthy works concerning what they considered to be heresies. They wrote so much that a large part of the New Testament could be reconstructed just from their works! Furthermore, churches often preserved records regarding the succession of their leaders, and in some cases the list of leaders goes back to someone mentioned in the New Testament.

We have evidence that churches were already practicing Christian traditions prior to the time of Constantine. For example, apart from eating bread and drinking wine in memory of Jesus, there was also the issue of when his crucifixion and resurrection should be commemorated. A couple of different customs existed in different parts of the world. The Council of Nicaea also sought to unify all the churches on this matter, but with only limited success at the time.

We have evidence of Christian history from Eusebius, sometimes called the "Father of Church History," who wrote an account of this history, along with a biographical work on Constantine.

We also have evidence preserved by secular historians; and although we don't have precise figures, the overall record of history indicates that quite a large number of Christians lived across the Roman empire prior to Constantine, and it was not uncommon for some of them to be executed because of their belief that Jesus Christ was Lord and Savior.

Therefore, for Constantine or the established Church to be the source of the Jesus story, and particularly the story of his resurrection, it would need a conspiracy and forgery of monumental proportions. It would require vast reams of writings by earlier Christians to be forged. It would require hundreds of fragments of New Testament writings to be created and located in different places, and somehow for these forgeries to be dated as far back as just fifty or one hundred years after Christ.

It would require the invention of dozens of heresies to spring from this newly created orthodoxy, including false gospels, so as to appear to conflict with the true gospels, made to look like they were written by apostles who never actually existed; and for vast reams to be written against these heresies, to defend an orthodoxy that had also just been invented.

It would require hundreds of churches to spring into existence, each with their own hierarchy of leaders; and then for these leaders to convene, and decide upon the interpretation of a few words and scriptures, even though those same scriptures had just been made up. The whole history of the persecution of Christians would also need to be created, for how could earlier Christians have been persecuted if Christ was an invention of Constantine or the Church in power?

In other words, the idea that Constantine or the established Church was the source of the Resurrection Story, or indeed any part of the Jesus story, is practically impossible, and flies in the face of a mass of evidence showing that Christians believed just about all of what they did, well before Constantine came along or Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire.

The Council of Nicaea in 325AD was simply arguing over the fine print, like lawyers arguing over how to interpret clauses in legal documents that had been written long before.

1 Revelation 1:1. **2** Revelation 11:1. **3** Revelation 17:10. **4** Eusebius, *Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine*. **5** Isaiah 11:10.

42. The Prime Suspects

I have shown through reason and logic, which are rightly viewed as important by skeptics, that the groups who came after the original apostles were probably not the source of the Resurrection Story, at least without the formation of a highly elaborate and implausible conspiracy.

Paul and his associates were probably not the source. Paul's alleged encounter with the risen Christ would not have been believed unless the original apostles already believed Jesus had been raised. This is the simplest explanation for why Paul was accepted into the Christian community. His letters also provide evidence that he wasn't the source of the story. They are dated before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD and treat the resurrection of Jesus as a fact.

The internal evidence in Luke's second book, the Acts of Apostles, and therefore also the gospel bearing his name, implies it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, during the lifetime of the apostles and women who claimed to be eyewitnesses. Luke's gospel contains the details of the Resurrection Story, and Acts shows the outcome of early Christian missionary work. This suggests the later Church, after most or all of the apostles had died, was unlikely to be the source of the story.

It was also far too late for Roman emperor Constantine, or the Church once it acquired an official status in the fourth century AD, to make any changes to the core Christian story. The Council of Nicaea in 325AD was simply arguing over the interpretation of words written a century or two earlier.

Christians believe that Jesus was the "anointed one," the "Messiah," destined according to Jewish scriptures to come through the lineage of King David and be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. The leaders of Judaism accepted that Jesus was a real person, even if they didn't believe he was their Messiah. This strongly suggests Jesus wasn't a myth or fictional character, as in the "Heavenly Christ" hypothesis.

In other words, the evidence we have indicates that Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus had already been established by the time Paul wrote his letters, and so most likely originated in the time of the original apostles.

In addition, there are three logical reasons why the apostles were almost certainly the source of the Resurrection Story.

First of all, their credibility depended on it. They claimed to be eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry and resurrection, but if they couldn't supply the details regarding what happened, their claim to be eyewitnesses would fail and their authority as apostles would be damaged.

Second, the story of Jesus' resurrection needed to be believable, both to the disciples and also to potential converts. But if there were no eyewitness reports, skeptics and disciples alike would have plenty of room to doubt that Jesus had been raised, and the Christian message would have much less momentum.

Third, Christians were commissioned to make disciples of all the nations. But if the apostles didn't ensure an accurate account of the Resurrection Story – at least

accurate insofar as far they saw it – was transmitted and then preserved for later generations and the wider world, they would have failed to honor that commission. Spreading the message about Jesus to the nations would also be much harder if the disciples couldn't get their stories straight about how he was raised.

Incidentally, the same reasoning can also be used to argue that the gospels were likely written earlier, not later as some skeptics claim. It was the responsibility of the apostles to ensure that Jesus' teachings were transmitted accurately. It might be harder for the apostles to do this once they were dead, so the gospels were more likely to have been compiled while at least some of them were still alive, as early Christian writers indicate.

To summarize: the original apostles, the "Twelve," were the only ones with the means, motive and opportunity to be the source of the Resurrection Story. They were the leaders of the early Christian movement, appointed by Jesus himself. If we were to treat this as a criminal investigation, that would make them the prime suspects.

The women, such as Mary Magdalene, may have made an important contribution to the story, but it was the apostles who were in charge of spreading it and thus determining what went into it.

Furthermore, the story can't have changed in any substantial way from the time it came into existence. Significant changes, such as the introduction of new characters who didn't exist before, could have been seized upon by opponents, as well as becoming a source of doubt and skepticism for believers.

There are three main components of the Resurrection Story we have today: the empty tomb, the encounters with Jesus, and the appearance of men or angels in Jesus' tomb, seen exclusively by the women. These are almost certainly the same three components present from the beginning.

The "empty tomb" was necessary for the story to gain its initial momentum. It also showed that blind faith wasn't being asked of the disciples. This would have meant believing Jesus had been raised without any physical evidence.

The "encounters with Jesus" must have been present from the start, or else how could the apostles claim to be eyewitnesses? Without this element, they would just be witnesses to an empty tomb, which by itself wouldn't be convincing evidence of Jesus' resurrection, and would have left even many of the disciples doubting it happened, let alone opponents.

The "appearance of men or angels" component was likely also there from the start. The testimonies of the women served to corroborate what the men experienced, helping to strengthen their belief that Jesus had been raised. In other words, the "encounters with Jesus" and "appearances of angels" elements reinforced and complemented each another.

Also, the differing versions of the Resurrection Story suggest the gospel writers were accurately reporting the testimony of two or three individuals from two groups of women. The first group went deeper into the tomb, and saw two men. To this group, it was obvious the men were angels. The second group went in, but perhaps

stayed near the entrance. They saw only one man to the right of where Jesus should have been. To them, it wasn't clear the man was an angel, but given the circumstances they were willing to accept he probably was.

Matthew says that Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, came to view the grave early in the morning, and an angel spoke to them saying Jesus had been raised. While Matthew's account reads as if the two women were together the whole time, they could have set out together, but then Magdalene could have returned later and had a similar experience to the other Mary, as John's gospel suggests. I think Matthew wrote it this way for the purpose of brevity, because the two women had basically the same experience in regard to seeing angels and encountering Jesus.

Mark's account of the resurrection is the shortest. It includes the two women in Matthew's version, and also Salome. I think Mark erred on the side of caution and simply reported one man to the right of where Jesus should have been, perhaps because Salome stayed near the entrance and only saw one man, and she couldn't say for sure that he was an angel.

Luke claimed to have followed all things accurately from the start. His sources seem to have been the same two women as in Matthew's gospel, and also Joanna, who isn't mentioned in the other gospels. They claimed to have seen two men wearing shining garments in Jesus' tomb. In the same chapter, Luke made it clear the women believed the men were angels. He wrote that other women were also present, but he doesn't name them, perhaps to draw more attention to his named sources.

In regard to the women, John's account is focused only on Mary Magdalene, who was by herself when she saw the two angels. I think Magdalene must have accompanied the other women to the grave as Matthew says, but then she ran off to tell Peter and John, returning a little later to the tomb as John implies.

While Magdalene was a single witness in John's account, I think the apostle counted himself as a second witness to the resurrection, because he personally heard what Magdalene said, he saw the empty tomb, and he also wrote that later the same day Jesus appeared to the disciples in a locked room, which presumably included himself.

What this means is, each of the four gospel writers were following the scriptural requirement that two or three witnesses were needed to establish any matter of importance. The gospel accounts differ because of this, depending on which two or three witnesses each writer was relying on. This is further evidence that the accounts of the resurrection are accurate, at least in terms of reporting what the eyewitnesses claimed to have seen.

In summary, I think I have made a good case for saying that the apostles were almost certainly the source of the Resurrection Story, and that the version we have today is very likely the same one told by the apostles and disciples back in 33AD or thereabouts.

43. What Really Happened?

Finally then, we come to the most important question of all: what really happened in around 33AD? Did Jesus actually rise from the dead, as the apostles and disciples claimed? This is the real question, and the heart of the matter.

If there is no God, I accept that the story of Jesus' resurrection is implausible. But if there is a God after all, then his resurrection is possible; and if Jesus was who he claimed to be, the Son of God, I'd suggest his rising from the dead wasn't just possible but probable. Either way, let's look carefully at each component of the Resurrection Story one last time.

The first component was the empty tomb. This was necessary for the story of Jesus' resurrection to gain momentum. Why was it empty, and what happened to the body? If Jesus wasn't raised, someone must have opened the tomb and removed the body, leaving the linen cloths.

Here we have to ask an important question: did Jesus really die, or could he have somehow survived crucifixion and come out of the tomb by himself?

According to the gospels, darkness fell upon the land from the sixth hour until the ninth hour, or midday until 3pm, and Jesus expired shortly afterwards.¹ Matthew's gospel says that the moment he died, the curtain of the Jewish Temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and there was a powerful earthquake. When the army officer and those keeping watch saw the circumstances under which Jesus had died, they grew afraid and reportedly said, "Certainly this was God's Son."²

John's gospel says that when the soldiers saw Jesus was dead, one of them jabbed the side of the body with a spear, and blood and water came out.³ According to all four gospels, Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man and a secret disciple for fear of the Jews, went to Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea, and asked for the body. Joseph and a man named Nicodemus wrapped it in fine linen, laid it in a new tomb, and rolled a big stone over the entrance.⁴

In Mark's gospel, Pilate first checked with the centurion who had witnessed the execution, to ensure Jesus was dead, before he handed over the body to Joseph.⁵ This means there were multiple eyewitnesses to Jesus' death, and several people were in a position to confirm that he was dead.

Besides, for the disciples to believe Jesus had been raised, they had to first believe he had died. If he had survived his own execution, his bruised and bloodied state would hardly be a good basis for them to believe he had risen miraculously.

I think the Roman ability to crucify people, the zeal of the religious leaders to see that Jesus was put to death, and the way the disciples treated Jesus' body and their surprise at the subsequent events, all suggest that Jesus really did die.

So who opened the tomb and removed Jesus' body? Did the religious authorities do it, so the disciples couldn't do anything with the body? If so, I think it's fair to say that, in hindsight, they committed one of the most incredible blunders of all time. But I don't think they were stupid enough to do this. It would fuel speculation

that Jesus had risen, unless they later produced his body to refute the beliefs they themselves had helped to create. It would be far simpler, and make much more sense, just to ensure Jesus' tomb was guarded properly, until his claim that he would rise on the third day was no longer possible.

Could the Roman authorities have removed Jesus' body? I don't think they had any good motive for doing this. According to John, Pontius Pilate ordered Jesus' execution partly because of the accusation made by the religious leaders that he had claimed to be a king.⁶ Pilate put "THE KING OF THE JEWS" on a sign above Jesus' head in Hebrew, Latin and Greek, which could be read by people entering Jerusalem, primarily as a warning to others who might be tempted to proclaim themselves king.⁷

If the Roman authorities had opened the tomb and removed Jesus' body to make it look like he had been raised from the dead, this would give credence to the idea that he was a king. Furthermore, it would make the authorities look weak and incompetent, and perhaps encourage others to try their hand at becoming a messianic king.

Self-proclaimed messiahs and their followers tended to cause trouble for Rome, especially since the Jewish people believed their messiah would throw off the shackles of Roman rule. I doubt this is something the Romans wanted to encourage.

As a man, Jesus gave no indication that he was interested in overthrowing Rome, but Pilate couldn't be sure the disciples wouldn't take things in a different direction to the one Jesus intended. As governor of Judea, Pilate was responsible for ensuring order and stability. Therefore, he was unlikely to be interested in fueling the idea that Jesus was still alive.

However, he may have been curious about the idea that Jesus would rise on the third day, which would provide him with an incentive not to make it easy for Jesus to come out on his own.

What about the disciples? Could they have stolen Jesus' body? I don't think they had any motive for doing this. If they really believed Jesus would rise on the third day, why would they take him out of the tomb the night before, as the religious leaders claimed had happened, or even on the morning of the third day? This would rob Jesus of the opportunity to come out by himself!

Besides, I don't think the disciples actually believed Jesus would be resurrected a few days after his death. The gospel accounts seem to imply this, although they don't tell us why. In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus told his disciples he would suffer, be killed and then raised up on the third day, Peter's response was: "Be kind to yourself, Lord. This will not happen to you."⁸ In Luke's gospel, after Jesus told them he would die and then rise on the third day, Luke wrote that the disciples "understood none of these things, and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know what was being said."⁹ Similarly, when Jesus told them not to tell others about certain things until after the son had risen from the dead, the disciples started discussing the more general question, "what is the resurrection of the dead?"¹⁰

Jesus was buried in a rich man's tomb, which doesn't suggest the disciples thought he was going to be there for only a few days. On the morning of the third day the women were bringing spices and perfumed oils to apply to his body. What was the point, if they believed he was coming out later that day? And even when the women reported that angels had told them Jesus had been raised, the other disciples didn't believe them.

How can these things be true, if Jesus had told them he would be raised on the third day? The answer is surprisingly simple and yet isn't obvious to the modern reader. The "third day," to the Jews in his day, was probably used a metaphor for an unspecified time in the future when the dead would be raised to life. This belief was reflected in Martha's answer to Jesus after her brother Lazarus had died. Jesus said to her: "Your brother will rise." Martha replied: "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." ¹¹

The idea of a "last day" was partly based on a prophecy in Hosea, which says: "Come, and let us return to YHWH, for he has torn to pieces, but he will heal us. He struck us, but he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, and we will live before him." ¹²

To the Jews, this was about their nation, struck by YHWH but then revived, hence the plural "us" and "we." The "third day" was a future time of restoration and revival, but not in three literal days. It wasn't viewed as a prophecy about an individual, and I doubt the disciples thought very much about applying it to Jesus or themselves, at least in the first few days after his death, even though their shepherd had just been struck and they had been scattered like sheep, which Jesus warned about beforehand, according to Matthew. ¹³

In other words, when Jesus told his disciples he would rise on the third day, I think what they heard was that he would be raised in a general resurrection on the "last day." They might have believed that time was near, but I don't think they expected a specific resurrection to be literally a few days away.

This is how, as Luke puts it, "this saying was hidden from them." I think they simply weren't expecting Jesus to be put to death, and then come out of the tomb a few days later. Ironically, the religious leaders took Jesus' words more literally, and so they wanted to prevent the disciples from stealing his body and claiming he had been miraculously raised.

If the disciples had no good motive for stealing the body, what about the soldiers guarding the tomb? Could they have removed the body, and if so, why?

Maybe the whole thing was a cruel jest on their part. Maybe they removed the stone from the entrance, hid the body, and then dressed up in shiny garments pretending to be angels saying he had risen.

Perhaps they just wanted to have a bit of fun at the expense of the disciples. If so, they should have put Jesus' body back afterwards to avoid getting into trouble, and to prevent fueling the idea that Jesus had been raised, which was what the religious leaders were primarily concerned about.

Even if something went wrong with the prank, so they couldn't return the body for some reason, they could have made up an excuse for moving it, such as a security threat to the tomb; although I suppose dressing up in shiny garments and pretending to be angels might be a little harder to explain.

At a minimum, they could have closed the tomb again, and feigned ignorance if and when the body was discovered to be missing. Instead, they never returned Jesus' body and they left the tomb open, which was what they were supposed to be guarding.

According to the gospel of Matthew, after an angel appeared and rolled away the stone from the entrance of the tomb, the soldiers guarding it became as dead men. When they recovered, some of them went into the city and reported what they had seen to the chief priests, who paid the soldiers a large sum of money to say the disciples had stolen the body in the night while they were sleeping.¹⁴

If the soldiers were lying about what they saw, perhaps to cover for their own failed prank, they could have just blamed the disciples, instead of making up a story about an angel.

Whatever the case, they were playing a very risky game, since they had been assigned by Pilate to guard the tomb, not open it up, remove Jesus' body, and make up a story involving an angel. Their failure in this regard meant they could have been put to death. Furthermore, losing the body and saying an angel came and opened the tomb would have fueled the belief the religious authorities were trying to prevent.

I suppose it's plausible that the guards wanted to play a prank on the disciples, although whether they could do a good job of pretending to be angels is another matter. But losing the body and leaving the tomb open afterwards seems much less plausible, since these are the things they were meant to be guarding. I doubt they would have been willing to risk their own lives for the sake of a prank.

However, if the soldiers could be bribed, as the gospel of Matthew suggests, maybe they were paid to remove the body. If so, by whom? As I have said, the Roman authorities had no interest in fueling the idea that Jesus had been raised, and neither had the Jewish religious leaders. The disciples in general also had no incentive to do this, since if they believed Jesus would be raised on the third day, they would have wanted to see him come out by himself; or else they simply didn't believe he would be raised a few days later.

What about Joseph of Arimathea, the rich disciple? Could he be the culprit? He certainly had the means, but did he have the motive? Joseph was the one who went to Pilate and asked for the body. The gospel of Matthew also implies the tomb Jesus was buried in was one Joseph had paid for or built for himself.¹⁵

According to Matthew, the day after Jesus' death and burial, the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate and asked that the tomb be made secure until the third day. Pilate provided them with soldiers, and the religious leaders sealed the stone and posted the guard.¹⁶

I suppose Joseph could have paid the soldiers to remove the body, or he might have created a secret tunnel in the tomb which he could later use to take out the body. But if he really was a disciple of Jesus, as the gospels claim, he would be robbing his Lord of the opportunity to come out by himself. And if he wasn't expecting Jesus to be raised any time soon, by removing the body he would be showing disrespect to it and the resting place of his Lord, things he had taken such care over before.

On the other hand, if Joseph wasn't a believer, why would he bother asking Pilate for the body, then wrapping it up and placing it in his own tomb, only to have it secretly removed a few days later, to make it look like Jesus had been raised? He would be fueling an idea he didn't believe in.

There is also another possibility we need to consider. While he was still alive, could Jesus himself have paid or arranged in advance for someone to bribe the guards, open the tomb and hide the body after his death, to deceive people into thinking he had been raised?

I think this ultimately depends on what Jesus believed. If he really did believe he was the Christ, the Son of God, it's very unlikely he would have orchestrated these things in advance, since they would be a distraction from any actual miracles that might take place.

However, if he didn't believe he was the Son of God, and so wanted to fool people into believing he had been raised, he would have certainly needed help to come out of the tomb.

For the sake of argument, let's assume his co-conspirator was Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph had the financial means to bribe the guards into removing Jesus' body and claiming an angel had opened the tomb.

This would be a very risky plan that could easily backfire. To do what Joseph asked, the soldiers would be risking their lives, because they had failed to guard the tomb and body, angels or no angels. The plan would also critically depend on Joseph and the guards never admitting to what they had done.

Now, if Jesus had arranged in advance to fake his own resurrection, this would obviously make him an impostor. In that case, what was the point of his ministry?

The gospels repeatedly make plain that Jesus believed he had been sent by God. To give just one example: early in his ministry, the gospel of Luke says Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth where he had been raised, and he read aloud from a passage of Isaiah that says: "The spirit of my Lord YHWH is upon me, because YHWH anointed me to declare good news to the meek. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to the ones bound; to proclaim the year of YHWH's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God."

Jesus cut short his reading at "the year of YHWH's favor." He then rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant, and sat down. As the eyes of all in the synagogue were looking intently at him, he said to them: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your ears." ¹⁷

Assuming this really happened, Jesus must have believed he had been anointed by God for a special purpose. The word “Christ” means “anointed one,” which is why people called him Jesus Christ.

According to the gospels, Jesus’ core message to his own people was that they should repent of their badness, because something called “the Kingdom of God” was near with blessings for the meek, but that the wicked generation in which he lived would be dealt with severely by God.

He taught people to love God and neighbor, to freely forgive others, to avoid lies, hypocrisy and materialism, to be pure in heart, to have your needs met by putting the Kingdom of God first, along with seeking God’s righteousness, and to put faith in Jesus as the one sent by God to save people from their sins.

This is the kind of message he preached to his own people for about three and a half years. Isn’t this much more likely the actions, not of a deceiver, but of someone who sincerely believed he was sent by God, even if he was mistaken?

Of course, this assumes the gospels are reporting Jesus’ words at least somewhat accurately. In previous chapters I have already made the case that the apostles and early disciples were the most likely source of the Resurrection Story, and that the gospels are likely the products of their recollections and eyewitness testimonies.

The apostles and disciples believed Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God even before his death, which is why they were apostles and disciples in the first place. I think it’s fair to say they believed this partly because Jesus himself really believed he was the Christ, and the Son of God.

He admitted this to the religious leaders in his final words to them, which is why they brought him before Pilate. From their point of view, Jesus’ claims made him a blasphemer who was liable to death.

This also explains why Jesus was careful about how he described himself during his ministry. If he had started out by declaring himself to be the Son of God, the religious leaders would have tried to have him executed much sooner.

In summary: Jesus’ teachings as recorded in the gospels, the faith of the apostles and disciples, and the opposition Jesus and the early Christians faced, all strongly indicate that Jesus really believed he was the Christ, the Son of God. For this reason, it’s highly unlikely he would arrange for anyone to fake his resurrection, since this would rob his Father of the opportunity to perform a miracle.

In any event, Jesus’ body would have grown more valuable as belief in his resurrection spread, and as the pressure increased on the religious leaders to end the apostasy, as they saw it, about Jesus being the Christ. If any of the soldiers that were supposed to have been guarding the tomb, or Joseph of Arimathea, or a guilt-ridden apostle, or indeed anyone else, could have produced Jesus’ body or evidence of a conspiracy to fake his resurrection, I think they would have been rewarded handsomely by the religious authorities. But as far as we know, this never happened.

The main point here is this: I don't think any of the potential suspects had a good motive for opening up the tomb and secretly removing Jesus' body. The Roman authorities didn't, because the last thing they needed was a messianic king on their hands, especially one that people believed had come back from the dead.

The religious leaders didn't, because an empty tomb on the third day would fuel the very idea they wanted to suppress, namely that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God; a blasphemy in their eyes. According to the gospels, his claim to be the Christ and the Son of God was the real reason they handed Jesus over to Pilate.¹⁸

The disciples didn't have a good motive for removing Jesus' body, because it would rob him of the opportunity to come out miraculously. But if the disciples didn't even believe Jesus would rise again after a few days, as the gospels imply, stealing the body from the tomb would be the height of disrespect and sacrilege, a form of vandalism perpetrated on their Lord's body.

If the soldiers hid the body as a prank, they should have put it back afterwards, because their job was to guard the tomb and prevent the disciples from doing anything with the body. They certainly weren't there to open the tomb, then leave it open and hide the body, fueling the idea that Jesus had been raised. And nobody had a good motive to pay the soldiers to do this either.

I think what makes the most logical sense, if we haven't already excluded in advance the possibility of it happening, is that Jesus was actually raised from the dead.

Now, the second component of the Resurrection Story was the appearance of men or angels exclusively to the women.

Let's consider the possibility of deception here. Were the women lying? If so, what was their motive? I suppose if they could convince the apostles Jesus had been raised and that angels had revealed it exclusively to them, this might give them an enhanced status among the disciples. They might even become celebrities, interviewed about their now invisible Lord for the next issue of Judea Today when it was scheduled to come out several months later.

However, we need to weigh up these possible motives with the disincentives and risks for taking such a course of action. Maybe they weren't keen to become celebrities for Jesus, given that he'd just been crucified for claiming to be the Christ, his death being demanded by an angry mob and incited by the religious leaders. If the women went around proclaiming that their Messiah had risen and that angels had told them this, and yet they were lying, these were incredibly bold, brave and I think also very foolish women.

The other risk of making up the appearances of angels was that the other disciples simply wouldn't believe them, which would have the opposite effect of enhancing their status. According to Luke, this is what happened at first. The others didn't believe the women.

In addition, it's highly unlikely they could have made up their story later, because then why would the apostles take the women seriously? What would be their excuse for the delay? "Oh, by the way, we saw angels and encountered the Lord after

we found the empty tomb, but we didn't tell you guys at the time, because you had your hands full with other stuff." I'm not sure this would sound very convincing.

Besides, the "angels" told the women to go and tell the others the news about Jesus. If the women hadn't done this, it would make them and therefore their story unreliable. The only window of opportunity they had to fabricate their story was the time when they first saw the tomb open.

But this was also the most dangerous time to make up stories about their Lord, because the Roman authorities had just executed him at the behest of an angry mob, and it looked as if someone had just opened the tomb and taken away Jesus' body, contrary to the orders of the Roman governor.

If the soldiers hadn't done it, suspicion would inevitably fall on the disciples. I suppose the women could have made up the angels story as a cover for other disciples stealing Jesus' body in the night, which would make them part of an increasingly strange conspiracy. But it's interesting that none of the disciples seem to have been arrested or charged with stealing the body.

Is this because, as Matthew's account says, it was the soldiers who reported that an angel had rolled away the stone? If this really was the case, the authorities needed to invent the cover story of the disciples stealing the body while the guards were asleep; but they didn't want to charge the disciples with this, in case the evidence supported an actual resurrection.

Whatever the case, if the women made up their stories, they would have to live with the burden of knowing they were liars for the rest of their lives, and knowing tens of thousands of people were becoming disciples of Christ based partly on their fabrications. They would be liars and false witnesses of God, while simultaneously being passionate disciples of a man they believed to be the Christ, the Son of God, who taught them that out of their own words they would be judged.

I don't think any valid motive they had for making up appearances of angels, if there really was one, outweighed the much easier thing for them to have done at the time, which was simply to not make things up. Of course, if they actually did see angels and their Lord, this would be a powerful motive for speaking out.

I don't think deception is a good explanation for the women's stories. Their only window of opportunity for making those things up was the time when Jesus' tomb was first found to be open. But this was also the most dangerous time for them, as disciples of a man who had just been executed by the Romans for claiming to be a king. They had far more incentive to just keep a low profile, rather than make up stories that could thrust them into the spotlight and potentially get them into trouble.

But what about delusion? Could the women simply have been seeing things that weren't really there? If they all saw at least one man in the tomb telling them Jesus had been raised, but he wasn't really there, this would be a case of mass delusion; and perhaps the only case in history where all of the people experiencing the delusion were receiving essentially the same detailed message – namely that Jesus had been raised as he said he would be, and that they were to tell the apostles and

Peter to go to Galilee, where they would meet Jesus. This sounds incredibly specific for a delusion most of them had at the same time!

Mary Magdalene is also an interesting case because, according to John's gospel, she saw two angels and encountered Jesus separately from the other women. I suppose she could have been lying. After all, John and Peter had already been to the tomb and saw only the linen cloths. Magdalene perhaps saw the same thing, but maybe she heard what the other women had supposedly seen, and didn't want to feel left out. This would make her a liar and a false witness, and yet simultaneously a devout follower of a man she believed was the Lord, who said that by their words they would be judged. On the other hand, if she was simply deluded, it's remarkable that she independently had the same delusion as the other women.

But could the women have just been exaggerating? If so, what was the core truth they saw or heard, that would later grow to become two angels telling them Jesus had been raised, and that they were to tell the disciples to go to Galilee and meet him there?

Mark's account of the resurrection is the simplest. In his version, the women enter the tomb. There is only one man in a white robe, sitting on the right, and he says Jesus was raised, and that Jesus would go on ahead of the disciples into Galilee. If this is an exaggeration despite its brevity, what was the original experience? Maybe it was a disciple who had made his own way to the tomb, mumbling something incoherent about Jesus?

Maybe he'd said something to the effect that Jesus must have been raised because his body wasn't here, and so perhaps they all ought to head back to Galilee. The women, fearful and confused after being inside a dark tomb where their Lord's body was supposed to have been, and after a lot of discussion among themselves, wrongly concluded that the man said Jesus had been raised, and that he had instructed them all to meet up in Galilee.

Since the man in white had startled them so much, maybe they also speculated that he wasn't a man after all, but actually an angel. He was certainly young and good looking, and wearing a white garment, which all helped. And maybe, because of the echo of the man's voice in the tomb, some of the women thought there might have been two men in there after all. And this is how the "appearance of angels" component might have come about. It began with a confused disciple sitting in Jesus' tomb speculating that Jesus had been raised, and this got exaggerated either immediately or over days, weeks or even some years, to the point where it became two shining angels proclaiming Jesus' resurrection.

Again, this would mean Mary Magdalene was lying or deluded when she said she saw two angels and encountered Jesus, assuming she did indeed have a separate experience as John wrote. Or maybe John himself was lying. But then, if he made up the account, why credit only Magdalene with seeing angels when the apostles also could have? After Magdalene told them about finding the tomb empty, he and Peter could have raced to the tomb and been greeted by a whole choir of angels singing

songs and declaring that Jesus was risen – hallelujah! – along with some nice words about the two men. Who would ever know this was a lie, since only Peter and John would have been there to witness it?

Instead, John's experience was surprisingly mundane. He and Peter raced to the tomb but didn't see angels, only the empty tomb and the linen cloths. Could it be that John wrote this because this is how it actually happened, and as an apostle and disciple of Jesus, he wasn't inclined to make up stuff about his Lord?

Either way, if the disciples had gone to Galilee but didn't encounter Jesus there, then the women were exaggerating at the very least. But according to the accounts, the disciples encountered Jesus multiple times, including at the Sea of Tiberias, also called the Sea of Galilee.¹⁹ Whatever the case, it seems the testimony of the women, on its own, wasn't enough to convince the other disciples that Jesus had been raised. It was the alleged appearances of Jesus that convinced them.

So let's now consider the "encounters with Jesus" component. After Mary Magdalene had come to the disciples saying she had seen the Lord, John wrote that later the same day, when they were in a locked room for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst.²⁰ According to John, Jesus also appeared to the disciples at least two other times.

What about "deception" here? Could the apostles be deceiving us? If they are, what would be their motive? I think it's fair to say they had a couple of possible motives. For one, they didn't want their Lord to be dead. Perhaps making up stories about him being alive was a form of denial. Maybe they so desperately wanted him to be alive, they were even willing to invent stories about seeing him.

Second, they had been appointed by Jesus as apostles. Perhaps they felt a deep sense of obligation to carry his message further. If Jesus still happened to be alive and directing them invisibly, this would be a good incentive for them to carry on being apostles, as well as being an interesting story to hook people in to the teachings of Jesus. I suppose it's also possible they saw it as a way to obtain fame and glory, an opportunity to make a name for themselves.

But if they made up the story of Jesus' resurrection, and in particular his encounters with them, then they also made up the "Great Commission," Jesus' instruction to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all of the things I have commanded you."²¹ According to Matthew's account, this commission was given to them by Jesus after he had been raised. Previously, Jesus said their ministry had been only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."²²

This meant the apostles deliberately chose to impose the burden of preaching to the whole world upon themselves, even though it would involve a lot of hard work, and they would face intense hostility from their own people, since they were teaching an apostasy in the eyes of the religious leaders; and also from the Gentiles, who often worshiped idols, a practice completely at odds with their original Jewish faith and also their new Christian beliefs. They would be preaching a sincere message of repentance

and salvation, and telling people to believe in Jesus, including the parts they had knowingly fabricated.

If they had made up their encounters with the resurrected Jesus, the apostles would be ringleaders of the most remarkable conspiracy in the history of the world – a conspiracy involving themselves, Jesus' mother, the women who had accompanied him from Galilee, up to 120 other disciples who voted on a replacement for Judas, and probably also the apostle Paul, who claimed to have encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Yet while conspiring to make up stuff about their Lord, they also claimed to be devout disciples who were taught by Jesus not to be hypocritical, not to go beyond a yes meaning yes and a no meaning no, and that truth was to be highly valued. This would make them far worse than the Pharisees, whose hypocrisy Jesus had condemned.

The disciples believed Jesus was their shepherd, and they were his sheep. They believed he was the Suffering Servant, the one who was “brought as a lamb to the slaughter” even though “he did no wrong and no deceit was in his mouth.”²³

They also believed they were the remnant of Israel, the ones foretold to come out of a time of trouble and testing, and the ones whom God had made into a “treasured possession” after the coming of the Lord to his temple, during the time when God was to make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked.²⁴

The apostle Paul echoed this belief when he wrote, “so then, in the present time, a remnant has come to be, by the choosing of grace.”²⁵ Christians, and perhaps Jewish Christians in particular, were the remnant of Israel according to Paul. And in the Old Testament, the prophet Zephaniah wrote that “the remnant of Israel will not commit iniquity, nor speak a lie; neither will a tongue of deceit be found in their mouths; for they will graze and lie down, and no one will cause them to tremble.”²⁶

In other words, the apostles and disciples sincerely believed of their shepherd that “no deceit was in his mouth,” and that as his sheep and as the remnant of Israel, a “tongue of deceit” was not to be found in their mouths either.

Yet if they had fabricated the Resurrection Story, this would have been a clear case of deceit. Their lives from that time on would be ones of utter hypocrisy and lies, and they would have betrayed their own shepherd. They would have disqualified themselves from being “the remnant of Israel.” And they would have gone to their deaths, to stand before their Lord and Judge, knowing full well their conspiracy was a lie. This seems highly implausible, in my opinion.

But maybe instead they were deluded. It's fair to say that all involved would have been emotionally distraught after the horrific execution of their teacher. The women had followed Jesus and ministered to him from Galilee, and the men had followed him after giving up careers as fishermen, tax collectors and so on. They all had good reasons to hope their Lord wasn't really dead.

I suppose it's plausible that some felt they had "encountered Christ" during those uncertain days. But the encounters reported in the gospels don't sound like delusions or inner spiritual awakenings. In fact, quite the opposite.

The disciples sometimes didn't recognize Jesus at first. The skeptic could say, "that's because it wasn't Jesus!" Maybe they were simply projecting Jesus onto a stranger, in a case of wishful thinking. But usually they recognized him, not only by what he said, but also by what he did, such as the way he broke bread and said a blessing; or in the case of Mary Magdalene, by what he said and the way he said it.

The encounters usually involved more than one of the disciples, and sometimes most or all of the apostles. If true, this would make them mass delusions, where Jesus said and did the same things in front of a group. He had long conversations with them, teaching them, and even eating with them.

In other words, they don't sound like delusions or inner spiritual experiences. They sound like the sort of thing that would happen if Jesus had actually risen from the dead and wanted to appear to his disciples. It's also intriguing that, if the women were also deluded, their delusions were very different from those of the men.

But what about exaggeration? Could the disciples have been exaggerating somehow when they claimed to have encountered Jesus?

The two disciples traveling to Emmaus might have simply mistaken a stranger for Jesus, and then overstated their case. But according to their report, the man interpreted all the things about Jesus in the scriptures. Then he dined with them, broke bread and said a blessing in the same manner as Jesus, at which point they realized he was actually Jesus; and then he disappeared from them. If the man didn't do any of those things, this would be a case of deception rather than exaggeration.

But maybe the man was just a stranger who happened to be intensely knowledgeable about Jesus and the scriptures related to Christ, who on the very same day Jesus was said to have been raised, was somehow able to vanish from their sight. Or maybe he didn't actually vanish. Maybe he just got fed up with their company, or wasn't impressed with their cooking, and so while the two disciples were looking away, he left quickly!

Whatever the case, the two disciples rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the apostles and the others that they had encountered Jesus; and while the disciples were all gathered together, Jesus supposedly stood in their midst. According to Luke, the disciples were afraid, so he showed them his hands and feet. They also feared he was some kind of apparition, so he ate a piece of fish they gave him, to prove he wasn't.²⁷ Which parts of this story got exaggerated, and how?

Maybe it was the same stranger who had earlier conversed with the two men on the road to Emmaus. Maybe he didn't have holes in his hands and feet, but those things were added to the story later. If so, why did the disciples think the man was an apparition? Was it his uncanny ability to slip unnoticed out of rooms, even locked ones? And why would the disciples think this stranger was Jesus anyway, unless the man was at least pretending to be him?

John would later reinforce this enormous case of mistaken identity, or deception on the part of the stranger, by writing that Thomas, one of “the Twelve,” wasn’t with the disciples for the first encounter, which occurred in a locked room; but in a second encounter, in which he again appeared to them in a locked room, he said to Thomas, “Bring your finger here, and see my hands, and bring your hand and thrust it into my side; and don’t become unbelieving, but believing.” ²⁸

I suppose this stranger could have been, not just a good escape artist, but also an illusionist, somehow faking the wounds inflicted on Jesus prior to his death. The question is, did the two disciples on the road to Emmaus really get fooled by a stranger who had detailed knowledge about the Christ in scripture, who broke bread in the same manner as Jesus, and who then vanished from their sight? And were the other disciples really fooled by the same man or a different stranger who appeared in a locked room to them twice, and somehow faked the physical evidence of Jesus’ crucifixion?

Did the disciples exaggerate by saying he had the marks of crucifixion on his hands and feet, along with an imprint of the piercing in his side? Or did they just make those parts up, and then preach Jesus to the world, based on encounters that were really just mass delusions, desperate exaggerations, or outright fabrications?

The author of John’s gospel explained why he wrote those things: “These have been written so you can believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you can have life by his name.” ²⁹ If the author was the apostle John, as early Christians said it was, he would have been an eyewitness to those encounters. They obviously convinced him that the man wasn’t merely a stranger pretending to be Jesus, but was actually Jesus. Either that, or the author was a liar who had no problem making stuff up about his Lord to deceive his readers.

He also reported on a third encounter, when he and several other disciples were out fishing. This account is unique to John’s gospel. According to the story, the disciples caught nothing during the night; but in the morning, a man stood on the beach and told them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, and they would find fish. They did as the man said, and weren’t able to haul all the fish in because of the large number. John realized it was the Lord, and Peter jumped into the water and swam to the shore. John names most of the disciples who were there, and provides us with curious details about the encounter, including how far they were from shore – about 200 cubits or 300 feet away – and even how many fish they caught – 153. ³⁰

Peter and John were both fishermen, so I suppose it was natural for them to count the fish. The number 153 could be an exaggeration, but it’s very specific, which implies instead that John was there and could even remember how many fish they caught that morning; or maybe he made it up as part of the conspiracy to fool you into believing in Christ.

Speaking about himself, the gospel author wrote: “This is the disciple who testifies about these things, and the one writing these things; and we know that his

testimony is true.” ³¹ If his immediate audience didn’t already believe his testimony was true, his statement here would sound hollow.

Whatever the case, if at least some of these stories are based on delusion, deception or exaggeration, where are the skeptical apostles and disciples, who in later years could have written more honest accounts expressing doubts about their faith in Jesus? As far as we know, there were none. While they initially had doubts, as the gospel writers report, according to Christian tradition all of the apostles died as Christians, with the exception of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus and then killed himself shortly afterwards.

Or just think of the money Jesus’ mother or any of the other women could have made, had they later come forward and admitted that the story of Jesus was based on delusion, deception or exaggeration, to the delight of the religious leaders. Their testimony would have been a powerful tool the religious leaders could have used to refute faith in Jesus. But as far as we know, the women never did this. They went to their graves believing Jesus was their Lord who had been raised from the dead.

1 Matthew 27:45-50; Mark 15:33-37; Luke 23:44-46. **2** Matthew 27:51-54. **3** John 19:31-37. **4** Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-54; John 19:38-42. **5** Mark 15:44,45. **6** John 19:12-16. **7** John 19:19-22. **8** Matthew 16:22. **9** Luke 18:34. **10** Mark 9:10. **11** John 11:23,24. **12** Hosea 6:1,2. **13** Matthew 26:31,32; Mark 14:27,28; Zechariah 13:7. **14** Matthew 28:1-15. **15** Matthew 27:59-61. **16** Matthew 27:62-66. **17** Isaiah 61:1,2; Luke 4:16-21. **18** Matthew 26:63-66; Mark 14:61-63; Luke 22:66-71. **19** John 21:1. Compare John 6:1. **20** John 20:18-23. **21** Matthew 28:19,20. **22** Matthew 10:5,6; 15:24. **23** Isaiah 53:7,9. **24** Malachi 3:1,17,18. **25** Romans 11:5. **26** Zephaniah 3:13. **27** Luke 24:36-43. **28** John 20:24-27. **29** John 20:31. **30** John 21:1-14. **31** John 21:24.

44. Beyond Reasonable Doubt

As in a court case, let me summarize my arguments, and then I will put all of what we have discussed into a larger context.

There are three components to the Resurrection Story: the empty tomb, the appearance of men or angels to the women, and the encounters with Jesus. Each of these components can be explained away, in that we can come up with an alternative explanation for each one.

The tomb might have been empty because the disciples really did steal Jesus' body, even though that would rob their Lord of the opportunity to come out of the tomb by himself. Or maybe the soldiers pulled a prank on the disciples, even though they had been charged with guarding Jesus' tomb. That they never returned the body meant they ended up perpetuating the Christian story.

The women claimed to see one or more men or angels telling them Jesus had risen. Maybe the women were liars, and wanted to get into the next issue of Judea Today, despite having been devout followers of their Lord who had been crucified a few days earlier. If so, they probably should have got their story straight and come to a definite decision about how many men there were, and whether or not they were actually angels. Or maybe they were deluded, and all had a mass hallucination, with Magdalene having a separate one later. Or maybe they were exaggerating, and just saw a man in white sitting in the tomb mumbling something about Jesus, which they interpreted somehow to mean that Jesus had risen and the disciples would see him in Galilee.

The disciples also claimed to have encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus, in locked rooms, and even on one occasion while fishing. Each time, they first recognized Jesus by something he said or did, and according to the gospels, he taught them many things during these encounters. The apostles would ultimately be in charge of spreading these stories, and if they were false, this would make the apostles liars and ringleaders of a remarkable conspiracy. But maybe the disciples were deluded. In which case, they were incredibly consistent mass delusions, with this same delusion telling them to preach to the nations and make disciples of them; and then a little later, the apostle Paul would encounter the same delusion with essentially the same message, while he was busy persecuting Christians.

However, I would suggest that the simplest explanation for each of the three components is as follows:

The tomb was empty, apart from the linen cloths used to wrap the body, and the stone was rolled back, because Jesus had actually risen. None of the people involved had a compelling reason to remove the body, but they all had reasons to leave it in the tomb.

Jesus' disciples would have wanted to respect his burial place, and those who believed he would literally rise on the third day would have wanted to see it happen

miraculously, rather than faking a resurrection and thus making their own faith null and void.

The religious authorities had every reason to ensure Jesus stayed in his tomb. The last thing they wanted was to give credence to the idea that he was the Christ, the Son of God. Similarly, as governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate didn't want people believing in a king who hadn't been appointed by Caesar, who claimed his authority came from a higher source, and who might somehow direct his followers from beyond the grave, or at least give them a pretext, to rebel against Rome.

The soldiers assigned to guard the tomb had one job. While we can't rule out the possibility of a prank, they had no good incentive to permanently hide the body, and they risked the potential wrath of Pilate, who had the power to have them executed or disciplined in typically brutal Roman fashion. And nobody had any good reason to pay the soldiers to do this. In fact, the religious authorities would have probably paid the guards a lot of money if they could have handed over the body.

However, if an angel really did open the tomb, the guards would have felt obligated to report this to the religious authorities, who had asked for the soldiers in the first place; and since the religious leaders didn't want people believing in Jesus, they had to come up with a cover story.

Jesus himself had no reason to fake his own resurrection. His teachings, the faith of the disciples, the persecution from the religious leaders, and the reason why he was handed over to Pilate, all point to the conclusion that Jesus really did believe he was the Christ, the Son of God.

Therefore, the simplest and most logical explanation for the empty tomb is that Jesus really did rise, as the gospels claim. The linen cloths were the only things left behind, because he had no need of them any more!

What about the women's stories? The simplest and best explanation for them is that they really were telling the truth about their encounters. They weren't deluded, liars or false witnesses. They did see angels who looked like men, telling them Jesus had risen. A few of the women saw two angels because they had gone right into the tomb. The others only saw one man sitting on the right of where Jesus should have been, because they were near the tomb entrance. These were less sure the man was an angel. Each gospel writer wrote up an account of the women's testimonies, based on the sources he named in his particular gospel.

Mary Magdalene had a separate encounter with both the angels and Jesus, reported on in more detail by John, but Matthew simply includes her with the other women, because her testimony is essentially the same as theirs.

The apostles and disciples were also telling the truth about their experiences. They really did encounter the risen Christ, who appeared to them, not only to prove that he was alive, but also to teach them what it all meant. He wasn't raised just because God felt in a generous mood that day. It was all part of a much bigger plan.

They had far more incentive to tell the truth about these matters than to lie or exaggerate. Jesus had taught them the importance of their words, and that they

would be judged on the basis of what they said. Since they claimed that God had raised Jesus, they would be false witnesses not just of men but also of God, if they knew their story was untrue. This carried a heavy penalty.

They believed their shepherd was the Suffering Servant foretold in Isaiah, who “did no wrong and no deceit was in his mouth.”¹ They were his sheep, and were taught to imitate Jesus. They believed they were the remnant of Israel, of which the prophet Zephaniah wrote, they “will not commit iniquity, nor speak a lie; neither will a tongue of deceit be found in their mouths.”²

They believed Jesus was their judge, and that he would return, perhaps even within their lifetime; or if they died, they would be raised up to meet the Lord.³ It would certainly be an interesting meeting, if they had made stuff up about their Lord and Judge.

At the start of this letter, I gave you the analogy of the unfriendly post office clerk who demanded proof of your identity in order for you to collect your parcel. You show him your driver’s license, but the clerk argues it could be fake. You hand him your passport, but he argues the picture could be someone who looks like you. You give him a utility bill with your name and address on it, but he argues you could have forged it at home with a word processor and printer.

The clerk’s arguments are all perfectly valid. Maybe you did forge the utility bill, or use the passport of someone who looks just like you. But if you weren’t able to collect your parcel that day, you would be entitled to suspect that the clerk had a grudge against you, and simply didn’t want to give you your parcel.

Some skeptics claim they reject the resurrection of Jesus because of a lack of evidence, but what evidence do they expect? The event in question is purported to have happened a few thousand years ago, and the authorities had no incentive to proclaim it. In fact, quite the opposite. Only the disciples had a motive for preserving the evidence, and they did this by writing and spreading the gospels, which contain their eyewitness testimonies.

Historians might make a note of these things, but only insofar as Jesus would have an impact on history as they saw it. But his impact came primarily through the apostles and disciples who preached to the world, and in how the world responded. Caesar Nero burned or set wild beasts upon some of them. This was the kind of thing Roman historians were interested in, not in Jewish stories involving miracles and messiahs.

I suppose God could have stationed a supernatural cross or something similar permanently over Jesus’ tomb, as enduring proof that he had been raised. Maybe God could have authorized the angels in Jesus’ tomb to conduct interviews with the media. Why didn’t God provide these additional lines of evidence?

Assuming skeptics wouldn’t simply explain those elements away, I think there are at least good two reasons. First, it would have forced the people of Jesus’ day into accepting him, rather than being a genuine test upon the nation of Israel. According to the prophet Malachi, the people had asked, “Where is the God of judgment?”⁴ God’s

response was: "Look! I am sending my messenger, and he prepares the way before me; and suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his Temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight. Look! He is coming, says YHWH of hosts. But who will endure the day of his coming?"⁵

Did the people of Israel really delight in God's covenant, or were they hypocrites, demanding judgment and justice from God while not practicing it themselves? Their response to Jesus would be a test. It would reveal what was in their hearts.

Second, I think God values our freedom to choose. If he had made Jesus' resurrection a certainty to the world, this would rob people of their choice not to believe. I think this freedom is important to God for the present time, at least until the sign of the Son appears in heaven, which I presume will end all doubts.

Besides, too many supernatural elements would perhaps distract us from the human aspect of the story. Jesus' story wasn't about angels or glowing crosses. He may have been the Word of God before, according to John; but in that moment of death, Jesus was a human being who suffered and felt pain and bled like all of us. This wasn't just about us experiencing the divine. It was about the divine experiencing us.

Now, in a murder trial, the jury is usually asked to deliver a guilty verdict only if they are convinced, beyond reasonable doubt, that the one accused really was a murderer. We weren't there to witness the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. But the apostles and disciples were, and despite their own initial skepticism, the evidence they were presented with took them far beyond reasonable doubt. It emboldened them to preach about Jesus literally to the world, despite hostility from their own people, from the Roman authorities, and from the nations.

For us, living a few thousand years later, if we are willing to accept that God may exist after all and that he occasionally intervenes in human affairs, then it really comes down to whether we choose to believe the testimony of the apostles and disciples or not; and I think I have made a strong case for them having told the truth, and not exaggerating, deceiving or being deluded, despite their story being quite remarkable. At the same time, it doesn't exist in a vacuum.

Hundreds of years before Jesus' day, the prophet Isaiah wrote about a servant of God, whose description and nature matches up remarkably well with Jesus.⁶

Isaiah wrote, "Who has believed our report? And to whom is the arm of YHWH revealed?" This suggests the report about this man would be hard to believe, meaning people would be inclined to be skeptical.

God's servant would be "raised and be lifted up, and be highly exalted," much like Jesus at his death and resurrection. At the same time, "just as many would be appalled at" him, and he would be "despised and rejected by men." In other words, he would be honored by some, hated by others. This is precisely the nature of Jesus.

He would be oppressed, brought "as a lamb to the slaughter," and given a tomb with the wicked and the rich, "although he did no wrong and no deceit was in his mouth." Yet he would somehow "lengthen his days, and the desire of YHWH will

prosper in his hand." YHWH says of him, "my righteous servant will make the many righteous."

The man would also bear the people's sins somehow – "by his stripes we were healed," "YHWH has laid on him the iniquity of us all," "he will bear their iniquities," he "carried the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

These things could be said to have found their fulfillment in the person of Jesus, as reported on by the gospel writers.

Furthermore, it wasn't just the original apostles and disciples who encountered the risen Jesus, but also Paul, who was so convinced of his encounter on the road to Damascus that he spent the rest of his life preaching about Christ throughout the Roman empire, which would lead to his imprisonment and eventual execution. Maybe he was deluded, but his course of life would also be consistent with a man who really did encounter the raised Jesus; and not just once, but several times in his life, as the book of Acts suggests.

He also wrote, in his first letter to the Corinthians, which is accepted by scholars as authentic, that upwards of five hundred people had encountered the risen Christ at one point, and the majority were still alive in his day.⁷ If these were mass delusions, they are the most consistent, purposeful and stubborn delusions in the history of the world.

They are also part of a remarkable chain of events, which include Jesus' mother Mary being told by an angel that she would give birth to the "Son of the Most High,"⁸ John the Baptist declaring Jesus to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,⁹ Jesus' ministry and miracles, which even the opponents and skeptics of his day didn't deny, his life and death culminating in the Resurrection Story we have already discussed in detail, the bold faith and preaching of the apostles about Jesus, which according to the story was accompanied by signs and miracles, the spread of the Christian message across the Roman empire in just a few decades; and now, after a few thousand years, Jesus Christ has become one of the most well-known figures in all history.

All of this in the context of a nation that claimed to have been founded by YHWH, the God who created the heavens and the Earth, and whose prophets promised a king from Bethlehem who would give Israel up for a time, and a Suffering Servant who would suffer and die, and be either appalling or a delight to those who saw him; a man who would be despised by his own nation, but who would give himself for a covenant of the people, for a light of Gentiles, to be God's salvation to the ends of the Earth. Indeed, the very name Jesus, or Yeshua, means "YHWH Is Salvation," and Jesus' name has become synonymous with saving.

The skeptic demands extraordinary evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead. The apostles and disciples were given precisely that, and they have left us the best evidence they could have passed on to us – their eyewitness testimonies as preserved in the four gospels.

In reality, they have left us with more than that. They have also left us the legacy of their preaching work, which is how the world knows the name of Jesus Christ in the first place.

But if Jesus wasn't the Son of God, and the whole story was the work of deluded or deceptive men and women, then surely it would have faded into obscurity at some point. After all, there were many opponents who would have relished the idea of dealing the fatal blow to the Christian faith. Judaism could have dealt it several fatal blows in its early years, simply by pointing out the fictions that modern skeptics dismissively allege. But instead, and no doubt to the annoyance of those in Judaism, the story of Jesus is now tied in with their story, and is part of the most widely distributed book of all time.

The Roman empire could have wiped out the Christian message as it tortured and murdered its adherents. But less than three hundred years after Jesus died, the Christian faith was embraced, at least in part, by the Roman emperor himself. And I could continue to list the opponents, right through to modern times, when whole political systems, religions, philosophies and ideologies have attempted to eliminate, replace or supplant the Christian message, including atheism.

I would suggest that the real reason for its success is divine providence. The God of Israel, YHWH, promised to do something new and extraordinary – namely, to bring forth a servant of his who would be unique.

He would be a prophet like Moses, who was humble and meek, perhaps involving a new covenant with God, just as Moses mediated a covenant between God and Israel. He would be a son born to Israel, who do not worship humans; and yet paradoxically he would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace. He would be born in Bethlehem, but would give Israel up for a time. The nations would turn to him for guidance, his resting place would be of glory, and through him, the Earth would become full of the knowledge of God.

God's Spirit would be upon him, and he would declare good news or "gospel" to the meek. But he would have to suffer and be humiliated, and his own nation would abhor and despise him. He would be put to death, but come back to life, and bring many to a right standing with God. He would be a covenant for the people, a light for Gentiles, and God's salvation to the ends of the Earth.

None of these promises were written by Christians, or could have been altered by Christians. They were all written by prophets of YHWH well before Jesus came into the world, and are preserved in Jewish scriptures down to this day.

But in all history, there has literally been only one man who even qualifies to be the servant YHWH promised, and this is the person we know of as Jesus Christ. And far from merely qualifying for the role, he has fulfilled those prophecies in a way that would be utterly out of his control if he were merely a man who lived and died in Judea a long time ago.

For within a few thousand years of his birth and death, all the ends of the Earth know the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Even though he was born as a son in Israel,

many agree that he was a Wonderful Counselor. Christians throughout the world accept his claim to be "I AM," the very substance of God whose name is "I AM THAT I AM." They believe he is the Eternal Father that Adam couldn't be, whether literally or metaphorically, because of Adam's sin and death. But for any father to be eternal, he has to live forever, which Adam and his offspring couldn't do, but is what Jesus could do, having been raised from death. And Christians call him Prince of Peace, because genuinely applying his teachings brings peace into the heart, and turns even violent, angry men into lovers of peace.

Most remarkable of all, his words, and the words of his apostles, can be read by anyone who wishes, in the most successful book of all time. This is either the most remarkable coincidence in a string of remarkable events, or it is indeed the extraordinary evidence skeptics say they are looking for.

1 Isaiah 53:9. **2** Zephaniah 3:13. **3** 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. **4** Malachi 2:17. **5** Malachi 3:1,2. **6** Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. **7** 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. **8** Luke 1:32. **9** John 1:29.

45. The Hidden Secrets

Now, I would like to share one other intriguing line of evidence, which is likely to be altogether new to you, that Jesus was who he said he was.

Let's suppose that the Christian claim about Jesus Christ is true, that he really was the Son of God, and that he actually was "in the beginning" with God in some way, as the gospel of John claims, although not in flesh and blood form.¹ I will readily admit, this is an extraordinary claim.

And let's be clear, this is a claim that Jesus himself also made, assuming the gospels are reporting his statements accurately, because he said that "before Abraham was, I am." Some have supposed he was merely saying he existed before Abraham, although that would be remarkable in itself. But we only have to look a few verses later, where a blind man also says "I am," and uses the exact same words as Jesus in Greek, to realize that Jesus must have been calling himself "I AM."²

To his Jewish audience he was blaspheming by equating himself with God, whose name is "I AM THAT I AM."³ Their response? The moment he uttered those words, "Before Abraham was, I am," they picked up stones to throw at him. If he was simply claiming to be older than Abraham, their response would probably have been ridicule, not stoning. But his hearers knew exactly what he meant by the words "I am."

Let's suppose he was who he said he was, and that some form of him really was "in the beginning" with God, as John claims at the start of his gospel. Perhaps we could expect Jesus to give us some insights into the universe and how it was formed. After all, he was supposedly there, although not as flesh and blood.

If Jesus intended to share such insights with us, how could he do it? His audience wouldn't have a clue about cosmology or particle physics. Therefore it would have to be coded, perhaps in the form of parables, but in a way that would still have meaning for hearers in his day. Furthermore, concepts we take for granted would have to be put into figures of speech, using words and ideas that would still be relevant to a non-scientific audience, so they would preserve them for later generations to hear.

For example, if Jesus wanted to convey our modern understanding that the universe started off incredibly small, and expanded to become the vast universe we see around us today, how could he tell us? Perhaps he might use a parable such as this one:

"The kingdom of the heavens is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown, is the greatest of the vegetation, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of heaven come and nest in its branches."⁴

This is exactly what Jesus does, because this is one of his parables, according to the gospel of Matthew. Now, it's fair to say that Jesus may have been talking to his original audience in spiritual terms, about how the Kingdom of God grows from the

smallest seed to become a mighty tree – which is still remarkable, considering the impact this man from Judea has already had on the world.

In Isaiah, YHWH says that “the heavens are my throne, and the earth is my footstool.” ⁵ Since “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” ⁶ the universe itself could also be described as “the kingdom of the heavens.” In that case, Jesus’ illustration fits remarkably well with modern cosmology. The universe started off like the smallest seed, and became large like a tree, the greatest of the vegetation. Jesus followed up this parable with another curious one:

“The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three seah measures of flour, until the whole of it was fermented.” ⁷

Notice the similar structure of these two parables. In the first, the kingdom of the heavens is like a mustard seed which a man takes and sows. In the second, it is like leaven which a woman takes and hides.

In the first, the growth sounds organic, like the growth of a tree. In the second, growth is the result of the women hiding the leaven, or yeast, in three seah measures. Incidentally, a “seah” was a measure of dry food such as flour. Three seah measures (*satons* in Greek) was equal to one ephah; and the prophet Zechariah saw a woman sitting in an ephah, which Jesus was perhaps alluding to in his parable.⁸

What could the parable mean? Curiously, the ordinary matter of the universe is based upon threes, as I discussed earlier in this letter. Atoms are made up primarily of three components – protons, neutrons and electrons. And protons and neutrons themselves consist of three quarks.

I would suggest that the “three seah measures” represent quarks within the protons and neutrons, or else protons, neutrons and electrons; or perhaps both. The “leaven” represents the forces that caused the universe to expand, while also holding the elements together and turning them into something useful; because nobody eats flour in its ordinary form, but it becomes useful to us once it has been turned into dough and then baked into bread to sustain life.

In other words, as well as any spiritual application his disciples might have discerned, I would suggest that Jesus was also referring to the beginning of ordinary matter, and implying that the universe expanded, in the same way that a mass of dough expands to become a loaf of bread due to the leaven or yeast in it. This would be consistent with Jesus being a man who was also somehow there from the beginning.

In addition, these two parables are also remarkably good analogies for organic growth and biology. The first parable accurately describes the growth of a human being, from a tiny seed to a fully grown person. The word for “seeds” in Greek is *spermaton*, from which we derive the English word “sperm,” and the word for “smallest” is *mikroteron*, from which we derive words such as microbe and microscopic. Relative to our size later in life, we are indeed microscopic to begin with, and grow into tall trees that reach metaphorically into heaven.

Intriguingly, the Greek word translated “tree” in this parable is *dendron*, which is also the name of the branching part of a neuron that directs signals toward the cell body. Our nervous system and brain both consist of these type of cells. The word translated “mustard” is *sinapeos*, similar to the word “synapse” which describes the part of a neuron that passes electrical or chemical signals.

The second parable could also serve as a good analogy for how proteins are encoded in DNA. “Enzymes” are a particular class of proteins that are essential for dramatically speeding up chemical reactions. Without them, life wouldn’t work. The word “enzyme” comes from the Greek *enzymos* meaning leavened or fermented.

Proteins such as enzymes are encrypted in an organism’s DNA, and intriguingly, the Greek word used in Jesus’ parable for “hides in” is *enekrupsen*, which is where the word “encrypt” comes from in English, meaning to encode. Proteins are encrypted in sets of three nucleotides until the sequence is transcribed and translated, just as the woman hides the leaven in three seah measures until the whole is fermented.

Finally, it is intriguing that the first parable involved a man, and the second involved a woman. The word for “woman” here in Greek is *gune*, which is quite close to our modern word for “gene.” If the woman also represents a gene, it would explain why the parable is ambiguous, in that we can read it as if the woman herself hides in three seah measures. Genes are also encrypted in, or hidden in, sets of three nucleotides.

This is similar to how the woman is portrayed in Zechariah’s prophecy, which Jesus may have been alluding to. She is sitting in the ephah, which is a measure of flour. However, in that prophecy she is described as “The Wickedness.” If the woman in Jesus’ parable represents a gene, this begs the question as to what could be done to genes that would be considered wicked.

This is one way in which “the word of God is living,” as the author of the book of Hebrews puts it.⁹ An idea or meaning can be hidden until there is a need for it, such as the idea of nuclear power, which I have already suggested is implied in Ezekiel chapter 10, or of genetics, as in the case here. These warnings would not have been necessary, before the technology to do them became available.

Now, if these interpretations sound far-fetched – after all, how could parables about mustard seeds and leaven possibly relate to cosmology or genetics? – immediately after giving us the parable of the woman and the leaven, Matthew explained the reason why Jesus spoke in parables: **“All these things Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables, and he would not speak to them without a parable, so that what was spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled, saying: ‘I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things kept hidden from the founding of the world.’”**¹⁰

Jesus was revealing God’s purpose in regard to the “Kingdom of God.” At the same time, what has been kept more hidden for thousands of years, than the very nature of the cosmos (the Greek here translated as “the world” is *kosmou*, from which

we derive the word cosmos), and also the genetic basis of life itself, which humans now have the power to alter?

Jesus also said, in reference to hidden things: **“There is nothing hidden that will not become clear, neither concealed which will not become known and will come out into the open. Be careful, then, how you hear. For whoever has, to him it will be given. But whoever does not have, even what he supposes he has will be taken away from him.”**¹¹

What has been more concealed than the very nature of the universe itself, or the biological secrets of life? And who would be in the best position to reveal these things to us, than one who was “in the beginning” with God? No wonder Jesus says: “Be careful, then, how you hear.” Are Jesus’ parables just nice sounding illustrations we can dismiss? Or do they come from someone who had much deeper insight into the nature of reality than us?

The point here is, these two small parables are in complete harmony with modern cosmology, biology and genetics. And so, I propose that Jesus intended them to have a double meaning. The first meaning was for his initial audience of apostles and disciples, who would interpret them in a spiritual way, because they didn’t have any other choice.

The “kingdom of the heavens” would start off small – almost insignificant in its appearance and sown by one man who would die on our behalf – but would grow to become a large tree, the greatest of the vegetation. Unlike the kingdoms of the world, this kingdom’s growth would be hidden, not strikingly obvious, because it would grow in the midst of the world around it. At the same time, the kingdom would have an effect on the world, just as leaven ferments the dough and causes it to rise. These are, at least, how I read the spiritual sense of these parables.

However, in our skeptical times, when people find it hard to believe the idea that Jesus could be the Son of God, let alone have been “in the beginning” with God somehow, Jesus also hid a deeper meaning, meant to be understood only once we had sufficient knowledge of the universe and the molecular biological processes of life. Perhaps it was also a subtle warning about the dangers of tampering too much with such foundations. The overall message seems to encourage scientific discovery, but also suggests we be very careful when playing God in either the atomic or the genetic realm, because these are closer to “the kingdom of the heavens.”

This is why Jesus also said: **“The kingdom of the heavens is like treasure hidden in the field, which on finding a man hides, and from the joy of it, goes away and sells everything he has and buys that field.”**¹² When we find such hidden treasures in the Bible, we realize it’s not just the treasure itself that is valuable, but also the location of the treasure. No wonder the apostle Peter said that even “angels are desiring to peer” into these things.¹³

Jesus spoke these parables also for us, so we could know and believe he really was “in the beginning” with God, because he told us what the universe was like, a few

thousand years before cosmologists were able to, along with the microscopic workings of a cell.

He told us that the “kingdom of the heavens,” the universe itself, was like a tiny seed which grew to become like a large tree in which to dwell. By analogy we can also deduce that it was leavened somehow, or made to expand quickly, the “leaven” being hidden with the protons, neutrons and electrons, and perhaps also the three quarks making up protons and neutrons, until the whole, the cosmos, was fermented, like a loaf that has been baked and prepared.

In parable form, he also told us about biological growth, the typical human starting out as the winner of a tiny sperm race, a microscopic seed, and growing into what could be compared to a tree consisting of a nervous system and brain, both made up of neurons with synapses and dendrons. He also told us about how a gene is encoded, encrypted within sets of three nucleotides, along with enzymes for dramatically speeding things up, so that the whole machinery of life can be built.

No wonder Jesus completed his parables by saying, **“Every writer instructed in the kingdom of the heavens is like a man, a householder, who brings out of his treasure things new and old.”** ¹⁴

In previous chapters I showed you how quantum and particle physics, and various biological mechanisms including DNA, the four DNA bases, the processes of transcription and translation, and how ribosomes work, have been hidden in plain sight in Hebrew scriptures, within very tight clusters that simply cannot be down to chance. And I have more to show you in the second part of this book.

In this chapter I have shown you how, in just two small parables, Jesus has given us a new line of evidence to show that he really was “in the beginning” with God. These are all part of the “things new and old.” They have been given to you, to help you come to realize that the God of Israel, YHWH, is the God of the heavens and the earth, and that Jesus Christ really was and is the Son of God.

1 John 1:1-3. **2** John 8:58,59; 9:9. **3** Exodus 3:14, *King James Version*. **4** Matthew 13:31,32. **5** Isaiah 66:1. **6** Genesis 1:1. **7** Matthew 13:33. **8** Zechariah 5:6-8. **9** Hebrews 4:12. **10** Matthew 13:34,35. **11** Luke 8:17,18. **12** Matthew 13:44. **13** 1 Peter 1:12. **14** Matthew 13:52.

46. The Plan

Since I have spent many of the previous chapters dealing with skeptical arguments, let me put this mode of writing aside for a short while, and permit me now to describe what I perceive to be God's overall plan for humans, while also addressing some of the issues that arise from the plan. Of course, you are free to believe or disbelieve whatever you want. What follows is simply my take on God's plan as I see it.

In the beginning, God created humans in his image, which meant we were unique from the rest of his flesh and blood creation. We have the capacity for reason, reflection and deep thought. We have a conscience and an inherent sense of justice. We can cultivate values that go beyond immediate selfish concerns, and we have advanced language skills that allow us to share and accumulate knowledge. We care about things above and beyond survival and reproduction. We are creators, designers and artists, always looking for meaning.

The purpose of human life was simple enough. It was to enjoy life, which meant taking delight in their God-given abilities, such as their capacity to communicate and commune both with God and their fellow creatures, to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and to share life with their offspring.

However, humans lacked wisdom. They didn't know right from wrong. They didn't know what good and bad was, except in a very simplistic way. All they had to go on was their own feelings, and a command given to them by an outside source. Without knowing any better, they followed what felt and sounded good at the time, and experienced what many Christians call "The Fall."

What this meant in practical terms was, God let humans go their own way for a time, so they could gain the knowledge and wisdom they desired. But this meant experiencing both the good and the bad for themselves.

In a sense, the Fall explains three of the Four Big Questions: Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Why is there suffering? What does the future hold?

We are here because God created humans in his image, in his desire to share life with other intelligent creatures.

The purpose of life in general is to live. This is, of course, a tautology, but I think it became true after the Fall. Since God allowed humans to go their own way, I don't think he set the life course for people in general. Instead, it was up to each person to find their own purpose, especially if they chose to live without God. Life really did become more about survival and reproduction, which is not what God had intended, but was the path humans chose for themselves in their quest to know good and bad.

There is suffering because humans in general decided to go their own way, separate from God. Life became harder because they wanted to know both good and bad. This would also have an impact on the environment. Independent humans can't expect God to maintain a perfect world for them, because then they would be dependent on God. We can't demand independence from God, and yet expect him to maintain a perfect environment for us.

I think the Fall also indirectly answers the fourth question about what the future holds, because this alienation from God wasn't meant to be a permanent state of affairs.

Humans in general had to go through both good and bad times, in order to acquire knowledge of good and bad. God could have kept them in a permanent paradise, but then how would they learn bad? How would they know right from wrong? Even if God taught them those things directly, humans would have no way of knowing whether God's way was actually right or not. Therefore, his initial method of teaching them was to allow them to learn for themselves. But once this has been achieved in full, God can permanently remove the causes of suffering.

This would explain the very first prophecy in the Bible. Speaking to the serpent, God said: "I will put animosity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." ¹ This seems a little excessive if God was speaking merely to a serpent. It makes much more sense if God was indicating a long-range struggle between the forces of good and bad, with good ultimately triumphing over the bad.

However, since humans had no direct guidance from God in earlier times, selfishness and lawlessness gradually consumed intelligent creatures to the point where the Earth itself was eventually ruined. This resulted in God bringing about a global Flood.

Did this mean God's creation was faulty? Not at all. It shows that unrestrained free will and selfishness eventually consumes itself, because the Earth was already ruined by living things even before God pronounced a Flood. The purpose of the Flood was to preserve alive what was good in humans.

Noah and his family brought a new beginning, a new era, and what could be described as a peace treaty between God and all living things, in which God promised never to bring about a Flood again. He still allowed humans to go their own way for the most part, but this time he set some minimum standards. For example, human life was to be treated as sacred, and murder would be avenged.

Furthermore, God would intervene to a limited extent, to restrain evil and as a warning example to those doing evil. The destruction of Sodom for the crime of gang rape, which involved all of the men of the city, and the Canaanites for their practice of child sacrifice, are two examples. This does not make God a hypocrite. Just as a human judge can sentence someone to death for murder, God was wearing his judicial hat in these matters.

However, I think God's aim was also to give humans better alternatives, so they could choose good over bad more easily. This would take time, and it would involve a steep learning curve for humans. To achieve this, God needed to plant a seed, but it would take time to grow and bear fruit.

The next stage of the divine plan was to create a nation that would belong to YHWH, and that would be distinct from all other nations. God chose Abraham for this

purpose, whose offspring would inherit many blessings, and all the nations would bless themselves through his offspring.

His son Isaac inherited those promises, and so did Isaac's son Jacob, who was renamed Israel. As we have already seen, part of Jacob's life served as an extended metaphor for DNA and various processes involved in sustaining life on Earth.

Jacob's twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. YHWH maneuvered events so Jacob's offspring would move to Egypt; and a few hundred years later, after they had grown and multiplied, YHWH brought them out of Egypt with signs and wonders. Under the leadership of Moses they were brought back to the Promised Land, the land of the Canaanites.

The nation of Israel was given a distinctive law covenant that set them apart as a nation, and made them holy to God, but they often failed to live up to it. Again, we might ask, does this make God's creation faulty?

Not at all. Israel's struggle to obey God's law highlights the drawback with law in general, whether human or divine. For example, most humans probably agree, at least in principle, with the divine injunction not to commit adultery, which is one of the Ten Commandments. When standing before their future partner and saying their vows, they have every intention of being faithful.

It's also easy to stay faithful when we are flush with the hormones involved in being and falling in love. But love isn't simply about hormones or sex. These things can enhance the feeling of love, but they don't define love.

We speak of true love as coming, metaphorically, from the heart. We know it as a sense of desire, of passion, of devotion, of consideration, of empathy, of self-sacrifice. Love cannot be compelled or commanded. It is a product of free will.

Yet paradoxically, Moses told the nation of Israel to love God. He said: "Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God is one YHWH. And you are to love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your being. And these words which I am teaching you today shall be on your heart." ²

The history of Israel, as recorded in the Bible, demonstrates that law does not create love. A person can love law, just as a person can love another person, object or thing, but law cannot compel someone to love God or anybody else.

Moses could tell Israel to love God, but he couldn't compel them to do so, and they often forgot God many times. This is why, though the prophets, Israel was often compared to an adulterous wife.

Maybe part of Israel's problem was that they couldn't really get close to God at a personal level. In the wilderness, God's presence was represented by a pillar of cloud and fire. In the Temple in Jerusalem it was a cloud of glory, but it was confined to the inner compartment called the Most Holy, which only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year.

This emphasized the holiness of God, but also made it hard for people to relate to him, and thus to love him. Closeness fuels love, and so there was both a literal and a metaphorical curtain of separation between the people and their God.

I think this was deliberate, to make a clear distinction between this and the next stage of God's plan, which would involve much greater intimacy with God. In the next stage, God would send his Son to literally turn up on their doorstep, and this would be a test for the nation.

Now, if an inspector is due to check some aspect of your business, and tells you the exact time and manner in which he will come, you will make things perfect for the time of inspection, even though things may have fallen short at other times.

This is why God didn't tell them exactly how or when he would inspect his people. He did, however, give them plenty of clues. God's inspector would be a prophet like Moses. But in what way? This is a riddle God left unanswered for a long time.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God made Israel several promises. He promised to do something new for them. He promised to clear up the way before him, and to reveal his own glory to them. He promised good news for Jerusalem.³

He promised them a son who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. This is an unusual description if he was to be merely an ordinary man. He would also sit on David's throne forever. How could any ordinary man do this? ⁴

God promised them a servant who would bring forth judgment "according to truth," and "the islands will wait for his law." ⁵ This one would be given "for a covenant of the people, for a light of Gentiles" and also be YHWH's "salvation to the end of the earth." ⁶

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promised Israel a "new covenant," different from the one he made with them when they came out of Egypt. God himself would write it on their hearts. But he didn't tell them directly how this new covenant would come into being.⁷

When they grew jaded, the people of Israel asked God, "Where is the God of judgment?" God responded by saying, through the prophet Malachi: "Look! I am sending my messenger, and he prepares the way before me; and suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his Temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight. Look! He is coming, says YHWH of hosts. But who will endure the day of his coming?" ⁸

The Jewish man Yeshua, whom we know as Jesus Christ, was the fulfillment of those promises. He was "the Lord" and "the messenger of the covenant." He was their inspector, to see if the nation of Israel was fit for purpose.

He was the messenger of God's covenant with Abraham, because through Jesus' blood all the nations can bless themselves. He was the messenger of the Law covenant, because he showed the nation of Israel how to write it upon their hearts. They claimed to delight in it, yet failed to live up to it. It was etched in their minds, but not in their hearts as Moses had told them to do.

In particular, Jesus was also messenger of a new covenant, one that is based on love and written in hearts. By his death he was literally given "for a covenant of the

people,” because his blood initiated this new covenant between God and all people who choose to accept it, both Jews and non-Jews.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God calls this one “my servant Israel, in whom I will show my splendor.”⁹ Jacob was one man, God’s servant, when God renamed him Israel, and he became the human founder of the nation of Israel. Jesus Christ was also one man, God’s servant, and he became the founder of the Christian faith, named after Christ, which means “anointed one.”

This is why the gospel writer Matthew applied the following scripture to Jesus: “When Israel was a boy, I loved him; and out of Egypt I called my son.”¹⁰ Jesus was the personification of Israel, and Israel was the personification of God’s son. This is also why Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness after his baptism. He was living out what Israel went through after they came through the Red Sea; except they had to spend 40 years in the wilderness because they didn’t listen to God, a year for every day they had spied out the land of Canaan.

Now, the heart of Jesus’ law is actually very simple: love God, and love your neighbor. This is what makes it a “new” covenant in contrast with the old. The new one is simple, and based on love.

But people can’t even begin to love God unless they first know him. This was part of Jesus’ purpose, so that people could truly come to know God. This is why Jesus said: “The one who has seen me has seen the Father.”¹¹ In other words, if you really want to know God, know Jesus, because he reflects the Father.

Fortunately for us as humans, the bar for salvation to life was fairly low. Jesus said: “Most truly I say to you, that the one hearing my word and believing the one who sent me has everlasting life, and is not coming into judgment but has stepped out of death into life.”¹² The words here translated as “most truly” are literally the words “amen, amen.” Jesus was uttering a profound and sacred truth. When a person believes in Christ, they are no longer alienated from God but become part of his family again, and have “stepped out of death into life.”

At the same time, Jesus raised the bar for us all. He taught people to forgive others, turn the other cheek, stop judging, love their enemies, and be perfect. These are pretty high standards, and I would say they even go against our own human inclinations in some instances. But I think this is also the point. When we strive to meet these standards, even when we inevitably fail, they make us aware that our inclinations are not those of perfect people but of imperfect, fallen ones. And besides, if Jesus really was the Son of God, what standard could we expect him to set, other than a perfect one?

For those who heard Jesus, the bar was set even higher. They were to give up their possessions, and God would give them what they needed. Jesus said to them: “Fear not, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom. Sell your belongings and give gifts to the poor. Make yourselves purses that do not wear out, a treasure in the heavens that never fails, where no thief gets near and no moth decays. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”¹³

They were to inherit in the coming age much more than they had given up in this one. Also, by setting the bar high for them, he was also ensuring they would be similar to him, and more spiritually than materially minded. Certainly it seems that the early disciples took these words to heart, because in the account in Acts, we learn that “all the believers were in the same place and they had all things in common. And they sold their possessions and properties and divided them to all, according to what each person needed.” ¹⁴

It is obvious that many Christians today fall short of the high standards Jesus set. The truth is, all of us, believers or not, are works in progress. When we put faith in Jesus, we step over from death to life from God’s point of view, and this faith based on knowledge allows our hearts to become more inclined towards good rather than bad, even if perfection takes time, often a long time. This is part of the growth process, just as a seed doesn’t become a beautiful flower or a mighty tree overnight.

Now, many of Jesus’ contemporaries knew God in an academic sense. The Jewish leaders were well versed in scripture. They knew God with their mind, but not with their heart. For this reason, Jesus became a stumbling block to the nation of Israel. Isaiah wrote: “He will become a sanctuary; but a stone of striking and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel.” ¹⁵ As a result, he was “despised in soul” and became “the one whom the nation abhorred.” ¹⁶

It was necessary for Jesus to be put to death, to fulfill the prophecy of the Suffering Servant, which said: “From restraint and judgment he was taken, and who will think about his generation? For he was severed from the land of the living.” And again, “he poured out his soul even to death, and was counted with the transgressors, and carried the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” ¹⁷

The book of Zechariah even describes the manner of his death. The people would “look to me whom they pierced, and they will wail over him as the wailing for the only son.” ¹⁸

For the world as a whole, the meaning and purpose of Jesus Christ is summed up by the apostle John: “For God so loves the world that he gives his only-begotten Son, that everyone believing in him will not perish, but can have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world that he should judge the world, but that he may save the world through him.” ¹⁹

However, for the nation of Israel, Jesus was also a test, to inspect them and reveal what was in their heart. YHWH had asked through the prophet Malachi, “who will endure the day of his coming? And who will stand when he appears? For he is as the fire of a refiner, and as the soap of a cleaner.” However, God said he would draw out “a treasured possession” from his own people, and would “spare them, as when a man spares his own son who serves him.” ²⁰

In Zechariah, we have a similar theme. Shortly after they “look to me whom they pierced,” the author wrote, “in all the land, says YHWH, two parts in it will be cut off and expire, and the third part will remain in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested.” ²¹

The book of Daniel also contains a similar prophecy: "An anointed one will be cut off, and nothing for him. And the city and the sanctuary will be destroyed by the people of a prince to come, and end in flooding; and until the end, war and desolations have been decided." ²²

Each of these prophecies have been examined in more detail in "Letter To The Jews." ²³ The three prophecies are essentially the same, but contain different details. The first says that God's servant would be the Lord and messenger of the covenant. The second says he would be pierced, but people would look to him. The third says he would be an "anointed one," which is what "Christ" means, who would be "cut off." Each of them foretold destruction on the land afterwards.

These prophecies were fulfilled in the Roman war against Judea, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, coming upon the same generation in which Jesus lived and died.

However, God also gave the people plenty of warning through his ancient prophets, and also through Jesus Christ and his disciples, about how to escape those events. The purpose of the destruction was to clear out the wicked, but it also served to reinforce the identity of God's Son.

In the long interval before Israel would be restored again, Jesus Christ would become YHWH's "salvation to the end of the earth." Jesus himself said to his disciples: "You will be witnesses of me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." ²⁴ And speaking to the people of his day, he said: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, but you being cast out." ²⁵

The stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are told in Jewish scriptures, but to the rest of the world they have also become part of the Christian heritage in what is often referred to as the "Old Testament."

Jesus continued: "And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the Kingdom of God. And look! they are the last who will be first, and they are the first who will be last." ²⁶

Here, Jesus was alluding to the words of Isaiah. After describing God's servant who would become YHWH's "salvation to the end of the earth," Isaiah describes the followers of this servant: "On the roads they will graze, and in all the hills their pastures. They will not go hungry, and they will not thirst, and scorching wind and sun will not strike them. For the one showing compassion to them will lead them, and guide them to springs of water. And I will make all my mountains into a road, and my highways will be raised up. Look! These will come from far away, and look! These from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Sinim." ²⁷

These would become a great crowd of people from all nations, tribes and languages, led by God's servant Jesus Christ. ²⁸ The nation of Israel was given the first opportunity to become part of the Kingdom of God, and while many accepted Jesus, the nation as a whole rejected him. He became "the one whom the nation abhorred."

And so the first became last. The nation of Israel went to the back of the queue as it were, while the Gentiles who were last in the queue became first.

However, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD did not mean God had forgotten or completely abandoned Israel. After describing the great crowd of people from the nations, the prophet Isaiah goes on to describe the city of Jerusalem as Zion lying desolate. Pictured as a woman, the prophet Isaiah has her say, "YHWH has abandoned me, and my lord has forgotten me." But YHWH speaks kindly to her: "Can a woman forget her nursing baby, that she should not have compassion for the son of her womb? Even they may forget, but I will not forget you." ²⁹

When Zion sees her sons returning to her, she asks in surprise: "Who has fathered these for me, since I am bereaved of children and am barren, exiled and taken away? Who has raised these? Look! I was left all alone. Where did these come from?" ³⁰

God replies to her: "Look! I will lift up my hand to the Gentiles, and raise my banner to the people; and they will bring your sons in their arms, and carry your daughters upon their shoulders. Kings will become your foster fathers, and their princesses will be your wet nurses." ³¹

As I have talked about elsewhere, even as far back as in Moses' day God had promised to restore the nation of Israel once they returned to him. "If you are dispersed to the end of the heavens, from there YHWH your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. YHWH your God will bring you into the land your fathers inherited, and you will inherit it." ³²

The manner of Israel's restoration was also foretold: "Will a land be brought to birth in one day, or a nation be born in one moment of time? For as soon as Zion went into labor, she gave birth to her sons." ³³

The modern nation of Israel came into existence on May 14, 1948 in literally one day and one moment of time. The indication here is that this was ultimately YHWH's doing, and another stage of God's plan.

But what was the point of restoring Israel again, especially after such a long time? First of all, it was to fulfill the promises YHWH had made to their ancestors, to bring them back. Unlike many humans, God keeps his promises!

Second, it serves as an indicator of time. Jesus said, in reference to the things that would come upon his generation: "For these are days of vengeance, for all the things written to be fulfilled. But woe to the pregnant ones and to the suckling ones in those days, for there will be great distress upon the land, and indignation on this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled by the nations, until the times of the nations are fulfilled." ³⁴

The trampling of Jerusalem by the nations would not continue forever, but would last "until the times of the nations are fulfilled." By using the word "trampled," Jesus was here referring to the prophet Daniel, who saw a vision that began with Alexander the Great defeating the Persians, and then the holy place being trampled

for 2,300 days.³⁵ If we measure the time from when Alexander crossed the Hellespont to defeat the Persians in 334BC, to the time when Jerusalem was restored to Israel in 1967AD, there are 2,300 years.

The prophet Hosea also indicated that the restoration of Israel would mark a special time. He wrote: "For many days the sons of Israel will dwell without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without a monument, and without a sacred vest and household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek YHWH their God, and David their king, and they will be in awe of YHWH and his goodness in the last days." ³⁶

The restoration of Israel indicated a period called "the last days." A little later, the same prophet has the people of Israel speaking to one another: "Come, and let us return to YHWH, for he has torn to pieces, but he will heal us. He struck us, but he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, and we will live before him." ³⁷

After some 2,000 years the nation of Israel was restored. But why do these prophecies talk about days, if they supposedly mean years or an even longer period of time, such as a thousand years?

I suppose the best answer is that God wanted to conceal the actual length of time. After all, two thousand years is a very long time from a human perspective, and human patience expires much faster than this. However, it also highlights that God's perspective is very different from ours. To him, these lengths of time are like just a few days. As Moses wrote regarding God: "For a thousand years in your eyes are as yesterday when it has passed, and a watch in the night." ³⁸

The third reason to restore Israel was to teach them a subtle point about the nature of their messiah. Many of their teachers say the nation of Israel itself is the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah. But in that case, the nation of Israel died, and disappeared for almost two thousand years, only to suddenly return again in the last days. In the ultimate irony, the nation of Israel set the pattern for what the Suffering Servant would actually do. The return of Israel is a pattern for Jesus' death and resurrection, and also for the return of Christ.

The fourth reason God restored Israel was so he could demonstrate his own power, although not necessarily using that nation's own strength, to prevent them from boasting in their own power.

The prophet Ezekiel foretold an invasion of a restored Israel in "the final part of the days." Speaking of a mysterious entity called "Gog of the land of Magog," the prophet Ezekiel writes:

"After many days you will be roused. In the final part of the years you will come into the land restored from the sword, gathered out of many peoples onto the mountains of Israel, which had been constantly deserted; and she is brought forth from the peoples, and they all dwell in security." ³⁹

YHWH continues: "You will come upon my people Israel, like the cloud covering the land. It will happen in the final part of the days. And I will bring you upon my land

so that the nations will know me, when I sanctify myself by you before their eyes, O Gog.”⁴⁰

How does God make himself known? “In my jealousy, in the fire of my fury, if I do not speak on that day, there will be a great earthquake on the ground of Israel. And the fishes of the sea, and the flying creatures of the heavens, and the wild beasts of the field, and every creature that moves on the ground, and every human who is on the surface of the ground, will quake before me; and the mountains will be thrown down, and the cliffs will fall, and every wall will fall to the earth.” And then, “they will know that I am YHWH.”⁴¹

This, I hope, will provide sufficient proof for skeptics and atheists about the existence of God. But apart from demonstrating his existence, this astonishing and hopefully unrepeatable event serves another purpose, which is to make both Israel and the nations aware of why Israel once again exists as a nation.

YHWH says: “And the house of Israel will know that I, YHWH, am their God from that day and beyond. And the Gentiles will know that the house of Israel went into exile for their iniquity, because they were unfaithful to me. Therefore I concealed my face from them, and I gave them into the hand of their enemies, and all of them fell by the sword. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions I did to them, and I concealed my face from them.”⁴²

This is why the nation of Israel can’t be the Suffering Servant talked about by the prophet Isaiah, for that servant is righteous both before and after his death, and suffers because he is righteous; but the nation of Israel went into exile for its own iniquity and unfaithfulness, as YHWH says here.

Now, Christians say that Jesus Christ is the King of Israel, but not only of Israel, but also the world. He is also the Son of God. He was raised from the dead and lifted up to heaven, and will return in what Christians call the “second coming,” to become king over the Earth, presumably in a more literal sense. This is the grand climax to God’s plan.

But why do it this way? Why not just get everything done in the first coming? Two comings, with a two thousand year gap in-between, might seem a somewhat convoluted way of doing things. Even if Jesus had to die and be resurrected, why not just have him become king and conquer his enemies shortly afterwards?

This is one of the main reasons why the nation of Israel in general rejected Jesus the first time round. He didn’t do the things that kings are supposed to do. Kings are supposed to conquer their enemies and reign in glory, not be humiliated and die.

However, an explanation can be found in Israel’s own scriptures, although it is not explicit. God often uses patterns and parallels as a way of teaching, rather than direct prophecies.

Some of the key figures in the Bible are actually patterns for Christ. For example, the story of Joseph the son of Israel is also, in many ways, the story of Christ. Joseph was Israel’s beloved son. His father loved him more than any of his other sons, and made him a distinctive robe, which some have interpreted as a coat of many

colors. Either way, his distinctive clothing would have made him stand out. Joseph also had dreams, indicating he would be ruler over his brothers, and even over his own father and mother.⁴³

For these reasons, his brothers despised him, threw him into a pit and sold him into slavery for 20 pieces of silver. They told their father Israel he was dead, showing him Joseph's garment dipped in blood. This corresponds to the first coming of Christ. From Israel's point of view, Jesus was just a false prophet or dreamer who died, betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, with his disciples making much of his linen cloths.

However, YHWH was with Joseph, and raised him up to become Lord over Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Later, during a seven year famine across the Earth, people came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, and even his brothers came down, but they didn't recognize him, even though he recognized them.

In the second year of the famine, after testing them further, he revealed himself to them, and they were utterly astonished, unable to speak. Here was their brother, whom they had despised and sold for twenty pieces of silver, and whom Israel presumed to be dead, actually alive and Lord over the Gentiles. But Joseph loved them and wept over them, and told them not to be upset or angry with themselves over what they had done to him, because it was actually God who had sent him before them, to preserve and deliver Israel.

Joseph's story was a pattern for how Israel's messiah would also be despised and rejected at first, but would later return to them in glory in their hour of need; and not only Israel's need, but also that of the whole world, because the seven years of famine fell upon the whole Earth. Joseph revealing himself to Israel is a parallel for the second coming of Christ.

Even King David, the first righteous king of Israel, foreshadowed their messiah; for David was anointed as ruler by the prophet Samuel, and then for many years David was despised by Israel while Saul remained its ruler. David wrote many psalms, but it's clear he felt despised, and even alluded to death many times.

For example, he wrote: "My strength is dried up like a piece of pottery, and my tongue sticks to my palate; and you lay me in the dust of death."⁴⁴ And again: "I can count all my bones, while they look and stare at me. They divide up my garments among them, and they cast lots over my clothing."⁴⁵

And again: "But I am a worm, and not a man; a reproach of men and despised by people. All those seeing me mock me. They sneer, they shake their heads: 'He trusted in YHWH, let him rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.'"⁴⁶ Also: "I have become a reproach to them. When they look upon me, they shake their heads."⁴⁷ And yet this was God's anointed one, and a forerunner of the messiah!

Christians quote verses like these, because they also describe the circumstances of Jesus' death. And while this is true, the more important point here is that King David's life was also a parallel to that of Christ.

When David was first anointed as king by God's prophet, he then became despised by the nation of Israel and its ruler Saul, and became as good as dead. This

corresponds to Christ's first coming. After Jesus was baptized and anointed by God's Spirit, his ministry started and he began to be despised, particularly by the rulers, and he was literally put to death in ways described metaphorically by David.

Coincidentally, or perhaps not coincidentally at all, one of the greatest opponents of the teaching about Jesus was a Pharisee named Saul, who hounded Jesus' followers in much the same way as King Saul hounded David. After his encounter with Christ, Saul gradually became known as the apostle Paul.

After being anointed, David spent much of his time hidden from Saul. Only many years later did David return and become king over Israel, which would correspond with Christ's second coming.

In terms of prophecies, I have already quoted the one about a son being born to them who would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." It also says, "Of the increase of his rulership and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and support it with judgment and justice, from now on and forever. The zeal of YHWH of hosts will do this." ⁴⁸

If his rulership increases continually, then by definition it must start off small and grow ever larger, but it would take some time to grow. Also, how could one man rule over a kingdom "from now on and forever"? He would have to be immortal. This would explain why he could be called "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father." If Jesus was resurrected and became immortal, he would certainly qualify for the role.

Elsewhere, the prophet Isaiah also alludes to two comings. In the first coming, Isaiah writes: "Look! My Lord YHWH will come with power, and his arm will rule for him. Look! His reward is with him, and the wage he pays is before him. Like a shepherd, he will feed his flock. With his arm, he will gather the lambs, and carry them in his bosom, conducting the ones being nursed." ⁴⁹

Here, YHWH's "arm" comes and acts like a shepherd. And "his reward is with him, and the wage he pays is before him." But not everyone recognizes YHWH's arm, for Isaiah later asks: "Who has believed our report? And to whom is the arm of YHWH revealed?" ⁵⁰ He then describes the Suffering Servant, but this one is such an unusual figure that not everyone would believe the report about him, which is exactly the case with the skeptic and atheist about Jesus.

However, later on, Isaiah describes a second coming. YHWH says to Zion: "Look! YHWH has proclaimed to the ends of the earth: 'Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Look! Your salvation is coming. Look! His reward is with him, and the wage he pays is before him.'" ⁵¹

We are asked to "look!" three times, which is perhaps an indication to look deeper. The prophecy doesn't name the form of God's salvation that is coming, but there is a clue in the phrase, "his reward is with him, and the wage he pays is before him." This exact phrase occurs only twice in the whole book of Isaiah.

The first time it was used, it described YHWH's arm coming like a shepherd to gather and feed his flock, which would correspond with the first coming of Christ. The

second time the phrase is used, it is for the salvation of Zion from her enemies. This would correspond to the second coming of Christ.

This is why Isaiah can say YHWH has already proclaimed it to the ends of the Earth. Prior to the second coming, the name of Jesus Christ, YHWH's means of salvation, has already gone out to the ends of the Earth, so the nations can point Israel to their Messiah.

Now, shortly after saying "his reward is with him, and the wage he pays is before him" for the second time, Isaiah sees an intriguing vision of someone dressed in glorious clothing, marching with great power. Isaiah is so baffled that he has to ask, "Who is this?" The cryptic reply is, "It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty in saving." Isaiah asks him: "Why is your clothing red, and your garments like one treading in the winepress?" The man replies: "I have trodden the winepress alone, and there was no man with me from the peoples." And again: "For the day of vengeance is in my heart, and the year of my redeemed ones has come." ⁵²

If this is Christ, then no wonder "there was no man with me from the peoples." Christians aren't meant to fight, but to turn the other cheek. And if Jews do not believe in this figure, they will also not fight with him. Therefore, he has to do it without the aid of any man. There is also parallel prophecy earlier on in Isaiah that explains what this is all about. "It is the day of vengeance of YHWH, and the year of repayments for the cause of Zion." ⁵³

Christians are in no doubt as to the identity of the man Isaiah saw, because the book of Revelation alludes to the same prophecies. It identifies him as the Word of God; and the gospel of John has already explained that Jesus in human form was formerly the Word in heaven. ⁵⁴

The book of Revelation says: "I saw heaven opened, and look! a white horse, and the one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and battles." And again: "He is clothed in a garment dipped in blood, and he is called by the name The Word of God." Also, "he treads the winepress of the fury and indignation of God the Almighty. And on his garment and on his thigh, he has a name written: 'King of kings and Lord of lords.'" ⁵⁵

These prophecies are all likely referring to the same event – the "day of vengeance of YHWH, and the year of repayments for the cause of Zion." The revealing of the Word of God from heaven is the culmination of a great war in which God's enemies have been gathered to fight against God.

But how is this even possible? How can mere humans fight against God? Presumably they do this by attacking Israel and Jerusalem, because other prophecies also suggest the same thing. For example, Zechariah contains a remarkable prophecy that has already come true in many ways.

YHWH says: "Look! I am making Jerusalem a bowl of shivering to all the surrounding peoples, and they will also be against Judah in the siege against Jerusalem. And it will be in that day, that I will make Jerusalem a burdensome stone

for all of the peoples. All of those burdened with it will certainly be cut to pieces, and all the nations of the earth will be gathered against her.”⁵⁶

This is already a reality. For some people, even the mere existence of the Jewish state is controversial, and it has already been to war several times with the surrounding nations. The city of Jerusalem itself also has its controversies. It was divided for about two decades after the founding of modern Israel; and between 688 and 691AD, one of Islam’s holiest places, the Dome of the Rock, was built on top of or near to Judaism’s holy place, where YHWH’s Temple once stood.

Incidentally, this was 1,260 years prior to the founding of modern Israel in 1948AD, which could also be related to prophecies in Daniel and Revelation involving the numbers 1,260, 1,290 and 1,335. Whatever the case, God has certainly made Jerusalem a bowl of shivering and a stone of burden to the people around her, enough for a potential war.

But how could “all the nations of the earth” be gathered against her? In one sense, all the nations already gather on a regular basis, in forums such as the United Nations in New York, which has often proposed resolutions against Israel. Nevertheless, it must also be a real war, for the prophecy says:

“Look! A day of YHWH is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. And I will gather all of the nations to Jerusalem for the war; and the city will be taken and the houses will be plundered and the women will be raped. And half of the city will go out into exile, and the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city.”⁵⁷

It’s intriguing that the city was already divided, into East and West Jerusalem, before the Six Day War in 1967AD. As part of the spoil of winning that war, Israel was able to reunite the city. Will the city be divided again along the same lines? Whatever the case, once these things have occurred, God steps in, perhaps somewhat literally:

“And YHWH will go forth and fight against those nations as in the day of his fight in the day of attack. And his feet will stand in that day on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem from the east, and the Mount of Olives will be split in half from east to west, to form a very great valley; and half of the mountain will move northward and half of it southward.”⁵⁸ Incidentally, the Mount of Olives already lies on a fault line running west to east, almost as if things have already been lined up in advance.

God seems intent on making that day a memorable one for the world. Zechariah says: “And YHWH my God will come, all of the holy ones with you. And it will be in that day, there will be no clear light. They will be congealed. And it will become one day that is known to YHWH, not day and not night, and it will be that at evening time it will become light.”⁵⁹

And just in case that day isn’t memorable enough, God rounds it off with this: “And this will be the blow with which YHWH will strike all of the peoples who fight against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot away while standing on their feet, and their eyes will rot away in their sockets, and their tongues will rot away in their mouths.”⁶⁰

If this sounds harsh, at least God has the courtesy of warning people well in advance, so they can stay as far away as possible when the time comes! This sounds

remarkably like the effect of a nuclear explosion, although if it took place near Jerusalem, I suppose it would defeat the purpose of YHWH defending that city, so perhaps it is another city that experiences YHWH's anger here. Either way, on that day you would probably not want to be in the place where all the nations unitedly gather against YHWH.

Perhaps the most direct prophecy about a "second coming" is the one in Daniel referring to a "son of man." Daniel writes: "I was watching in the visions of the night, and look! one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of the heavens; and to the Ancient of Days he approached, and they brought him before him. And to him were given dominion, glory and kingdom; and all the peoples, nations and language groups will serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom one that will not be destroyed." ⁶¹

During his ministry, Jesus constantly referred to himself as the "son of man," which was an allusion to Daniel's prophecy. God also referred to the prophet Ezekiel as "son of man." Ezekiel was the prophet who saw "visions of God" starting with a cloud and a fire taking hold of itself. Ezekiel was sent to God's people shortly before the destruction of their nation. Jesus may also have been referring to himself as "son of man" to indicate that he was performing the same role as Ezekiel.

Either way, the phrase "son of man" sealed Jesus' fate. When he was on trial, the high priest demanded: "I put you under oath by the living God to tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus replied: "You say this. Moreover I say to you, from now on, you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Immediately afterwards, "the high priest ripped his garments, saying that 'he has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look! Now you have heard his blasphemy, what do you think?' In answer they said: 'He is liable to death.'" ⁶²

If the prophecy in Daniel is true, how can a "son of man" come with the clouds of the heavens, and be brought before God? He would first of all need to be born as a man, and then he would have to be lifted up to heaven. This is exactly what is reported about Jesus on the Mount of Olives, after he had assigned his disciples to preach about him to the ends of the Earth.

The book of Acts says, "saying these things, while they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their view. And as they were looking intently into heaven as he went up, look! two men stood by them in white garments, who also said: 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, the one taken up from you into heaven, will come therefore in the same way as you saw him going into heaven.'" ⁶³

This might sound rather surreal, but I think it was done like this to teach the disciples an important lesson: Jesus departed on a cloud, and will come again on the clouds. The apostles Peter, James and John were given a vision of this some time earlier, along with God's voice, which strengthened their faith. ⁶⁴

In a prophecy about his return, Jesus also talked about the powers of the heavens being shaken, “and then the sign of the son of man in heaven will appear, and then all the tribes of the earth will grieve, and they will see the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”⁶⁵

Although I think Jesus was ultimately referring to his second coming here, a smaller version of this seems to have played out prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. According to Jewish historian Josephus, the stone launched by the Romans in their siege against Jerusalem was initially white, which could be seen because of its brightness by the watchmen, who cried out, “THE SON COMETH.” In this way, the people who would have been in the way avoided harm. The Romans therefore blackened the stone, so it couldn’t be discerned beforehand, and so it was able to destroy many of them in one blow.⁶⁶

It’s quite possible the Romans were mocking the Jews when they said “THE SON COMETH.” However, I think it also serves as a powerful metaphor for the discernment, or lack of it, on the part of Jesus’ generation. Jesus had warned them: “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by encamped armies, then know that the desolation of her has drawn near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains, and those in the midst of her depart into the country, and those in the country not enter into her.”⁶⁷

A person didn’t even need to be a Christian to heed those words. If they could simply accept Jesus was a prophet or even just a wise man, they would have fled Jerusalem before the tribulation started. They didn’t even need to believe Jesus, for their own prophet Daniel said the same thing and even gave an indication of roughly when it would occur. According to Josephus, just prior to the tribulation that would come upon Jerusalem, “many of the most eminent of the Jews swam away from the city, as from a ship when it was going to sink.”⁶⁸

Now, while those events indicated that Jesus was the “son of man,” they didn’t fulfill Daniel’s prophecy that “all the peoples, nations and language groups will serve him.” The nations still did their own thing. Therefore, the coming of the son of man on the clouds was still future, to be preceded by a clear sign. Perhaps Daniel himself saw the sign in his vision. Either way, I think it will be recognizable to all, and will cause the nations to grieve.

The return of the “son of man” marks the culmination of God’s plan, when this one is “given dominion, glory and kingdom.” But I still haven’t fully answered the question I posed before: why take so long?

Only God really knows the answer to that, but I suppose the long interval has given humans further opportunity to see the consequences of their own choices, to reap what they have sown, and to see both good and bad in every field of human endeavor, including the scientific and religious ones. We have seen some truly remarkable human achievements that are worthy of praise, but also some of the depths of depravity and evil. During this time, God has allowed people their own faith and opinions, including the faith that he does not exist.

Understandably, most people want good and not bad. But God has allowed both to exist, because if he only allowed good, we couldn't learn both good and bad. And if only good is available to us, we are no longer making a choice. Nevertheless, God's purpose is ultimately to bring an end to badness, and even reverse it.

For example, how can war ever end if there are always warmongers? If there are warmongers, there is always a risk of another world war. God's solution may seem ironic: he is going to cause the nations to go to war with him! But this is what they are already inclined to do, and so God's response is meant to be a dramatic showdown to prevent war in the future.

The nations may or may not like Christ being their king, but this is the only way the words of Isaiah in reference to the "last days," and that was quoted in part outside of the United Nations building in New York, can really be fulfilled:

"And in the last days, it will be that the mountain of the house of YHWH will be established in the height of the mountains, and lifted up above the hills, and all the nations will stream to it." And again: "Out of Zion law will go forth, and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem. And he will judge between the nations and correct many peoples; and they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning shears. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and neither will they learn war anymore."⁶⁹

Then there will be healing for the nations, both spiritually and physically. Revelation portrays a symbolic New Jerusalem about 12,000 stadia in length, width and height, which is about 2,220 kilometers, out of which flows a river of water of life, and trees of life, in which "the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."⁷⁰

The Hebrew prophets portray something similar, but give more realistic dimensions. The book of Zechariah, which contained the prophecy about the Mount of Olives being split, also says that "living waters will go forth from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern Sea," which is the Dead Sea, "and half of them toward the western Sea," which is the Mediterranean.⁷¹

Ezekiel says the same thing but goes into much more detail. The waters flow from underneath the Temple in Jerusalem. They flow through the Arabah region and enter into the Dead Sea, which will be miraculously revived. Trees will grow on both banks of the stream. "And their fruit will be for food and their leaf for healing." This will occur in territory assigned to the tribes of Israel.⁷²

Why are there major differences between the Jewish and Christian versions? Ezekiel is describing the physical reality of what will occur, while Revelation gives it a spiritual meaning. Both prophecies complement each other. Ezekiel's vision revolves around a physical Temple, and goes into exquisite detail about how it should be built, while Revelation says, "I did not see a temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty is its temple, and the Lamb."⁷³

This is not a contradiction, when we understand the symbology of the book of Revelation. The difference is, Christians do not need a temple, for they already know and believe God and Christ are their temple. However, the rest of the world hasn't

come to know this, and so God provides them with a physical Temple, while they catch up. Humans have demonstrated that without God's presence, people quickly forget him. The ancient nation of Israel often forgot God, and some people think Jesus is a myth after a mere few thousand years!

Therefore a physical Temple, even though strictly speaking it isn't needed, acts as a reassurance for all people that "look! The tent of God is with humans, and he will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death; neither will there be mourning nor outcry nor sorrow anymore; for the former things have passed away." ⁷⁴

There will also be a resurrection of the dead. Speaking in his own defense before governor Felix, the apostle Paul said: "I have hope in God, which they themselves also look forward to, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, of both the righteous and the unrighteous." ⁷⁵

Why would God resurrect the unrighteous? I suppose we could think of it as a second chance. If the human legal system offers this opportunity to criminals, why should God not also offer this to those who didn't get a chance to know him the first time round?

But then, if even unrighteous people are to be resurrected, what is the advantage of being righteous now? From a legal point of view there is a difference, as described by Jesus himself:

"Most truly I say to you, that the hour is coming, and is now, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and the ones hearing will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so he also gives to the Son to have life in himself. And he gives him authority also to do the judging, because he is the 'son of man.' Do not marvel at this, for the hour is coming in which all those in the memorial tombs will hear his voice and come out; those doing good to a resurrection of life, but those practicing bad to a resurrection of judgment." ⁷⁶

The Son of God is well suited to be our judge, because he was also a man, literally the 'son of man,' and can therefore relate to us and understand our weaknesses. Those "doing good" are resurrected to life, and do not come into judgment. Those "practicing bad" are also resurrected, but they will need to change. We might think of them as being on parole. They will need to get themselves written into a metaphorical "book of life" if they wish to continue living after they have been raised up. ⁷⁷

But the question "what is the advantage of being righteous now?" could really also be rephrased as: "What incentive do I have for being good? What am I going to get out of it?"

This is a somewhat childish way of thinking. Parents often give their children rewards for behaving, and so they raise children who expect to be rewarded for being good. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this, but at the same time, goodness is simple. It is founded on love, not rewards.

When you love your neighbor as yourself, you don't need God or any other law to tell you not to sleep with your neighbor's partner. This would be selfishness, not love. Every human knows this deep down. Our own conscience tells us this, along with thousands of years of collective experience. We now know what is bad, and we know it is ultimately self-destructive, or harmful to others.

In a sense, we could say that God's plan has been about helping the human race to grow up. We started out wanting to be like God, knowing good and bad. God has allowed us to learn the meaning of these things for ourselves; but he has also given each person a shortcut to truly becoming like God and really knowing good and bad, in the person of Jesus.

For humans, Jesus is the only way, not because of a religious command, but because love is literally the only way to live. Love produces goodness. Any other way is ultimately self-destructive or destructive to others. For example, if we all walk over the homeless, we may find ourselves in the same situation one day. This is why Jesus taught the Golden Rule: do to others as you would have them do to you. And if we don't turn the other cheek at some point, the cycle of revenge and violence will ultimately end in mutual destruction, or in self-destruction.

However, the Son himself cannot always turn the other cheek. Since God has given him authority to do the judging, sometimes wearing the judicial hat means passing sentence, in order to restrain or punish badness. If badness is allowed to continue forever, bad will always dominate and ultimately ruin the good. If you add a little poison to a cup of water, the whole drink is ruined. This is why God intends to bring badness to an end, through the rule of his Son.

You are, of course, free to accept or reject any of what I have written here. But this is what I perceive is God's plan for humans, and for the world in which we live.

Now, the purpose of the first part of this "letter" has been to provide evidence that God exists, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that God isn't the monster some skeptics and atheists have made him out to be, but he actually has the long-term welfare of all humans in mind; even atheists and skeptics. Indeed, the existence of the document you have been reading and what it contains, is also evidence of this.

In the second part of this letter, I will put life itself under the microscope. Has a natural origin of life been proven? Was life on Earth built over billions of years by chemical fluctuations, evolutionary forces and a large helping of luck; or did God have a hand in it at some point? If so, at what point, and how could we know? I will also look at important questions about origins that I have deliberately avoided in the first half of this letter.

1 Genesis 3:15. **2** Deuteronomy 6:4-6. **3** Isaiah 40:3-5. **4** Isaiah 9:6,7. **5** Isaiah 42:1-4. **6** Isaiah 49:6. **7** Jeremiah 31:31-34. **8** Malachi 2:17; 3:1,2. **9** Isaiah 49:3. **10** Hosea 11:1. Matthew 2:15. **11** John 14:9. **12** John 5:24. **13** Luke 12:32-34. **14** Acts 2:44,45. **15** Isaiah 8:14. **16** Isaiah 49:7. **17** Isaiah 53:8,12. **18** Zechariah 12:10. **19** John 3:16,17. **20** Malachi 3:2,3,17. **21** Zechariah 13:8,9. **22** Daniel 9:26. **23** See *Letter To The Jews*, chapters 7, 12 and 27 at lettertothejews.com **24** Acts 1:8. **25** Luke 13:28. **26** Luke 13:29,30. **27** Isaiah 49:9-12. **28** Revelation 7:9,14-17. **29** Isaiah 49:14,15. **30** Isaiah 49:21. **31** Isaiah 49:22,23. **32** Deuteronomy 30:4,5. **33** Isaiah 66:8. **34** Luke 21:22-24. **35** Daniel 8:1-14. **36** Hosea 3:4,5. **37** Hosea 6:1,2.

38 Psalm 90:4. **39** Ezekiel 38:8,16. **40** Ezekiel 38:16. **41** Ezekiel 38:19,20,23. **42** Ezekiel 39:22-24. **43** The story of Joseph can be found in Genesis chapters 37, 39-45. **44** Psalm 22:15. **45** Psalm 22:17,18. **46** Psalm 22:6-8. **47** Psalm 109:25. **48** Isaiah 9:6,7. **49** Isaiah 40:10,11. **50** Isaiah 53:1. **51** Isaiah 62:11. **52** Isaiah 63:1-4. **53** Isaiah 34:8. **54** John 1:1-3,14. **55** Revelation 19:11-16. **56** Zechariah 12:2,3. **57** Zechariah 14:1,2. **58** Zechariah 14:3,4. **59** Zechariah 14:5-7. **60** Zechariah 14:12. **61** Daniel 7:13,14. **62** Matthew 26:63-66. **63** Acts 1:9-11. **64** Luke 9:28-36. See also 2 Peter 1:16-19. **65** Matthew 24:30. **66** Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews*, Book 5, Chapter 6, Section 3. See the footnote in *Josephus: The Complete Works*, translated by William Whiston, published in 1998 by Thomas Nelson Publishers. **67** Luke 21:20,21. **68** Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews*, Book 2, Chapter 20, Section 1. **69** Isaiah 2:2-4. **70** Revelation 22:2. **71** Zechariah 14:8. **72** Ezekiel 47:1,7,8,12. **73** Revelation 21:22. **74** Revelation 21:3,4. **75** Acts 24:15. **76** John 5:25-29. **77** See Revelation 20:11-15.