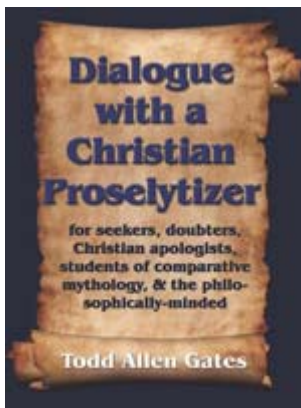


Dialogue with a Christian Proselytizer

**for seekers, doubters,
Christian apologists,
students of comparative
mythology, & the philo-
sophically-minded**

Todd Allen Gates



This book is a Socratic dialogue between a Christian proselytizer and a skeptic. The skeptic gets the proselytizer to spell out all the reasons he rejects non-Christian religions, and the discussion then turns to examining Christianity by the same light.

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by Todd Allen Gates

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Dialogue with a Christian Proselytizer

Todd Allen Gates

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Chapter 1: Foundations for Belief—Design, the Scriptures, Faith

CHRIS PROSELMAN: Good morning sir!

SCOTT CRATES: Good morning to you too, sir.

CHRIS: Please take one of these *Judgment Day* pamphlets, and read it carefully. Do you know that the day of reckoning will soon be upon us, and that we must all choose between accepting Jesus as our Savior or suffering eternal damnation?

SCOTT: I have heard this a number of times, and in fact I've been working on a book on that very subject. I admit I'm still unclear on several issues, and I've been looking for someone with a firm Christian perspective to help me out. I have my notes here with me—do you mind if I go through them with you and ask some questions?

CHRIS: I'd like that very much.

SCOTT: I thank you, and I hope I won't be taking up too much of your time.

CHRIS: Sir, I can think of few better uses for my time.

SCOTT: Much appreciated. And please, call me Scott.

CHRIS: Very well, Scott. My name is Chris.

The pamphlet in your hand cuts right to the bottom line, for it reminds us that the day will come when each of us must stand before God and face judgment:

And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

Hebrews 9:27, King James Version (KJV)

—and that this judgment will be based on our righteousness:

... [God] hath appointed a day, in which He will judge the world in righteousness ...

Acts 17:31, KJV

The unpleasant fact we all need to face is that *no* human possesses adequate righteousness:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 1:8, 10, KJV

As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.

Romans 3:10, KJV

—and that the penalty for our sinfulness is an eternity in hell:

So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 13:49–50, KJV

But the Good News is that even though we cannot be saved through our own efforts:

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us ...

Titus 3:5, KJV

—we *do* have a means to salvation:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:16, KJV

For Jesus's love for humanity moved Him to take the punishment for our sins upon Himself:

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities ... and with his stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5, KJV

... the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

1 John 1:7, KJV

—and all that's needed on our part is to trust, accept, and believe in Him:

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved ...

Acts 16:31, KJV

SCOTT: So in spreading this message, would it be fair to say that you're doing a public service?

CHRIS: More precisely, I think of myself as working in *God's* service:

And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so all nations will hear it ...

Matthew 24:14, *The Living Bible* (TLB)

SCOTT: Is this why you're out here at this early hour on a Sunday morning speaking with strangers, when you could be sleeping in, or attending to any number of personal matters? Would you say you're following God's orders by spreading His Word to those who have yet to take heed?

CHRIS: I wouldn't say it's by God's "orders" that I'm doing this, for that implies there's some reluctance on my part. Rather, I feel so grateful for all that God has given me that I see it as a *privilege* to be able to spread the Good News to as many others as possible.

SCOTT: A gracious mindset indeed.

CHRIS: I feel more blessed than "gracious"—yet at the same time, I welcome your appreciation. Some people accuse me of being arrogant, or even pushy: as if trying to save eternal souls makes me some kind of pest!

SCOTT: Let me assure you that I don't see it that way at all. If I were sure I knew of such a message that came direct from Divinity, I hope I'd be so kind as to do as you're doing.

CHRIS: Why do you say *if*? You do, after all, have God's Word right there on paper before you.

SCOTT: Well, I do have some questions regarding the basis of your knowledge, and this is the very issue my book struggles with. I mean no offense, but why do you believe there's anything divine about the words in this pamphlet?

CHRIS: Because as you can see from the quotation references, the text of this pamphlet comes directly from the Bible, which is *God's Holy Word*, as recorded by those He inspired.

SCOTT: Let's say, for the sake of argument, that I wholeheartedly accept the premise that there *is* some sort of Higher Power. Still, on what grounds do you conclude that this Higher Power had anything to do with the Judeo-Christian Bible?

CHRIS: The simplest answer is *faith*: my complete trust that God was in earnest when He gave us His Word, and the spiritual connection that I feel as a result of that trust.

SCOTT: When you say that “faith and a spiritual connection” tell you that the Bible was inspired by God, does this mean that this experience is the only means to such knowledge? Or in other words, would it be fair to say that for those without faith, the Bible appears as just an ordinary book?

CHRIS: Under *no* circumstances could one ever say that the Bible is “just an ordinary book”—what I meant is that through faith one gains the purest understanding of God’s Word. Yet regardless of the reader’s spiritual awareness, the Bible’s divine inspiration is self-evident: no other book contains such profound wisdom, no other ancient book has been so thoroughly proved true by archeology, and no other book contains so many accurate prophecies—prophecies that include the *miracle* of Christ’s resurrection.

SCOTT: So in other words, you’re saying there are actually two separate sources for your knowledge of the Divine: there’s the spiritual experience with God via your faith, and there’s the written contact from God via those who assembled the Bible.

CHRIS: When you speak of sources for “knowledge of the Divine,” don’t forget the physical evidence that surrounds us. For there are plenty of irrefutable reasons for why you should “wholeheartedly accept the premise of a Higher Power”—just look at the sun and the stars! Scott, could *you* have made those? Look at the miracle of a newborn baby! Was it by *man*’s talents that an infant can breathe both inside and outside the womb? The world around us shouts of God’s magnificence and glory!

SCOTT: Hold on ... please wait while I get all this down on paper.

Okay, here’s what I have as the three foundations for your trust in your pamphlet’s words:

- One, the beauty and order of the universe—that is, the universe’s “design”—tells us a Master Designer exists.
- Two, we have an ancient text recorded by those you believe were inspired by this Master Designer, and you claim its divine inspiration is self-evident.
- Finally, there’s your faith, from which you say you feel a spiritual connection with God.

Do these three reasons sum up why you feel confident that you know God’s Word?

CHRIS: I wouldn’t limit it solely to those three, but yes, they’re the central ones.

SCOTT: I don’t know if you have the time for this, but I’d like to explore each reason separately.

CHRIS: I do indeed have the time.

Part I:
Design and
First Cause

Chapter 2: On the Tentative Acceptance of the Uncaused Designer Argument

CHRIS: Probably the most famous presentation of the design argument is William Paley's analogy of the watch and the watchmaker. His *Natural Theology* (1802) starts out with him kicking a stone as he crosses a meadow, and trying to figure out how the stone came to be there. His conclusion is that for all anybody knows, this apparently purposeless object might have just been lying there forever. But next to that stone, he asks, suppose he found a watch? Would he also think the watch might have just been "lying there forever"? No, for upon studying the intricacies—the interconnecting gears, the coiled springs, the tight-fitting glass over the watch's face—and how they all worked together for the purpose of telling time, it would be obvious that its creation was deliberate: the watch must be the handiwork of an intelligent and purposeful watchmaker.

Paley pointed out that just as the watch's design proves the existence of a watchmaker, nature's designs prove the existence of a Master Designer. Paley looked at all the surrounding "living watches"—the wings of the bird, the gills of the fish, the flexible focusing capabilities of the eye—and concluded:

The marks of design are too strong to be got over. Design must have had a designer. That designer ... is GOD.ⁱ

—a point reiterated in modern terms by the astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle:

Order does not spontaneously form from disorder. A tornado passing through a junkyard would never assemble a 747.ⁱⁱ

You need also keep in mind, Scott, that the design argument is only a subset of nature's larger proof of God's existence—for the existence of God explains how the raw material for design got here in the first place! Realize that everything we know of has a "cause" behind it: science itself recognizes this, but stops at what it calls the "Big Bang." Yet even this so-called Big Bang must have come from something—that is, the pattern of "this caused that" can't just extend backwards in time infinitely. So the very first cause must have been something *outside* of time and space: that Transcendent Being we recognize as God.

This accounts not only for the watch that Paley finds, but also for the stone lying next to it.

SCOTT: Well, we could have an extended discussion on all the subjects that go with the debate over God's existence:

- whether using God as the "First Cause" of the Big Bang solves or only postpones the mystery, because this approach claims that everything must have a cause, but it doesn't account for God's cause;
- arguing which is a more plausible candidate for "just existing": the Big Bang's simple mass-energy (albeit unimaginably hot and dense mass-energy), or an unimaginably complex deity—that is, whether stating that "God is the Uncaused Cause" is only amplifying the problem;
- whether saying "a Transcendent Being outside of time and space must have started it all" is just a quick-fix solution to "we don't know how the raw material for the Big Bang came to be, or what came before that (and whether our Big Bang was just one of many), because we don't have enough evidence to work with";

ⁱ William Paley, *Natural Theology*, Chapter 1.

ⁱⁱ Fred Hoyle, *The Intelligent Universe*, pp. 18–19.

- whether something as complex as the life on our planet could have evolved by chance from the chemicals and conditions on primitive earth ... but if not, whether the answer “an unimaginably complex deity came first, and then organized that first simple life form” is the more satisfying solution;
- whether the “tornado assembling an airliner” analogy is valid, because evolution makes no claim that life appeared in its current jetliner complexity in a single giant random step, but that life arose only through billions of years of many small steps through mutations (random) and natural selection (non-random, and cumulative);

—but then we might never get around to discussing Christianity. I’d rather leave it at this: I’ll just agree that Design and First Cause are persuasive arguments for the existence of a Creator.¹

CHRIS: Recognizing God’s existence *is* the first step—but what’s stopping you from accepting His Son? After all, Christ has already fully paid the price for your eternal life. Jesus does, however, leave the final decision up to us. Will you receive Him, or will you reject Him?

SCOTT: If I were to be convinced that this is our Master Designer’s arrangement—and I remain open for such an awakening to happen at any time, even during this very conversation—then I would be most grateful to unhesitatingly accept Jesus as my Savior. After all, as a general rule I don’t disregard the requests that even my quite-human employer makes of me, so I realize it would be the greatest folly to ignore the commands of so much higher an authority.

But jumping to the question “Will you obey the Word of God, as specified in the Judeo-Christian Bible?” is getting way ahead of ourselves. For although the Master Designer argument may be a persuasive reason for believing a Creator of sorts, it’s not an argument that necessarily points to Christianity.

Ancient Greeks and Romans, after all, also defended the idea of God (or *gods* in their case) by appealing to the Design argument:

It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the agent deliberating. ... If the art of ship-building were in the wood, we would have ships by nature.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.)ⁱⁱⁱ

Who is it that has fitted the sword to the scabbard, and the scabbard to the sword? Is it no one? ... Do not male and female and the desire of union and the power to use the organs adapted for it—do not these point to the craftsman? ... From the very structure of such completed products, we generally infer that they must be work of some artificer, and that they were not produced by mere chance. ... let [the atheist] explain to us what it is that brings all this about, and how it is possible that things so wonderful, and which carry such marks of craftsmanship, should come into being of their own accord and at random.

Epictetus (c. A.D. 55–135)^{iv}

—but they were hardly coming to the conclusion of “therefore, Christianity.”

For doesn’t the Design argument support not only Genesis, but also the ancient Greek explanation for the movement of the sun—that the god Helios pulls it across the sky from a fiery horse-drawn chariot?

CHRIS: Yes, but that story is not God’s Word: it’s nothing but a myth!

SCOTT: I’m not saying I believe that the Greek myths contain divine truths. I’m just saying that most of ancient Greece’s citizens believed these stories were true, and could have equally used the design argument as “proof”:

ⁱⁱⁱ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, Part 8.

^{iv} Epictetus, *The Discourses* (from “On Providence”), pp. 16–17.

that the earth's fruits and grains were apparently the result of a goddess, one they happened to name Demeter; that the ocean's gentle breezes and violent storms were apparently caused by a moody god, one they called Poseidon; and that the sky must be held up by a being of titanic strength, a being they named Atlas.

And take the Vikings—didn't they explain thunder as coming from the hammer of the angry god they called Thor? Isn't that also Design explained by a Designer?

CHRIS: In a primitive way of course, but yes, true enough.

SCOTT: And what about the Hindu belief that their god Purusa created the wind from his breath, the sun from his eye, the moon from his mind, the heavens from his head, and the earth from his feet? Doesn't that also explain the world's design via a Master Designer?

CHRIS: I'm not particularly familiar with the Hindu religion, but I'll take your word for it that they have such a myth.

SCOTT: It seems, then, that there's nothing about the design argument that gives it a Christian conclusion, but that it's a broad enough umbrella to encompass *every* religion: all our current organized religions, all the ancient ones that we now categorize as "mythology," and all the pre-literate nature religions that worshipped the spirits of the forests and the rainfall and the harvest. The design argument covers even the low-commitment beliefs of the Deists—those who find God in creation, but see no basis for believing that such a God inspired any of what we called the "revealed" religions, or has made any communication effort with mankind whatsoever.

CHRIS: It is true that non-Christians have described God's creation in terms of their own odd beliefs—as a matter of fact, the Bible itself explains this:

From the time the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky and all that God made. They can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. ... but they ... began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused.

Romans 1:20–21, *New Living Translation* (NLT)

More than just His Creation, however, God also gave us His Word, so our thinking need not remain dark and confused. Some people, however, actually seem to *prefer* the state of darkness! The Christian philosopher C. S. Lewis made the point that this especially holds true for those you refer to as Deists: those who say they experience God in the flowers and the forests and the awesomeness of the solar system, but who feel free to ignore God's Word as something "trivial" in comparison.^v

To a limited extent, as Lewis points out, these Deist notions are understandable. Comparing the physical universe to the Bible is like comparing a view of the Atlantic Ocean from the beach—where we can see, hear, smell, and touch it—to sitting at home and looking at the ocean's map. In going from the beach to the map, it does seem like we're going from something majestic to something somewhat less majestic: the map is, after all, only a colored piece of paper.

The vital thing to remember, however, is that our experience at the beach gives us only an *isolated glimpse* of the ocean's depth and breadth. We can stand back in awe of its beauty and grandeur, but this won't tell us anything about navigating the waters should we want to travel by ship to another country. The map, on the other hand—mere piece of paper that it may be—gives us the big picture: it tells us where our continent stands in relation to the rest of the world, gives us warnings about the location of sharp rocks and other areas of danger, and thus provides us with the ability to plot a course should we wish to travel. God's Word is like that map: it tells us where we stand in relation to God's plan, warns us of the areas of earthly dangers, and provides us with the ability to plot a course to eternal life.

^v From C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, pp. 135–136.

So yes, the Deist does experience God, but in a very passive way. And this is just what makes such a “religion,” at least for a certain type of person, deceptively attractive: it has all the thrills and none of the rules, none of the ethical demands. But the mighty drawback is that such “worship” won’t equip us to get to heaven any more than gazing at the beach will equip us to cross the Atlantic! So just as all those who *do* want to cross the ocean had best study the map, all those who want eternal life had best study God’s Word.

SCOTT: I’m not sure that Deists, as a group, would agree that they reject the world’s scriptures because they think these books are just God’s trivial paperwork. Rather, I think the great majority would say the rejection comes from the lack of evidence, as they see it, that God communicated through any such paperwork.

CHRIS: Yet consider the sheer absurdity of this philosophy. For it makes *no* sense to believe that God would have:

- (1) undertaken the construction of all there is: imposing lawfulness on all matter—both living and non-living—giving everything a specific shape and form, making sure the universe operates with infinitely complex yet beautiful harmony; and
- (2) given a genuine language^{vi} to but *one* of His living creatures: blessed man alone with the ability to truly know and worship our Creator;

—*unless* He cared deeply about communicating with us! For despite the way humans have fallen, we nonetheless reflect our Creator’s noblest work: the only aspect of His creation made in the image of God Himself:^{vii}

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...

Genesis 1:26, KJV

And as Paul explains in his letter to Timothy, it is the *Bible* that is God’s means of providing us, His special creations, with the gift of knowing His precise Will:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16–17, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

SCOTT: Passage noted. Moving forward, let’s go beyond the broad ideas of First Cause, Design, and the argument that “a Master Designer would surely have communicated with the sole species He gave a genuine language to,” and narrow our discussion down to the various claims of specific knowledge about the communication efforts from our said Divine Architect.

^{vi} True, chimps and dolphins and the like have “languages” too, but not in the sense that they can write down stories and publish them and ascribe authorship to Divinity.

^{vii} Chris’s argument is based on parts of Professor Daniel Robinson’s lecture “The Stoic Bridge to Christianity” (from *The Great Ideas of Philosophy*, Part II, Lecture #16).

Chapter 5: Non-Christian Religions—Design, Rules, Origins

EXPLAINING NATURE’S DESIGN

SACRED RULES

Rules Similar from Religion to Religion

Holy Hierarchies

Interpreting Divine Will via Clues from Nature

SOURCES OF “THE WORD”

Internal Inconsistencies

* * *

SCOTT: I’ll begin with a broad overview of the subject: a review of *why* and *how* religions come to exist.

As for *why*, most of the theories I’ve come across say that people create religions in order to explain the following four categories of life:⁵

- (1) Nature’s design: the origin of the universe, the movements of the heavenly bodies, the creation of the earth, the change of the seasons and other phenomena of the weather, and the creation of life.
- (2) Why the world is afflicted with suffering and apparent evil.
- (3) Rules for how we should live here on earth: how to interact with others, how to interact with Divinity (through prayer, rites, rituals, etc.), and how best to realize our individual place in the Divine Plan.
- (4) What happens to us, if anything, after we die.

As for *how*, religions generally develop in four broad stages:⁶

Stage 1: the period of stress—brought on by invasion, enslavement, extreme poverty, natural disaster, or anything else that brings widespread suffering.

Stage 2: a prophet preaches the Word from Divinity, promising relief from this suffering—and often this “Word” draws on beliefs from pre-existing religions. The prophet’s message helps make sense of people’s suffering by placing the pain in context with a greater knowledge of the Divine Plan, bringing hope to the prophet’s followers.

Stage 3: followers spread the prophet’s Word from Divinity, during which time that Word is usually modified to better fit the needs of the community.

Stage 4: the establishment of routines—set rituals, structured hierarchies, official sacred documents—so the religion can survive the death of the founding prophet. Another key part of a religion’s ability to survive is how practical these routines are: whether its beliefs and customs on sex, marriage, agriculture, and food preparation help keep its community functional and alive long enough to reproduce. Whether these beliefs are true in the literal

sense doesn't matter—the timing itself of the planting season is what counts, not whether it really coincides with an agricultural goddess's life cycle.

CHRIS: *None* of this applies to Christianity: it exists solely because God has given us the gift of knowing His Word. It was not “modified” to suit the quirks of the community, but unfolded precisely as God saw fit. And its Truth and practical advantages are not coincidences, but one and the same!

SCOTT: Point noted ... but because (a) our discussion will entail looking at an assortment of allegedly Divine Dictations, and (b) we've agreed to operate from the fundamentalist's premise that only *one* came from God—this means man must have created all the rest. So to organize our discussion, I feel it's helpful to have an overview of why and how man has created all these apparent counterfeits.

What I'd like to do now is record all your reasons for determining that a religion is *not* from God. Once I can firmly recognize this, I hope to be in a better position to see how, or if, Christianity differs from the rest.

So that we don't overwhelm ourselves with details, let's limit our discussion to just three categories: nature's design, sacred rules, and the origin of the prophet's Word.

Explaining Nature's Design

SCOTT: Let's start with a few creation stories, beginning with one from the Pima, a native tribe of North America:

In the beginning, the Creator reached into his heart and pulled out a magic “Creation Stick,” which gathered resin on its tip as he walked. He rolled the resin into a ball, chanted a creation song, and the ball grew into what we call earth.

The Creator then took a great shiny rock, broke it, and threw it into the heavens, where the pieces became the stars. Then he made the moon in a similar fashion, but neither the moon nor the stars furnished enough light. So the Creator took two bowls of water from out of his flesh, and with thoughts of light, pulled the bowls apart and created the sun. But it did not yet move, so the Creator bounced it like a ball to the east and it bounced back to the west, even as it does today.ⁱ

But according to God's middlemen from ancient Finland:

The goddess Luonnatar was lonely and came down to the vast primordial sea, where she met a great duck. The duck built a nest and laid eggs on Luonnatar's knee, and when she turned over the eggs fell into the water. In the fertile primordial sea the eggs changed form: the yolk of the eggs became the sun, and the white, the moon. The spots on the shell became the stars and the black flecks became clouds.ⁱⁱ

And here's an explanation from Kenya's Luyia tribe on why the sun and moon have differing degrees of brightness, and why these two “siblings” are seen at separate times of the day:

God created the Moon first and then the Sun. In the beginning the Moon was bigger and brighter, and the envious Sun attacked his elder brother. As they wrestled, the Moon was thrown in the mud; dirt splashed over him and he was no longer so bright. Their fight became tiresome to God, so he decided to eternally separate

ⁱ Bierlein, *Parallel Myths*, p. 66.

ⁱⁱ Bierlein, *Parallel Myths*, p. 53.

them. “You,” he commanded the Sun, “shine only during the day!” “And you,” he commanded the Moon, “shine only at night!”ⁱⁱⁱ

So ... given that I didn’t hear any of these stories directly from the Creator, but read them via middlemen who *claimed* their stories were passed on from Up Above, I’m not going to automatically accept any as being the Real Thing. I take it we’re in full agreement here.

CHRIS: Of course.

SCOTT: And indeed we’re forced to use some sort of weeding-out process, because these explanations contradict each other. Conceivably, we could believe that one is true and the other two are wrong, or that all three are wrong, but it’s logically impossible that all three are correct: the moon could not be a shiny rock *and* egg white *and* the sun’s mud-covered brother.

CHRIS: We hardly need a “weeding-out process”—these stories are obviously nothing more than primitive myths! They’re not even *remotely* possible candidates for God’s Truth! This is so self-evident it needs no further probing.

SCOTT: I admit that I happen to agree with you, but my purpose here is not to dismiss mythical stories one by one—it’s to test our method for being able to state with confidence that a story came to us not by Special Delivery from Divinity, but only by man’s fertile imagination. So rather than saying that these three myths are “just obviously not from God,” we can pinpoint the non-omniscience of their origins by noting the way their descriptions of nature contradict a wide set of observations. Looking at their depictions of the moon, for example, we see that the Pima story presumes the moon gives off its own light, that the Finland story says the moon is larger than the stars, and that the Kenyan story claims the moon would be brighter than the sun if not for that coat of mud on it. Even if we take the slippery New Age approach of declaring that Divine Truths need not be literal, how likely is it that the Architect of the Universe would use “Vehicles of Truth” that were so clueless about the moon’s size and source of light?

CHRIS: Impossible.

SCOTT: And how likely is it that stories with such errors could have arisen from the unaided mind of primitive man?

CHRIS: It’s more than likely—it’s absolutely certain!

SCOTT: So when we notice that a religion’s perspective is limited to the earth-bound naked human eye—which sees an earth that’s flat, a sun that orbits around us, a moon that shines its own light, and stars that are tiny—would you say this is a good clue that the religion’s author is likewise earthbound?

CHRIS: Quite so.

SCOTT: Rather than go on with further examples, I believe we can summarize the subject with observations from the field of comparative mythology, which tells us that rather than God shaping geography, geography shapes the local interpretation of God:

- In religions from areas regularly deprived of sunlight, God is often personified in the sun. In religions from desert areas, God is often personified in the rain.
- In hot climates, hell is generally described as a place of insufferable heat; in wintry climates, hell is sometimes described as a place of bitter cold.
- In hunting societies, religions tend to be animal-inspired; in agricultural societies, religions tend to be plant-inspired. For example, the religions of hunting tribes often include stories of how the gods visit the earth in the form of animals, and how the killing and eating of these animals releases the gods’ spirits to return to the spirit

ⁱⁱⁱ Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology*, p. 71.

world. In agricultural societies, Divinity often echoes the pattern of the plant world's periodic decay and revival: the gods die as winter begins, and are reborn the next spring.

Looking at this overview, would you agree that people's local geography shapes how they perceive Divinity? That when people notice the design around them and conclude there must be a Master Designer, they make up explanatory stories that rest on the mistaken premise that their own surroundings reflect those of the whole planet?

CHRIS: Going by all the examples you gave, and I suppose the pagan religions in general, yes, I agree.

SCOTT: So it's no surprise that the "God" of such religions always has the same ignorant beliefs of the people that created the religion?

CHRIS: No surprise at all.

SCOTT: Let's move on to our next category of religious characteristics that betray an origin that is human, rather than holy.

Sacred Rules

I'd like to look at three categories of sacred rules: (1) rules that are similar from religion to religion, (2) rules on holy hierarchies, and (3) rules based on interpretations of Divine Will via clues picked up from nature.

Rules Similar from Religion to Religion

Certain ethical rules are common to just about every religion, the most famous being the "Golden Rule":

Buddhism:

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

Udanavargu 5:18

Christianity:

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Luke 6:31, NRSV

Confucianism:

Tsekung asked, Is there one word that can serve as a principal of conduct for life? Confucius replied, It is the word shu—reciprocity: Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.

Analects 15:23

Hinduism:

Do not to others what ye do not wish done to yourself ... This is the whole Dharma, heed it well.

Mahabharata 5:1517

Islam:

None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.

Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadiths, 13
(sayings of the prophet Muhammad)

Jainism:

A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.

Sutrakritanga 1.11.33

Judaism:

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.

Talmud, Shabbat 31a

Sikhism:

Treat others as thou wouldst be treated thyself.

Adi Granth

Taoism:

Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and regard your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien 213–228

(“Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution”)

Traditional African:

One [who plans] to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.

Yoruba proverb (Nigeria)

Zoroastrianism:

Human nature is good only when it does not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.

Dadistan-i-Dinik 94:5

Such examples are favorites of New Age Spirituality adherents, because they're similar enough to have all come from the same source. But as we discussed earlier, religions also contain so many serious discrepancies between them—there is *no* caste system versus there *is* a caste system; God *forbids* human sacrifice versus God *demand*s human sacrifice—that this “All religions are true” idea is difficult to make sense of (unless we picture a God of limited concern, competence, or sanity).

An alternative explanation for the similarities is that the Golden Rule just makes good practical sense when it comes to groups of people living together.^{iv} For example, I may want the freedom to play my music as loud and as late as I want, but I don't want my neighbors to have the freedom to do the same, particularly when I'm trying to sleep. So in trying to solve the ageless problem of wanting to enjoy limitless freedoms ourselves, while wanting to restrict the freedoms of others (because other people's freedom can interfere with our own freedom), a practical solution is to adopt the guideline that people should not do to others what they would not want done to themselves. Prohibitions of this sort apply not only to playing loud music at night, but to a wide range of activities that *we* may feel the occasional urge to commit, but don't want *others* to commit (especially if it adversely affects us): theft, adultery, assault, murder, and so on.

This is called “reciprocal altruism”—that we're willing to be considerate to others, but mainly because we want others to be considerate to us.

CHRIS: I don't wish to be impolite, but I'm not sure what your point is.

SCOTT: My point is that to have a relatively happy and peaceful society (or at least to minimize strife), people living in communities throughout the world have always needed to reach agreements such as “You don't steal my food and I won't steal yours,” and “You don't take my mate and I won't take yours.” So when it comes to setting down firm rules—prohibitions on theft, false witness, adultery, assault, murder—it makes sense that these

^{iv} Ancient Greek philosophers, centuries prior to Christ, also had their versions of the Golden Rule. From Aristotle (384–322 B.C.): “We should behave to friends ... as we should wish them to behave to us” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume I, Aristotle* 5.21, p. 465). From Isocrates (436–338 B.C.): “You'll conquer Anger, if you behave yourself towards Offenders as you would have others behave themselves to you, when you Transgress ...” (Isocrates and Epicurus, *Epicurus's Morals and Isocrates: His Advice to Demonius*, p. 212).

solutions become part of not only the local law, but also part of the local religion. For what better way to add power to a law than to link it to a commandment from the gods!

In Zoroastrianism, for example, good-neighbor rules became part of their sacred creed:

*I renounce the theft and robbery of the cow, and the damaging and plundering of the Mazdayasnian settlements.
I reject any who harm beings. I reject them with my thoughts, words, and deeds. I reject them publicly.
I pledge myself to the well-thought thought, I pledge myself to the well-spoken word, I pledge myself to the well-done action.*

The Zoroastrian Creed: Yasna 12:2, 4, 8

Homer's *The Iliad* also includes moral guidance from the gods (although the gods fail to meet standards as frequently as do humans), such as the Divine Displeasure against those who lie:

[Agamemnon prayed:] "If I swear falsely may heaven visit me with all the penalties which it metes out to those who perjure themselves."

Book XIX

—and against corruption:

Zeus rains his hardest to punish men for giving crooked judgment in their courts and driving justice therefrom without heed to the decrees of heaven ...

Book XVI

—and against unjustified murder:

[... the servants made sure to avoid enraging] Achilles, who might then kill Priam and sin against the word of Zeus.

Book XXIV

—and on the wisdom of controlling one's pride and fury, as demonstrated by Poseidon after he feels he's been insulted by Zeus:

Iris [messenger of the gods] ... came close up to the great shaker of the earth [Poseidon] ... and said: "I have come ... to bring you a message from Zeus. He bids you [to stop helping the Greek army] ... If you take no heed and disobey ... he will come down here and fight you ...

Poseidon was very angry and said: "Great heavens! Strong as Zeus may be, he has said more than he can do if he has threatened violence against me, who am of like honor with himself. ... I will not walk as Zeus would have me. For all his strength, let him keep to his own ... and be contented without threatening to lay hands upon me as though I were nobody."

Iris ... answered: "Am I really, Poseidon, to take this daring and unyielding message to Zeus, or will you reconsider your answer? Sensible people are open to argument ..."

Poseidon answered: "Goddess Iris, your words have spoken in season. It is well when a messenger shows so much discretion. ... I will give way in spite of my displeasure ..."

Book XV

We can find practical ethical laws in the form of sacred rules in religions throughout the world:

- In Jainism, the “Five Great Vows” are Truthfulness, Chastity, No Violence, No Stealing, and No Possessions (material wealth being said to have two strikes against it: it brings only bondage, and sin generally plays a role in attaining it).
- In Buddhism, “The Way of the Bodhisattva” claims that for a soul to attain nirvana it must abstain from all killing (including all meat-eating), cruelty, injustice, hatred, stealing, slander, lying, lust, obscene words, and flattery.
- Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism all provide incentive for good behavior with their teachings of “karma,” which claims there is a moral law of cause and effect: anything we do that’s hurtful to others will come back to us in either this life or the next.
- Traditional African gods issue forth Thou Shalt Nots that outlaw murder, stealing, lying, adultery, rape, incest, kidnapping, breaking promises, speaking evil of rulers, and irreverence and unkindness to parents.^v
- Bahaism also goes beyond the standard prohibitions against killing, stealing, lying, and adultery—its Thou Shalt Nots extend to gambling, gossip, and backbiting.

Oral traditions, too, have offered persuasive reasons for keeping in line:

- The shamans of Osage Native Americans told their people that the Great Spirit would see to it that everything you steal in this life will be carried on your back throughout eternity.
- Vietnamese folklore has it that people who hit others too much will be reincarnated as donkeys so others can hit them back.
- Chinese folklore has it that a woman who marries two men in this lifetime will be sawed in half by her two husbands in the afterlife because she had been the property of both of them.^{vi}

CHRIS: That particular Chinese folk tale is a bit gruesome ... yet I confess to rather liking the first two. Such beliefs would be excellent incentives for good behavior!

SCOTT: But do you think either story really represents a godly guideline—that abusive people might actually be reincarnated as donkeys, or that thieves might actually be burdened by eternal backpacks?

CHRIS: Of course not. I would say these were just stories made up in order to get people to behave.

SCOTT: So in other words, you agree that people have a tendency to assign Holy Origins to folk tales that were made up just for the practical purpose of helping people to minimize conflicts and promote social harmony.

CHRIS: Then again, many of the “practical” guidelines you mentioned *are* in fact Holy. The prohibitions against murder, stealing, lying, adultery, dishonoring your parents—these are all included in the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses.

^v S. A. Adewale, “Crime and African Traditional Religion,” *Orita* Vol. 26 (1994).

^{vi} Osage folklore from Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*; Vietnamese folklore from Andrew X Pham, *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* (p. 169); and Chinese folklore from Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (p. 61). Author Jung Chang notes that parents who didn’t believe the tale about twice-married women being severed in half in the afterlife would sometimes pressure widowed daughters to remarry—and that some widows, terrified that the tale might be true, committed suicide rather than risk the possibility of eternal torment.

SCOTT: Wait a moment—are you now saying there might be some truth to the New Age notion that some mysterious Higher Power had an influence in multiple religions? That along with the stone tablets of Moses, God could have also issued forth the Hindu concept of karma, the Buddhist’s ways of the Bodhisattva, the Jainist’s Great Vows, the Zoroastrian Creed, and the Native American tale of the eternal backpack?

CHRIS: No, of course I didn’t mean that: I was just noting that some of these practical laws coincide with the Ten Commandments.

SCOTT: So are you saying that the Buddhists, Hindus, Jainists, Zoroastrians, and the African and Native American religions all have *messages* that happen to agree with Holy Commands, without the *source* of their words being Holy?

CHRIS: Apparently this happens.

SCOTT: And to explain how such a thing could be, might we suppose that these people just recognized on their own—through trial and error if nothing else—that acts such as theft and murder were damaging to the happiness of their community? And upon noticing the damaging effect, people concluded that their gods must disapprove of such acts? And that throughout history, stories were made up regarding the forbidden acts and the gods’ disapproval, and the best stories got passed on and eventually worked their way into the local religion?

CHRIS: I suppose that’s what could have happened.

SCOTT: So this could explain why the Golden Rule is found in so many religions: it’s an effective standard for guiding a community in finding laws for the common good.

CHRIS: Yes, you could look at it that way.

SCOTT: In other words, the effectiveness and positive results of a religion’s moral laws don’t prove that those laws were divinely inspired.

CHRIS: I agree, for clearly these non-Christian religions did not come from God.

Holy Hierarchies

SCOTT: Let’s now look at what I call “Holy Hierarchies”: another common feature among world religions.

Probably the most well-known is the Indian caste system, which has it that Divinity decreed that everyone is born into sharply defined categories. The Rig Veda’s “Purusa, the Cosmic Person” (c. 1500 B.C.) explains that because all humans were created by the Hindu god Purusa, your function in life depended on what part of his body you came from:

- the priestly class came from his mouth;
- the ruling warrior class came from his arms;
- the farmers, herders, traders, and artisans came from his thighs;
- the laborers and servants, born to serve the top three castes, came from his feet.

The bottom caste, warn the gods, needs to mind their manners around the upper castes:

If a man of one birth [the Sudra, or bottom caste] hurls cruel words at one of the twice-born [any of the three upper castes], his tongue should be cut out, for he was born from the rear-end. If he mentions their name or caste maliciously, a red-hot iron nail ten-fingers long should be thrust into his mouth. If he is so proud as to instruct priests about their duty, the king should have hot oil poured into his mouth and ears.

Manusmṛti 8:270–272

Far below even the servants are those Purusa did not create: those of no caste, the Untouchables. The word *untouchable* was meant literally—just coming into contact with one of their shadows called for a re-purification ceremony. And if an Untouchable dared to intentionally “defile” an upper caste with his touch, the penalty was death:

If one who must not be touched, intentionally defiles by his touch one who may be touched, he shall be put to death.

Visnumrti 5:104–5

The occupations of the Untouchables were limited to those considered “polluting”—that is, anything involving physical contact with blood, excrement, or corpses: working with animal hides, cleaning sewers and latrines, and removing dead animals from the streets. The gods willed that the outcastes should live as follows:

The dwellings of “Fierce” Untouchables (candala) and “Dog-cookers” (svapaca) should be outside the village; they must use discarded bowls ... Their clothing should be the clothes of the dead, and their food should be in broken dishes; their ornaments should be made of black iron, and they should wander constantly. A man who carries out his duties should not seek contact with them; they should do business with one another and marry with those who are like them. Their food, dependent upon others, should be given to them in a broken dish, and they should not walk about in villages and cities at night.

Manusmrti 10:50–54

The gods allegedly deemed that people are born into their castes and cannot change them.⁷ People may be reborn into a higher caste in their next life, but only if they’ve behaved well and obeyed the caste rules in their current life:

Those whose conduct on earth has given pleasure can hope to enter a pleasant womb, that is, the womb of a Brahman or a woman of the princely class. But those whose conduct on earth has been foul can expect to enter a foul and stinking womb, the womb of a bitch, or a pig, or an outcaste.

Chandogya Upanishad 5, 10:7^{vii}

Other countries have also had their Divinity-Directed ostracisms: Japan’s minority group called the Buraku^{viii} were once considered outcasts, and only allowed to do blood-related jobs such as slaughtering animals and executing criminals—considered “polluting acts” by many ancient Shinto sects.⁸ Nigeria’s Ibo tribe, too, had an outcaste group: their “untouchables” were called the Osu, and were forced to live within a restricted area, not allowed to marry outside their caste, and had to be buried in the “Evil Forest.”

How can we tell if these class distinctions were dictated by God, or fabricated by man?

CHRIS: The Scriptures tell us quite clearly that this is not the way of the Lord, as Jesus tells us to “love your neighbor as much as you love yourself”: Matthew 22:39.

SCOTT: Again, if we rely only on the argument that “My religion says your religion is wrong,” we’re back to the “Is not!” versus “Is so!” shouting match. But by using reason and a wide variety of observations, we could surely prove the inaccuracy of the “character-by-caste” claims. Without going off on a long tangent on the subject, I believe we can agree that we would find, if we took the effort to research the subject, a broad range of favorable

^{vii} India legally banned caste discrimination in 1949, but the system remains largely intact: ancient laws believed to have come from the gods tend to carry more weight than modern laws of man (see endnote 7, p. 203).

^{viii} Japan legally banned discrimination against the Buraku back in 1871. Lingering prejudices, while not anywhere as severe as those suffered by India’s Untouchables, persist nonetheless (see endnote 8, p. 203).

and unfavorable character traits within each of the so-called castes. That is, we'd find no reliable evidence of either "superior" or "inferior" blood that was consistent along caste lines.

CHRIS: Agreed.

SCOTT: And given this inaccuracy, can we safely conclude that the idea of an "outcaste group" comes from man rather than God?

CHRIS: Quite safely. Note that such heartless doctrines are in complete contrast with the teachings of Jesus, who emphasized our responsibilities for taking care of the poor, sick, and neglected.

SCOTT: Well, before we get to the Christian contrast, I'd like to continue working my way through my book's outline and see if we can build on our foundation for how to recognize that a religion is man-made. I'd now like to ask you some questions about my final subject under the category of Divine Directions: those interpreted via clues from our natural surroundings.

Interpreting Divine Will via Clues from Nature

Though today we take knowledge about our natural world for granted, our earliest ancestors must have found the ways of nature baffling: the movements of the sun, moon, and planets; the life-giving but cruelly irregular gifts of rainfall, sunshine, and plantlife; and the way that fortunes and disasters fall randomly upon one's crops, health, and children. In trying to make sense of it all, a common conclusion was that all these events were under the control of supernatural spirits: spirits with human-like emotions. When bad things happened—when the rain didn't fall, or disease struck the community, or the hours of sunlight decreased and the earth became cold and barren—people reasoned that the spirits must be annoyed with humanity for some reason. When good things happened, they reasoned that the spirits must be pleased.

Based on these interpretations of supposed divine emotions, people came up with all kinds of rituals to help get on the spirits' good side, and even direct their assistance. Some of these rituals were harmless, such as dances to make the rain fall, sex rites to increase the fertility of the crops, or the shouting and drum-beating rituals that Pygmies would perform during an eclipse so that the sun would release his grip on his ex-wife, the moon. Rituals could also, however, be quite violent:

- Viking sailors who were stranded on windless days would pray to their god Odin and draw lots to decide which among them would be sacrificed, hoping that Odin would appreciate the sincerity of their pleas and pick up the breeze.
- The Ibo tribe of Nigeria believed that evil spirits must have been at work when a woman gave birth to more than one child at a time, so infant twins and triplets were abandoned in the forest to die. (This was because having one child at a time was regarded as a human quality, whereas having more than one was regarded as animal—although the association with "evil" may also have stemmed from the greater number of complications that tend to coincide with multiple births.)
- The Aztecs believed that their god Nanautzin sacrificed his life to light the sun and bring warmth to the world, and thus reasoned that regular human sacrifices were needed to provide the sun with ongoing nourishment. Youths were chosen to offer their hearts to be gouged out by priests, and great feasts were held in honor of those who were to give up their lives for the good of the community. Toward the later period of their empire, the hearts of prisoners of war were also used to feed the sun, whose appetite the Aztecs believed to be ravenous.

Now, how do we know that these interpretations of nature were incorrect interpretations of Divine Will? On what grounds can we say with confidence that all the above rituals were based on nothing more than the unfortunate guesswork of people with erroneous conclusions about cause and effect?

CHRIS: It's obvious—these pagan rituals are mentioned nowhere in the Bible, and our loving Father would never make such abhorrent demands.

SCOTT: I do understand that the search for figuring out which religion has God's stamp of approval is not an issue for you. But from my perspective, I'm still looking at multiple middlemen all claiming to possess that Sacred Stamp, and trying my best to weed out the forgeries from the Real Thing. So rather than rely on the debatable point of what is intuitively "obvious," we can once again use the following firm basis—these rival contenders can be ruled out by noting all the ways that their premises make no sense when looked at from a wide set of observations:

- the Pygmy's eclipse-ritual rests on the incorrect premise that the moon is right next to the sun during an eclipse—something that agrees with a casual observation from earth, but from nowhere else;
- a comprehensive study comparing the characteristics of those from multiple births versus single births would surely reveal no statistical difference about the former having anything unusually "evil" about them, thus showing the human error of the Ibo;
- the sun's fiery glow comes from the nuclear reactions that occur as the sun's hydrogen is fused into helium—something totally irrespective of the number of hearts torn out by the Aztecs;
- winds are caused mainly by the unequal heating of the earth's surface (air that's been heated expands and rises, and cooler air gets sucked under the risen hot air)—human sacrifices to the likes of the Viking god Odin are of zero influence.

Because the premises behind these rituals fail to explain or predict anything accurately, we know the premises must be flawed. Given such flaws, we can safely conclude that the commands for these rituals were not the directives of an All-Knowing Divinity, but only the guesswork of man.

CHRIS: No argument here!

SCOTT: Besides agreeing with why these specific religious beliefs are from man rather than God, do you also agree with the general reasoning? That is, when people attribute the phenomena of nature to the moods of the supernatural, they have a history of coming up with "Divinity-directed explanations" that come from nowhere but their own imaginations?

CHRIS: Listening to the stories of the Aztecs, Ibo, Pygmies, and Vikings, yes, evidently this does happen.

Sources of "The Word"

SCOTT: We're up to our last category on the topic of non-Christian religions: sources of the prophet's Holy Word. For the sake of focus, I'll limit our discussion to how these prophets' versions of "God's Word" are often combinations of bits and pieces from pre-existing religions.

My first example is India's Sikhism, a religion that was born from a mix of Hindu and Islamic beliefs.^{ix} Sikhism was founded in the early 1500s by the prophet Nanak, a man who grew up exposed to both Hinduism and Islam—

^{ix} It's a "mix" from the secular (or at least non-Sikh) perspective, that is. Sikhs themselves emphatically deny this, and assert that their religion came uniquely from God.

their beliefs, and the violent clashes between their believers. Nanak received what he declared to be a vision from God about how the truths of each religion worked together: that both the Hindu and Muslim names for God (Om and Allah, respectively) were acceptable; that the Hindu teachings of karma and reincarnation were part of Allah's Truth, but polytheism and idolatry and the caste system were not, etc. From a secular point of view, Nanak's "Word" is understandable, as it makes sense that someone who grew up with clashing views of Divinity might try to reconcile them, attempting to bring about not only spiritual peace but physical peace to the region. And from the New Age perspective that all religions contain some aspect of The Divine, mixing and matching is not only acceptable, but common.

But if we're to stick with the fundamentalist's premise that one religion is from God and the rest are from man, does it make sense that God's One Truth might have been dictated in such a manner? That God would have first set forth the half-wrong Hindu religion some 3,000–5,000 years ago, then dictated the half-wrong Islamic religion several thousand years after that, and then waited another 900 years for Nanak to finally put them together correctly?

CHRIS: Impossible.

SCOTT: The next example on my list is Haiti's Vodun (more commonly known as Voodoo), another religion formed by the fusion of pre-existing ones. When Roman Catholic missionaries tried to convert Haiti's slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Haitians ended up creating a new religion by combining elements of Catholicism with their traditional African religions. They interpreted Jehovah as the head African god; Catholicism's saints as versions of their lesser gods (Saint Patrick, for example, was identified with their snake god); and Catholicism's use of candles, crosses, bells, and baptism was interwoven with African dancing, drumming, and ancestor worship. The Caribbean-originated Santeria religion arose the same way, as the semi-converted slaves recognized Saint Peter as their African god Oggzn (patron of war), Saint Lazarus as Babalz Ayi (patron of the sick), Our Lady of Charity as Oshzn (patron of sensuality), and so on.

From either the secular or the New Age perspective, it's not surprising that people who are forced into a new environment will try to make room for their former culture within the new setting. But from the fundamentalist's stance, a serious consideration of either Vodun or Santeria as "The One" brings up the same problem that Sikhism did. For why would God dictate half-accurate and half-*inaccurate* Holy Messages to different parts of the globe in different millenniums—and then take centuries before joining the jigsaw puzzle pieces together?

CHRIS: Obviously He would not—it's ridiculous to think that God would inspire inaccuracies anywhere!

SCOTT: Looking at Japan we can see yet another example of how new beliefs arose from a collision of cultures. Japan's traditional religion is Shintoism, which recognizes the *kami*, or spirit, of everything in nature, be it person, tree, or volcano. Once Buddhism made its way into Japan (A.D. 500s), hybrid versions of the two religions gradually started to appear: Shinto shrines began to use Buddhist ornaments, and Shinto gods and goddesses showed up in Buddhist stories.

Going back to the 500s B.C., we can see the pattern of religious borrowing in the origin of Buddhism itself. For even though founder Gautama (563–483 B.C.) rejected Hindu basics such as the caste system and the sacred status of the Vedas, he nonetheless kept other aspects and blended them into Buddhism, such as the belief in karma and the practice of meditation. Later on the two religions were further mixed, as new sects developed that recognized Hindu gods as Buddha's bodyguards.

And if we go back to the 1500s B.C., we find that Hinduism, too, is a mix of pre-existing religions: it combines the religious beliefs of the indigenous Harappans with those of the migrating/invading Aryans.

Sticking with the fundamentalist's premise, we know that Sikhism, Vodun, Santeria, the Buddhist-Shinto blends, the Buddhist-Hindu blends, and the Harappan-Aryan-Hindu combo can't *all* be from God. And given that at least five out of six of these must therefore be man-made, we can also conclude that counterfeit versions of "God's Word" have a history of being constructed from pre-existing religions.

CHRIS: The human origin of every “hybrid” religion, as you put it, is immediately evident. For God may have revealed His message gradually rather than all at once, but it has always been one consistent unfolding of the Truth—not something pasted together from scattered bits of conflicting faiths.

Internal Inconsistencies

SCOTT: And if a religion were found to contain internal contradictions, wouldn’t that further support the argument that it originated from multiple sources—from fallible humans who didn’t properly cross-check each other’s work? Reading through the clay tablets of ancient Egypt, for example, we find that some tablets say the god Horus is Osiris’s brother, but other tablets say Horus is Osiris’s son. Looking through the sacred writings of the Hindus, we find that the Vedas say the god Vishnu is the goddess Aditi’s husband, but other Hindu scriptures say Vishnu is Aditi’s son. And to use the Hindu passages we looked at a moment ago, note that the gods sometimes tell us the Sudra (the servant caste) were born from Purusa’s feet:

When they divided Purusa, how many ways did they apportion him? ... His mouth was the Brahman [caste], his arms were the Rajanaya, his thighs the Vaisya; from his feet the Sudra was born.

Purusa, the Cosmic Person, Rig Veda

—but in other passages, the gods tell us the Sudra were born from the rear-end:

If a man of one birth [the Sudra] hurls cruel words at one of the twice-born, his tongue should be cut out, for he was born from the rear-end.

Manusmṛti 8:270

The ancient Greek myths also contain contradictions: in *The Odyssey*, Helen of Troy is said to be the daughter of Zeus, but in *The Iliad* she’s the daughter of the King Tyndareus. And in Book 11 of *The Odyssey* the ghosts of the dead must drink blood before they can recall their former lives, but in Book 24 their memories are fine without it.

And note how select passages from *The Odyssey* depict Zeus as All-Knowing:

For well does he [Zeus] know both what shall happen and what not happen to everyone ...

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May Zeus, the protector of suppliants, chastise them, for he watches over everybody ...

Book XIII

—but in *The Iliad*, Zeus is often oblivious to what’s going on behind his back. To cite just one example, his wife Hera is able to seduce the Not-So-Almighty solely to distract him from protecting the Trojan army:

[Hera] turned her eyes to Zeus ... and loathed him. She set herself to think how she might hoodwink him, and in the end she deemed that it would be best for her to go to Ida and array herself in rich attire, in the hope that Zeus might become enamored of her, and wish to embrace her. While he was thus engaged a sweet and careless sleep might be made to steal over his eyes and senses. ... she anointed her delicate skin, and then she plaited the fair ambrosial locks that flowed in a stream of golden tresses from her immortal head. She put on the wondrous robe which Athena had worked for her with consummate art ... She fastened it about her bosom with golden clasps and she girded herself with a girdle that had a hundred tassels; then she fastened her earrings, three brilliant pendants that glistened most beautifully, through the pierced lobes of her ears ... she loosed from her bosom the curiously embroidered girdle into which all her charms had been wrought—love, desire, and that sweet flattery which steals the judgment even of the most prudent ...

... Hera then went to ... the topmost peak of Ida, and Zeus, driver of the clouds, set eyes upon her. As soon as he did so he became inflamed with the same passionate desire for her that he had felt when they had first enjoyed each other's embraces, and slept with one another without their dear parents knowing anything about it.

... With this [Zeus] caught his wife in his embrace; whereon the earth sprouted them a cushion of young grass, with dew-bespangled lotus, crocus, and hyacinth, so soft and thick that it raised them well above the ground. Here they laid themselves down and overhead they were covered by a fair cloud of gold from which there fell glittering dewdrops. Thus, then, did the sire of all things repose peacefully ... overcome at once by sleep and love, and he held his spouse in his arms.

Meanwhile Sleep made off to the ships of the [Greeks], to tell earth-encircling Poseidon ... "Now, Poseidon, you can help the [Greeks] ... and give them victory, though it be only for a short time while Zeus is still sleeping ... I have sent him into a sweet slumber, and Hera has beguiled him into going to bed with her."

... Zeus [later] woke on the crests of Ida, where he was lying with golden-throned Hera by his side, and starting to his feet he saw the Trojans [being butchered by the Greek army] ... and Hector [the Trojan] ... gasping for breath, wandering in mind and vomiting blood ... [Zeus] looked fiercely on Hera. "I see, Hera," said he, "you mischief-making trickster ..."

Books XIV and XV

Does the presence of such contradictory ideas within an allegedly divinely-inspired text serve as further evidence that this is the work of humans—humans working without the aid of an Omniscient Editor?

CHRIS: Scott, you know the answer just as well as I do: God's True Word is without error, but man leaves his mark of imperfection on everything he does on his own.

SCOTT: You've answered all my questions on how I may recognize a religion's signs of being man-made. Before we move on to discuss Christianity, let me read back my notes on all the premises we've agreed upon so far:

- The designs found in our beautiful, intricate, and apparently purposeful world suggest the existence of a Master Designer.
- Upon accepting that premise, we have reasonable grounds to speculate that such a Master Designer would have made some effort to communicate with the sole species He gave a genuine language to.
- In trying to make sense of all the multiple and conflicting versions of God's Word that lay before us, we agreed that a reasonable explanation was that only one version came from God, and the rest came from the human imagination.
- When it comes to choosing a religion, we agreed that blind trust in your local religion is an unreliable method, and that it's best to find some way to make a deliberate choice.
- We agreed that logic has its uses, not only for everyday matters such as buying a home or bicycle, but also for investigating religious claims, like whether Helios really chariots the sun across the sky. Though we briefly touched on faith as the truest path to knowing God—and we will look further into this as we go on—we also agreed that using logic to examine religion has merit, and even biblical support:

Don't always believe everything you hear just because someone says it is a message from God: test it first to see if it really is.

1 John 4:1, TLB

What a shame—yes, how stupid!—to decide before knowing the facts!

Proverbs 18:13, TLB

- And finally, we agreed on the following clues that a religion is man-made:
 - (1) an inaccurate and earth-bound perspective of the universe's design,
 - (2) sacred rules that are based on irrational prejudices and erroneous conclusions about cause and effect, and
 - (3) the "message from God" can be traced to a patchwork of pre-existing religions—one repercussion of which is internal contradictions.

As a side question, how do you think it's possible that religions so error-ridden have been passed on to generation after generation? One answer could be that followers don't fully contemplate their beliefs, but instead sustain them through rote tradition, not questioning their elders, accepting without understanding, and limiting their focus to the positive aspects of their faith. Would you say this might explain why man-made religions have continued to thrive?

CHRIS: The quote I mentioned earlier from Romans sums up the situation clearly: man's clutter of false religions arose from man's foolish thinking. But again Scott, I spend little time thinking about why others are in the dark, but rather on how I can best spread Jesus's light.

SCOTT: Then let's move on to Christianity, and stay with the same three categories: (1) design, (2) sacred rules, and (3) the origin of the prophet's Word.

Chapter 6: Comparing Christianity to Non-Christian Religions—Design, Rules, Origins

EXPLAINING NATURE’S DESIGN

SACRED RULES

- Rules Similar from Religion to Religion
- Holy Hierarchies
 - Slavery
 - Women
 - Homosexuality
- Interpreting Divine Will via Clues from Nature

SOURCES OF “THE WORD”

- The Old Testament
 - The Flood and the Ark
 - Babies in the River
 - Miscellaneous Like-Phrases
 - The “Babel” Defense
 - The Bible’s Polytheistic Roots
- The New Testament
 - Virgin Births
 - Resurrecting Gods
 - Life after Death
 - The Devil

ARCHEOLOGY, PROPHECIES, AND THE RESURRECTION

* * *

Explaining Nature’s Design

SCOTT: I must admit that I fail to see the uniqueness of Christianity in the design category. For just like all the other ancient texts we looked at, the Bible describes the universe from the limited, earth-bound perspective of man.

For example, Ecclesiastes 1:5 describes the sun orbiting the earth; Genesis 1:16 has it that the moon generates its own light; Psalm 93:1 and Psalm 104:5 say the earth doesn’t move; Daniel 4:11 and Matthew 4:8 rest on the premise that the earth must be flat (that if a tree or mountain were tall enough, everyone on our planet could see

it); and the author of Revelation believed that the stars are so tiny that trillions could fit on our planet, given his prophecy that Satan's tail will sweep a third of them down to the earth's surface.

CHRIS: You're completely misinterpreting the Bible in every one of your examples! Let's look at each of these passages, starting with your accusation that Scripture says the sun orbits the earth:

The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

Ecclesiastes 1:5, NRSV

This refers not to the structure of our solar system, but only to what the common man sees as he looks up to the heavens. Furthermore, it's little different from the expressions we use today. Would you say that modern meteorologists are making an "error" when they use the words *sunrise* and *sunset*?

Let's turn to what you claim is a passage about the moon generating its own light:

God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night ...

Genesis 1:16, NRSV

In the sense that the moon provides the earth with moonlight, it *is* a light! Just because God didn't spell out the detail that the moon is only reflecting the sun's light doesn't mean He thinks the moon *that He created* is emitting a light of its own!

As for your accusation that the Bible tells us the earth doesn't move:

[God] has established the world; it shall never be moved ... [God] set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.

Psalms 93:1, 104:5, NRSV

—this passage is simply telling us that God meant that the earth will not be moved or shaken from its *orbit*: that our planet will not be abandoned to spin wildly away from the sun and thus doom all life to certain and immediate death. It doesn't contradict what we know about the earth's rotation on its axis or its orbit around the sun.

As for the supposedly "flat-earth" passages:

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world ...

Matthew 4:8, KJV

The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth.

Daniel 4:11, KJV

—this is a ridiculous charge, for both passages are clearly using symbolic language. In Matthew 4:8, "all the kingdoms of the world" simply refers to an extremity of wealth. And Daniel 4:11 is an interpretation of a *dream*, so it's absurd to think of the tree's height as anything other than symbolic.

As for the allegation that the Bible describes the stars as tiny:

[The Dragon's] tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.

Revelation 12:4, NRSV

—this too reveals an ignorance of a proper reading of the Bible. For if you would just read this passage in its proper context, you would realize that the word *stars* refers not to heavenly bodies, but to the angels who join Satan in his rebellion against God.

SCOTT: I can see how all your explanations free the Bible from charges of ignorance of astronomy ... yet they strike me as similar to New Agers' defenses of the "true myths" found throughout the world's religions—namely, the way New Agers stretch the meaning of words until even the most primitive of myths can be interpreted as being "true in the metaphorical sense."

For when we were discussing the general cluelessness about nature in the stories of non-Christian religions, didn't we agree that when an alleged "vehicle of truth" had a distinctly earth-based perspective, revealing no more than is evident to mortal human senses—when the stories consistently portrayed the stars as tiny, the sun as circling the earth, and the moon as being an independent light—that this was a good indication that man was operating independently of an Omniscient Wisdom?

In other words, what we dismissed as "clueless" in stories from non-Christian religions, you're interpreting as "metaphorical" in the Bible.

This strikes me as a double standard: you reject the stretchy definition of the word *truth* that New Agers will use to defend their so-called true myths, yet you embrace that same stretchy definition when we limit our focus to the Judeo-Christian Bible.

CHRIS: This is *not* a double standard, because the crude errors of the pagans are not in the same category as the beauty of God speaking in metaphor. God's knowledge is unlimited, but He uses figurative language because it's a more effective method of communication than explaining everything scientifically—especially in ancient days! It's not because He doesn't know any better!

SCOTT: Let me see if I've got this right, using similar examples from *The Odyssey* and the Old Testament. Are you saying that when the ancient Greeks tell of the goddess Athena holding back the sun, as she does on the night Odysseus reunites with his wife Penelope after his 20-year trip away from home:

[Penelope] flew weeping to [Odysseus's] side, flung her arms about his neck, and kissed him. ... Odysseus in his turn melted, and wept as he clasped his dear and faithful wife to his bosom. As the sight of land is welcome to men who are swimming towards the shore, when Poseidon has wrecked their ship with the fury of his winds and waves—a few alone reach the land, and these, covered with brine, are thankful when they find themselves on firm ground and out of danger—even so was her husband welcome to her as she looked upon him, and she could not tear her two fair arms from about his neck.

Athena ... held night back in the far west [and] would not [let] Dawn leave Oceanus, nor yoke the two steeds ... that bear [Dawn] onward to break the day upon mankind ... [until] Odysseus and Penelope had their fill of love ... When [Athena] deemed that Odysseus had enough ... she bade gold-enthroned Dawn rise out of Oceanus that she might shed light upon mankind.

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—and when Israel's God arranges for a similar solar Holy Halting in the Book of Joshua:

And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the [Israelites] had avenged themselves upon their enemies. ... the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. ... And it came to pass, when Joshua and the children of Israel had made an end of slaying them with a very great slaughter ...

Joshua 10:13, 20, KJV

—that the Homer story of Odysseus and Penelope's night of love reveals only a crude pagan ignorance of the earth's rotation, but the Old Testament story of the Israelites slaughtering the Gibeonites is an example of God using the beauty of metaphor?

CHRIS: First of all, your examples are taken from two very different situations, so making a comparison between the “beauty” of these two passages is hardly appropriate. But otherwise, yes, those who wrote the Greek myths had only human ignorance as their guide, whereas Joshua 10:13’s reference to “stopping the sun” is just a literary device to show what lengths God will go through to aid those who serve Him.

And regardless, my point still stands that God uses language in ways the ancients would have been sure to understand.

SCOTT: So in other words, God could have told the Bible’s authors that the moon only reflects the sun’s light, that the earth rotates on its axis, that our planet is a sphere, and that the smallest star is hundreds of times bigger than the earth ... but He didn’t let them in on that knowledge—for the sake of easing communication?

CHRIS: Scott, God created the universe—who understands it better than Him? So of course He could have informed the biblical authors, but for whatever reason, this didn’t suit His purposes: His Larger Plan. It’s as simple as that.

SCOTT: If the Universe’s Architect and the Bible’s Author are indeed the same Being, I don’t understand why this Omniscient Creator would use metaphors that reinforced the ignorance of the day. Why would God choose not to educate us but to continue the confusion, setting the stage for brutal oppression of science in the centuries to come?⁹ It hardly seems likely that ideas such as a rotating planet were too complicated for people of that age: look at all their brilliant art, architecture, literature, and philosophy. There’s no reason to believe that people back then were any less intelligent; the only real difference between them and us is that we have the advantage of working with an enormous body of accumulated knowledge.¹ Surely ancient people could have understood a correct model of the universe had it been explained to them—it’s something even grade-school children can understand!

If the Bible had truly been guided by the Hand of a Heavenly Architect, I would think our solar system would have been described more accurately. Maybe something like:

And the Lord tilted the earth and put it in orbit around the sun to give forth the seasons, and gaveth the earth an eternal spin to give forth night and day.

Scott’s Proposed Revision

Not to be disrespectful, but maybe the Bible’s authors didn’t write this because they didn’t know it.

CHRIS: That the *humans* who were chosen to record the Bible did not have such knowledge hardly means that *God* didn’t! Our small human minds cannot hope to understand all the mysterious and wonderful ways of our Lord, so neither you nor I can pretend to know why the Bible is worded the way it is, or what would have been a “better” way for humans to discover their universe.

But as for any alleged conflicts between religion and science, I can tell you this: the focus of the Bible is to teach religious truths, not natural history. It is true there are biblical literalists who believe it teaches both, but I am not a “fundamentalist” in that sense. Those Christians unfortunately confuse matters by insisting on literal interpretations that were clearly not meant to be taken as such—for it’s obvious God knows that the sun does not orbit our planet, and that the stars are much larger than the earth!

Proof that God often speaks to us in metaphor can be seen by reading the following passage from Psalms:

Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy ...

Psalms 98:8, NIV

Surely no one will claim the Bible is “in error” because rivers don’t have hands and mountains lack vocal chords!

ⁱ “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants,” as the saying goes. This was from Isaac Newton in reference to predecessors Galileo and Descartes and others, but it equally applies to the technological innovators of today.

You see, once you put aside the confusion of the literalist's claims, the invaluable religious truths come shining through: that God created all things at the beginning of time, that He made the world for man's use, that man's original state was one of blessedness, and that man lost that blessedness through original sin. So you see there is no conflict between the Bible and science in these matters, because they are concerned with wholly different fields.ⁱⁱ

SCOTT: When it comes to a passage such as Psalm 98:8, yes, the use of metaphor is undeniable. But when it comes to passages such as those that rest on the premise that the sun orbits an unmoving earth (Joshua 10:13, Ecclesiastes 1:5, Psalm 93:1, Psalm 104:5), it seems that few Christians could recognize God's use of metaphor until scientists such as Copernicus and Galileo showed what God *really* meant.ⁱⁱⁱ

But to move on with the "the Bible's instruction is spiritual, not scientific" explanation—I guess this could also account for the omission of the earth's ancient history prior to man's arrival. Is this why, for example, there's no mention of the 160-million-year reign of the dinosaurs?

CHRIS: The Scriptures contain the message that God feels mankind needs to know from Him. This does not mean that man is forbidden to discover any worldly knowledge that's not covered by the Bible! Learning to work with electricity, constructing various scientific theories about species of the past, discovering the orbits of the planets and solar systems and galaxies—these are all properly the studies of man, and unrelated to religion. Such discoveries do not contradict the Bible: they're simply unconnected. Just because God didn't tell man about electricity doesn't mean that plugging in a lamp is a strike against His Word! In the same way, discoveries of extinct giant lizards and the like are outside the Bible's concern.¹⁰

SCOTT: But a common component of almost every religion is an attempt at explaining creation and the ways of nature—so at least in this area, religion and science *do* overlap. And when an allegedly Divine Text gives us only a primitive's description of the world around us, it's damaging to the credibility that such a description was penned by an Omniscient Wisdom.

Your defense that the Bible teaches not "historical truths" but "religious truths" *is*, I admit, a possible escape hatch. But once we open that escape hatch, all the non-Christian religions can slip through it as well. For if Joshua 10:13's line "the sun stood still in the midst of heaven" is a metaphor, couldn't the explanation of the Greek god Helios pulling the sun across the sky be a divine metaphor as well? And what about the Finland folktale about the giant duck egg: its yolk being used to create the sun, its white for the moon, and the shell's spots for the stars? Such a story could also be interpreted as possessing "not a literal truth, but the religious truth that Divinity created all things." Christianity's rivals could likewise excuse their own ignorance of the dinosaur's 160-million-year history with the rationalization that it's "outside religion's concern."

I'll acknowledge that it's *possible* that the stories we find in non-Christian religions make scientifically-inaccurate references to nature because ignorant humans wrote those tales, while the Bible includes scientifically-inaccurate references to nature because our Divine Architect prefers metaphors over facts. I just find it more plausible that *all* ancient scriptures reflect the limited knowledge of ancient humans because ancient humans were the sole authors for each and every one.

But rather than further argue the issue with you, I'd like to move on—for as I mentioned earlier, it's not my intention to try to change any of your beliefs. I'm just trying to understand for myself how Christianity is indeed in a separate class from all the other religions. In the area of "explaining nature's design" I don't see this, but perhaps I'll be able to discover Christianity's uniqueness in our next category, that of sacred rules.

ⁱⁱ Chris's response in this section is based, in part, on the pamphlet *God's Story of Creation* (by the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Information Service, 1955), under its section "No Conflict Between Science and Genesis."

ⁱⁱⁱ See endnote 9 (p. 203) for details on the Church's initial reactions to Copernicus and Galileo.

Sacred Rules

SCOTT: As when discussing non-Christian religions, I'd like to talk about three categories of sacred rules: rules that are similar as we go from religion to religion, rules that dictate Holy Hierarchies, and rules based on interpretations of Divine Will via clues from nature.

Rules Similar from Religion to Religion

The Ten Commandments, Solomon's words of wisdom, and Jesus's parables all contain guidelines for an ethical life: to be kind and truthful, not to steal or kill, to pay our debts, to watch out for pride and conceit, to remind ourselves of the limited happiness that material wealth brings, and so on. But as we discussed earlier, similar "Holy Laws" are found in most other religions as well. And as we agreed when discussing non-Christian beliefs about Divinity's cautionary tales—the Native American story about the thief's eternal backpack, the Vietnamese belief about abusive people being reincarnated as donkeys, etc.—humans everywhere apparently do assign divine origins to what are really just made-up stories that offer practical guidelines for social harmony and conflict prevention.

Strictly secular governments have these types of laws as well, such as legal prohibitions against corruption, theft, rape, and murder. And this is no surprise, for any society that failed to put a check on community-destroying behavior would have died out long ago—so it makes sense that ethics that are linked to a community's survival are ethics that we find in all civilizations.

Even a so-called "outlaw" ruler such as Genghis Khan, whose army slaughtered its way across the greater part of Asia, gave his troops strict rules for the treatment of fellow Mongols: Thou Shalt Nots included adultery, kidnapping, slavery, murder, and horse-theft.

So although I concede that a Creator of the Universe *might* have specifically authored the Judeo-Christian ethical laws, man could have done so just as easily all on his own.

CHRIS: The morality of the Bible *far* exceeds the bare-minimum standards found in secular governments, and exceeds every other religion as well. Also don't forget that in its time—although other religions may have subsequently copied this feature—Christianity was unique in its message that every single human, regardless of tribe or background, is loved by our Creator, made in our Creator's image, and destined for eternal communion with Him. Compare *that* with the "ethics" of Genghis Khan. Compare that with the surrounding beliefs of the time period, such as those of the Greeks and Romans, who held that only the elite were worthy of freedom and dignity. Read what Luke has to say about God's acceptance of people *everywhere*:

In every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Acts 10:35, NRSV

—for we are all descendants of Adam, and no one man is inherently superior to the next:

He created all the people of the world from one man, Adam ...

Acts 17:26, TLB

Plus, no other religion speaks out so powerfully for peace:

Pray much for others; plead for God's mercy upon them ... Pray in this way for kings and all others who are in authority over us, or are in places of high responsibility, so that we can live in peace ...

1 Timothy 2:1–2, TLB

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Matthew 5:9, KJV

—and provides instruction on breaking the vicious cycle of violence, telling us that even our *enemies* should receive our prayers and love:

I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you ...

Matthew 5:44, KJV

SCOTT: I won't challenge your position on which religion is the most moral, as such a task exceeds my abilities. And there are sections of the Bible in which the morality of the character it calls God is questionable ... though we'll get to those soon enough.

But as for the uniqueness of Christianity's message of equality, this may have been a radical contrast to Roman law, but Buddhism and Jainism—both founded some five hundred years prior to the birth of Christ—also preached human equality: part of the very foundation of both these Indian religions was rejecting the elitism of the Hindu caste system.¹¹ As the Buddhist Scriptures say:

One is not a brahman by virtue of matted hair, lineage or caste. When a man possesses both Truth and truthfulness, then he is pure, then he is a brahman. What use is your [styled] hair, you fool? What use is your [expensive clothing made of] antelope skin? You are tangled inside, and you are just making the outside pretty.

The Dhammapada, 26:393–394

And as for peacefulness, I've yet to come across a more extreme example than the Jainist monk, who takes the following holy directions to treat all living things with compassion so literally:

All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away. This is the pure, unchangeable, eternal law, which the clever ones, who understand the world, have declared ... Correctly understanding the law, one should arrive at indifference for the impressions of the senses, and "not act on the motives of the world."

**Akaranga Sutra, First Book,
Fourth Lecture (Righteousness), First Lesson: 1–2**

—that he wears a veil to avoid accidentally swallowing any small insect life, carries a broom to sweep away any tiny creatures that he might otherwise step on, avoids going outside during the rainy season (too many forms of life come to the surface that the broom won't catch), and allows himself to be bitten by gnats and mosquitoes rather than brush them away and risk their injury.

Making peace with one's enemies is not unique either, as all the following were written centuries before the time of Christ:

The Akkadians (2200 B.C.):

Do not return evil to your adversary; requite with kindness the one who does evil to you, maintain justice for your enemy, be friendly to your enemy.

The Akkadian Precepts^{iv}

^{iv} Translation taken from George A. Barton's *Archaeology and the Bible*, 3rd edition, p. 408. From the *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook03.html.

Zoroastrianism (500s B.C.^v):

I pledge myself to the [Zoroastrian] religion, which causes the attack to be put off and weapons put down ...

Yasna 12:9

Taoism (500s B.C.):

It is the way of the Tao to ... recompense injury with kindness.

Tao Te Ching, 63:1

Buddhism (500s B.C.):

Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law ... Let us live happily then, not hating those who hate us! Among men who hate us let us dwell free from hatred!

The Dhammapada, 1:5; 15:197

And even the likes of Genghis Khan recognized the practical advantages of maintaining peace with one's neighbors:

Now Chingiz [Genghis] Khan had sent the Sultan by those merchants a message to the following effect: "The areas which bound on our territory have been purged of enemies and have been completely conquered and subjugated to our will; and we now have the obligations of neighbors. Human wisdom so requires it; that the path of concord should be trodden by either side; that the duties of friendship be observed; that we should bind ourselves to aid and assist one another in the event of untoward happenings; and that we should keep open the paths of security, frequented and deserted, so that merchants may ply to and fro in safety and without restraint."^{vi}

I'm not denying that there have been humane benefits with the spread of Jesus's teachings. I'm just saying that in my search for something that points to Christianity as the source of Wisdom Above All Others, I don't see it here. There are lots of different reasons for behaving ethically—obedience to select biblical passages is only one of many.¹² Just look at Japan: fewer than one percent of the Japanese are Christians, yet their crime rate is much lower than the predominantly-Christian America.

Your point about all humans being loved by our Creator leads to my next category, that of "Holy Hierarchies": rules justifying persecution.

Holy Hierarchies

SCOTT: Earlier we discussed examples of the human, rather than holy, motivation behind the prejudices in certain non-Christian religions: the "sacred" laws about the Untouchables of India, the Buraku of Japan, and the Osu outcasts of Nigeria.

When I read the Judeo-Christian Bible, however, I can't help but notice similar evidence of human-authored bias. For example, there is God's shunning of those with physical disabilities:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ... No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a

^v For simplicity's sake I am dating Zoroastrianism to the 500s B.C., because Iranian tradition has it that Zoroaster was born in 570 B.C. Yet scholars tend to date the earliest Zoroastrian texts anywhere from 1000–1700 B.C.: see endnote 23 (p. 227) for details.

^{vi} Ala-ad-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan, the History of the World Conqueror*, p. 368.

hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. ... he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord ...

Leviticus 21:16–20, 23, NRSV

—and here’s one on God’s bias against children of unmarried women:

A bastard may not enter the sanctuary, nor any of his descendants for ten generations.

Deuteronomy 23:2, TLB

Don’t you find anything strange about the Creator of the Universe being concerned with contamination of His sanctuary via the likes of dwarfs and “bastards”?

CHRIS: You must realize that the Old Testament’s setting is that of a different and harsher era—what we call the Days of the Law—and we cannot judge it by today’s standards. That time period lasted up until Jesus’s arrival, which ushered in the Days of Grace. Paul explains this in Galatians:

Until Christ came we were guarded by the law, kept in protective custody, so to speak, until we could believe in the coming Savior. Let me put it another way. The Jewish laws were our teacher and guide until Christ came to give us right standing with God through our faith. But now that Christ has come, we don’t need those laws any longer to guard us and lead us to him. For now we are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ ...

Galatians 3:23–26, TLB

We’re in no position to understand those days or to pass judgment on how things should have been. We can only trust in God that He arranged everything for the best. And however strange certain aspects of that age may seem to us now, we must also remember that our time spent here on earth is of little significance when compared to the time we’ll spend in God’s Kingdom.

Slavery

SCOTT: I do want to talk more about the argument that “we cannot comprehend, but only trust, the Word of God”^{vii} ... but I’d like to postpone that discussion for the time being, and instead just finish going through the rest of the questions I have about Holy Hierarchies. Let’s move on to the Almighty’s approval of slavery, as specified throughout both the Old and New Testament:

When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner’s property.

Exodus 21:20–21, NRSV

As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property.

Leviticus 25:44–46, NRSV

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for

^{vii} See the Index listing under the heading “finite man cannot grasp the Infinite, theory of.”

your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

Colossians 3:22–24, NRSV

God, according to the Bible, even spells out slavery laws for men who wish to sell their daughters:

When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed ...

Exodus 21:7–8, NRSV

Do you believe that the Creator of the Universe wrote this how-to section for slave-owners? That He told fathers it was okay to sell their daughters, and told slaves they should work wholeheartedly for their masters? That it was *God* who said it's okay for slave-owners to beat their slaves with rods—with “just don't beat them to death” being the only restriction?

CHRIS: It's a mistake to hear the word *slavery* as defined in contemporary terms—the evil practice of buying or kidnapping people, forcing them to work without pay, and whipping them if they disobey or even complain—and assume that the word meant the same thing back in ancient times. For in the biblical era, slavery was often just a voluntary way of getting out of debt. If a man owed more than he could pay, he could offer himself for sale to a well-off man, receive the compensation in his own hands, and then use the money to settle his outstanding financial obligations. The poorer man would then work for the richer, and go free once his term of service was over—something similar to what was later referred to as being an indentured servant. It was a much more humane practice than sending debtors to prison, as was often the practice in later years.

So it is in this context that we need to read Paul's advice to slaves in Colossians—Paul was simply urging those people to fulfill their contractual obligations honestly.

SCOTT: I don't see how this “indentured servants” explanation applies to the Exodus 21:7–8 lines about children being sold by their parents, or the description in Leviticus 25:46 of Hebrew-owned slaves as “possessions” to be treated as “inheritable property.”

CHRIS: The Leviticus 25 passage only means that if an owner died, the debt owed to him by the slave would still be paid to the owner's children. As for Exodus 21, yes, sometimes the sale of a slave was not arranged by the slave himself, but by a parent. Yet you need to realize that back then they didn't have today's welfare programs—as inadequate as these programs may be—so for a truly destitute family, selling their children to wealthier families was often the most humane thing to do: far preferable to letting their children wander as beggars or die from starvation.

And if you read Exodus 21 from verse 7 through 11, you'll notice that God is setting rules for the ethical treatment of children who were sold: sons would be set free after six years of labor, and daughters would be allowed to be bought back if they were not married—and if the daughter ended up marrying a son of the owner, she was no longer to be treated as slave-girl, but as a daughter. And if this rule were violated, the daughter was allowed to leave freely without payment.

Again, it's absolutely wrong to read the word *slavery* in the Bible and associate it with the abject conditions of slavery as it existed in the A.D. 1600s–1800s. Slaves in biblical times often had good homes and good relations with their masters, and even rose to prominent positions. Read Genesis 39:1–6: when Joseph was sold in Egypt he became Potiphar's slave, yet Joseph quickly became the head of Potiphar's household, running all his business affairs. Note, too, that Luke was a slave, and his Roman master educated him to become a physician. Slaves covered all professions from low to high—many were far better off than free laborers, and had less fear of the future.

SCOTT: I understand your point about the mistake of taking today's definitions and inappropriately applying them to an ancient era ... yet my point was not to criticize the lives of the ancient Hebrews, but rather to question

whether it's more plausible to believe that these rules were authored by people living in a harsh era, or authored by an All-Fair Creator of the Universe.

What about, for example, the Exodus 21:21 passage on the fine details of how close to death a slave-owner is allowed to beat his slave?

CHRIS: Realize that slaves were punished only for crimes, and that beatings were the punishment of the day: whether the criminal was a slave or a free man. The difference is that non-slaves were punished by local law enforcement, whereas this responsibility fell to the owner when it came to his slaves. Yet God never sanctions unfair treatment of slaves. In fact, oppression of the poor and needy—and even oppressing the laborer by withholding fair wages—is frequently mentioned as a reason for God's dissatisfaction with rulers.

SCOTT: I still find it farfetched to believe that an All-Fair Creator would set up and endorse such a system ... for even back then, there *were* people—including non-slaves—who condemned slavery as unjust. In the third century B.C., for example, the Greek “Stoic” philosophers denounced slavery as a deviation from what they believed was the divine and natural order of life, declaring it corruptive to the soul.^{viii} And the pagan Roman philosopher Epictetus (c. A.D. 55–135) demonstrated a better grasp of the Golden Rule than did any of the Bible's authors when he wrote:

What you shun enduring yourself, attempt not to impose on others. You shun slavery—beware of enslaving others!^{ix}

How is it that there were pagan Greeks and Romans who spoke out against slavery, yet the Bible contains not a word against it?

CHRIS: Not living with God's Truth in their hearts, the Greek and Roman slave-owners were undoubtedly much crueler than were the Hebrew and Christian slave-owners, which is probably why those select pagans felt more compelled to comment on it.

Also realize that the Bible's discussion of slavery can sometimes be metaphorical: for we are all “slaves” in a way, in that God is our master. And remember that Jesus Himself is described as a slave:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Philippians 2:5–7, NRSV

Women

SCOTT: I feel we're deadlocked on this issue, so let's move on to the Bible's treatment of women, starting with the way they're treated as property gains during wartime:

... and when the Lord your God gives [victory over an enemy town] into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you.

Deuteronomy 20:13–14, NRSV

^{viii} From Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume II*. Book 7 (Zeno), 121–122, p. 227: “[The Stoics] declare that ... slavery is a privation of [power of independent action] ... this too is evil.”

^{ix} Epictetus, *The Golden Sayings of Epictetus, Volume II*, Part 2, Chapter XLI.

There's nothing unusual, unfortunately, about such behavior in man's recorded history. The holy justification for the abuse of female captives, for example, is likewise documented in the first-hand accounts of Genghis Khan's plunderings:

Temujin [Genghis Khan] ... spake ... "Being named by powerful Heaven [we] hath taken [our] vengeance ... [on] the Merkid people ... we have made an end of the men ... and we have ravished those of the women ..."^x

The Mongols now entered the town and drove all the inhabitants, nobles and commoners, out on the plain ... separating the women from the men. Alas! how many [wives] did they drag from the bosoms of their husbands! ... How many parents were distraught at the ravishment of their virgin daughters!^{xi}

And compare the way the Mongols measured war booty in livestock and women:

... by this triumph the army waxed mighty ... Each achieved his object according to his desire, and all received in their embraces mistresses worthy of their longings. ... the devotees of wanton pastimes began to take their pleasure of moon-faced beauties; and the ambitious were gratified by the acquisition of wealth and the amassing of horses and camels.^{xii}

—with the way God allegedly does the same:

The plunder remaining from the spoils [after the Israelites' battle with the Midianites] that the fighting men had taken totaled 675,000 sheep, 72,000 cattle, 61,000 donkeys, and 32,000 young girls.

Numbers 31:32–35, NLT

To read such words from males of ancient days—and to read them in today's newspapers, for that matter—may be tragically common, but is it likely that the Creator of the Universe shares these sentiments? That God counts young girls alongside farm animals when assessing war booty?

Why is it that descriptions of the Mongols' atrocities:

"[The Mongols] drove all the men and women out into the open country and spared no one over ten years of age except the younger women."^{xiii}

—are understood as the deeds of barbarians, but similar atrocities recorded in the Bible:

Now kill all the boys and all the women who have slept with a man. Only the young girls who are virgins may live; you may keep them for yourselves.^{xiv}

Numbers 31:17–18, NLT

—are believed to be directed by God?

^x Francis Woodman Cleaves, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, pp. 47–48. (Cleaves's book is an English translation of a first-hand account that had been recorded in the year 1240.)

^{xi} Juvaini, *Genghis Khan, the History of the World Conqueror*, pp. 161–162. (This account dates from 1253. Juvaini [1226–1283] was a Muslim historian and an eyewitness to the Mongolian attack against Persia.)

^{xii} Juvaini, *Genghis Khan, the History of the World Conqueror*, pp. 345–346.

^{xiii} Juvaini, *Genghis Khan, the History of the World Conqueror*, pp. 615–616.

^{xiv} Following God's orders, these are Moses's instructions to the army officers who captured the cities of Midian. The Promised Land battles are discussed further in Chapter 7's "The Slaughters."

CHRIS: I may not be able to answer completely to your satisfaction, but part of the reason for this goes back to the fact that life was much different in those Days of the Law. So again, realize that the Old Testament doesn't speak to us in quite the same way the New Testament does.

Nonetheless, the comparison you're making to the chaotic carnage of the Mongols is completely inappropriate, as you're skipping over passages in which God provides strict ethical rules on humane treatment of women from conquered tribes:

[Moses, passing on God's commands to the Israelites, said:] When you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman whom you desire and want to marry, and so you bring her home to your house: she shall shave her head, pare her nails, discard her captive's garb, and shall remain in your house a full month, mourning for her father and mother; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife.

Deuteronomy 21:10–13, NRSV

Look at how fair God is when it comes to treating the Israelites' enemies, as the male soldier who might be tempted to take advantage of a female prisoner is given multiple restrictions. For one, he could not touch her for a full month, and his lust was further held in check by the requirement that she shave her head. This is *not* something written from the perspective of a pillage-crazed warrior!

Furthermore, these instructions lead up to *marrying* these women, so it's not at all comparable to the Mongols who "dragged wives from their husbands" and "ravished the daughters!" Quite the contrary: female captives were given a chance to mourn their losses, put aside their past lives, and then start anew.

SCOTT: On the one hand, you have a point about the passage in Deuteronomy 21:10–13 not being in quite the same category as the descriptions of the apparently unrestricted Mongols under Genghis Khan. On the other hand, there are multiple passages about God's commands for slaughtering every member of foreign tribes except young virgins, and the Deuteronomy 21 passage is the only one I know of that hints at any sort of restraint. In Numbers 31:17–18, for example, God tells the Israelites to slaughter all the male Midianites and adult women, and the only directions for the virgin Midianite girls is "keep them for yourselves."

Furthermore, although Deuteronomy 21 may indeed demonstrate a sensitivity of sorts when compared to unrestrained rape, it's hardly the height of compassion: after all, the women were still forced into being the brides of those who slaughtered their families. It can't compare to the far more humane Geneva Conventions, man-made as they may be. For the Geneva agreement not only specifies that women prisoners are to be treated honorably, it also states that males and females alike should be treated humanely, housed in hygienic surroundings and given medical care, and be kept safe from violence of all kinds, including humiliating or degrading treatment.^{xv}

So I hardly see Deuteronomy 21's instructions for shaving a female prisoner's head and waiting a month before marrying her—with no mention of the women having any say in the matter—as evidence that an All-Loving Creator must have inspired the text.

Regardless, I'd like to move on, as I have three more questions about women and religious literature, by way of comparisons between the biblical and non-biblical.

The first comparison has to do with passages about women's intelligence. The contempt we find in the Hindu Scriptures is something that most of us today would dismiss as the chauvinism of male authors:

Lord Indra himself has said, "The mind of woman cannot be disciplined; she has very little intelligence."

Rig Veda 8. 33.17

—but according to the Judeo-Christian Bible, God Himself, via Solomon, feels the same way:

^{xv} From the *Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, adopted on 12 August 1949 by the Diplomatic Conference for the Establishment of International Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War.

One tenth of one per cent of the men I interviewed could be said to be wise, but not one woman!

Ecclesiastes 7:28, TLB

The second comparison is about the derision for women's nature in general, as recorded in one of the Hindu versions of Divinity's Word:

This is the nature of women the whole world over: Women care nothing for righteousness, they are flighty, sharp-tongued, and divisive.

Ramayana 3, 43:27

—and how it is mirrored, at least in some passages, in the Judeo-Christian version:

O my son, whom I have dedicated to the Lord, do not spend your time with women—the royal pathway to destruction.

Proverbs 31:2–3, TLB

And last, let's look at the disregard for women's opinions. When we read this in *The Odyssey*, we see the “speech is a man's matter” attitude as typical of patriarchal ancient Greece:

“Mother,” said Telemachus, “... Go within the house and busy yourself with your daily duties, your loom, your distaff ... for speech is man's matter ... it is I who am master here.”

Book I

—yet we see a similar stifling of women's opinions in what you say is the True Word of God, via the letters of Paul:

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached? Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 14:34–37, NRSV

Paul is consistent on the subject, as he also declares that God created woman to be under man's authority:

God's glory is man made in his image, and man's glory is the woman. The first man didn't come from woman, but the first woman came out of man. And Adam, the first man, was not made for Eve's benefit, but Eve was made for Adam. So a woman should wear a covering on her head as a sign that she is under man's authority, a fact for all the angels to notice and rejoice in.

1 Corinthians 11:7–10, TLB

When we see how similar the sexism is in the Greek, Hindu, and biblical texts, doesn't it seem reasonable to conclude that each and every passage reflects nothing more than the opinions of male authors in ancient times?

CHRIS: The misogynistic passages you cited from non-biblical sources have nothing in common with God's Word! Solomon's passages in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, for example, only refer to *certain* women, not all. As for a woman being under man's authority, yes, First Corinthians 11 does say this, but in no way does Paul say that men have the right to be abusive. Read Ephesians 5—Paul specifically says that husbands should show their wives the same love that Christ showed the church:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ... In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Ephesians 5:25, 28, NRSV

As for Paul's line in First Corinthians 14 about women being "silent in the churches," Paul didn't mean that women's ideas were unworthy—that passage is only in reference to maintaining order in church meetings, specifically those meetings in which the early Church was establishing its policies. Because hierarchies are necessary for an organization to run efficiently, Paul simply meant that males were to take the lead in that limited setting. It's quite unlike the line you cited from Homer where Telemachus gives the blanket statement that "speech is man's matter."

Look at the way other religions and cultures treated women back then—as almost worthless except for breeding and physical labor—and then note just how prominently the Bible features its heroines. One of the first judges in Israel is the woman Deborah! What's more, Deborah prophesies an upcoming *military* victory by Jael, another woman! And before that, the Bible makes it clear that if it weren't for the courage and resourcefulness of Moses's mother and sister, Moses would have never survived (Exodus 2:1–9).

In fact, you can hardly get past any important event in the Bible without reading how women played an important role. Many parts of the Bible are on behalf of women or even *by* women: the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), the Song of Miriam (Exodus 15:21), Proverbs 31 (wisdom from King Lemuel's mother), and the entire books of Ruth and Esther. Even Paul, author of the most frequently quoted "sexist lines," is lavish with his praise of women—and not because they excelled at cleaning up or having babies, but because of their faith and hard work.

Also remember that the first people to see Christ after His resurrection were women! In Roman courts, women were considered so non-credible that they weren't even allowed to be witnesses. In stark contrast, Jesus chose women to witness the world's most momentous event!

Scott, keep in mind that God has a purpose behind everything He does. And God created men and women differently, giving each special qualities that He did not always give the other. To cite just one example, God gave women certain emotional gifts that men often lack. So when you isolate passages about "women being under men's authority," you're missing the larger picture: the vital roles women play throughout the Bible, the unique gifts God gave to each gender, and the love and care with which Christ wants us to treat each other. You need to balance what Paul says in First Corinthians with his writings in Romans:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Romans 12:9–10, NRSV

SCOTT: I could quibble over some minor matters in the examples you used ... but I'll let them go, and I'll even concede that the Bible may not be as one-sided as my initial presentation suggests. Still, the points you raise don't erase all the biblical passages that condone—and even encourage—oppression of women. Rather than seeing how "everything balances out in the larger picture," I see the conflicting passages as evidence that the Bible's different authors had conflicting ideas about how women should be treated. And Paul's inconsistencies strike me as signs of an average human author, not one who's a medium of the Divine.

I don't wish to come off as disrespectful; I'm only giving you my honest response to all these hierarchy-related passages. I just find it difficult to believe that instructions from a Beyond-Brilliant Creator Of Us All would include ostracizing the physically disabled, setting lax guidelines for masters on how hard they're allowed to beat their slaves, and authorizing all the inconsistent passages—the cruel and the compassionate—about women. As for the plausibility that *man* could have come up with such instructions ... well, when it comes to humans, prejudice and brutality and inconsistencies are the norm.

Homosexuality

SCOTT: Let's move on to my last subject in the category of divine prejudices, those of God's alleged laws against homosexuality.

CHRIS: To say that God is "prejudiced" against homosexuals is like saying God is "prejudiced" against liars and thieves! Homosexuality is a *sin* against God—the Bible tells us this clearly:

And in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Romans 1:27, NRSV

Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.

Leviticus 18:22, KJV

Much of our society may embrace perverted sexual practices nowadays, but such acts are still abominations to God! Homosexuality, pornography, prostitution: these are all *deviant* sexual practices, because they run contrary to God's ultimate purpose for sex, which is procreation and furthering the bond between a married man and woman.

But let me make it clear that God hates only the *deeds* of homosexuals, not homosexuals themselves. God, in fact, loves all people, homosexuals included. I should also add that *all* humans are born with a tendency to sin: the tendency to short-circuit our chance for eternal life by yielding to the evils of the flesh. Yet through faith in Jesus Christ, we can all—and this includes homosexuals—break the hold that sin has upon us. Evil temptations can be overcome when we repent, and allow our lives to be guided by the Holy Spirit.^{xvi}

SCOTT: Again, if the words "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination" appeared emblazoned across the sky in some sort of undeniably supernatural manner, I would know for sure that God hates the deeds of the homosexual. And if that were the case, I would unquestioningly join in on the condemnation of these "deviant" practices—for I would not be so foolish as to oppose the Master Creator of the Universe! But as things stand, I don't know see a way to know our said-Creator's feelings on the subject; I can only know what various groups of middlemen are telling me.

Of course, Christianity and Judaism are not alone in condemning gays—many other religions issue similar holy prohibitions. We can find this throughout the ages, from the sixth century B.C.^{xvii} Zoroastrianism:

The man that lies with mankind as man lies with womankind: ... is the man that is a Daeva [demon] ...

The Vendidad, Fargard VIII, Chapter 5

—to the seventh century A.D. Islam:

Will you fornicate with males and abandon your wives, whom your Lord has created for you? ... Do you commit indecent acts that no nation has ever committed before? You lust after men in preference to women. Truly, you are a degenerate people.

Surah 26:165–166, 7:80–81

^{xvi} Chris's words are based on the "Bible Answers" section from the website *Christ Unlimited Ministries* (www.bible.com), under the section "What Does the Bible Say about Homosexuality?"

^{xvii} See endnote 32 (p. 227) for details on the uncertainties of the dating of Zoroastrianism.

—to the nineteenth century A.D. Bahaism:

Ye are forbidden to commit adultery, sodomy and lechery. ... We shrink, for very shame, from treating the subject of boys. ... Commit not that which is forbidden to you in Our Holy Tablet, and be not of those who rove distractedly in the wilderness of their desire.

The Prophet Baha'u'llah^{xviii}

—to the twentieth century Church of Scientology: founder L. Ron Hubbard puts gays in the same category as perverts and criminals, insisting that they need to either undergo Church “processing” or be permanently quarantined.^{xix}

But the mere fact that such varying faiths all say the same thing lets us know that in at least four out of five of the above examples, people made up this prohibition on their own. For we are sticking with the fundamentalist’s premise that only one religion is God’s Truth, and all the other religions were made up by people, are we not?

CHRIS: Yes, but the fact that all these different religions agree in this particular area is hardly proof that homosexuality is not a sin!

SCOTT: True, and I acknowledge that this condemnation may indeed have Divinity on its side—for on that I can’t yet say—so I won’t rule it out.

But we’ve also seen how humans come up with interpretations of Divinity’s preferences via murky “clues” picked up from our natural surroundings, and I can think of at least two reasons why this applies to the widespread prejudice against homosexuality.

Interpreting Divine Will via Clues from Nature

SCOTT: First, any trait that varies from the norm is a candidate for being treated with suspicion. Just look at the prejudices against something as benign as being left-handed!

- our word “sinister” comes from the Latin word for “left”: *sinistra*;
- older versions of the Oxford Dictionary define left-handed as “ill-omened, inauspicious, sinister, defective”;
- in Buddhism, the “Noble Eightfold Path” to enlightenment is the right-hand-side path of life, while the wrong way of life is the left-hand-side;
- in Greek mythology, good omens are witnessed to your right, bad omens to your left;
- in Roman mythology, the “land of the dead” has two roads: those who died with honor take the road to the right, those who died without honor take the road to the left.

Second, humans have a track record of believing there’s Holy Wrath directed at people with health problems—look at how the Ibo of Nigeria took the health risks of multiple births as signifying the presence of evil spirits^{xx}—

^{xviii} Sources: Baha’u’llah tablet dated “the 17 of Jamadi-2 of the year 1291 AH” (more commonly known as 1875), and verse 107 of the *Aqdas*, the Holy Scriptures of the Baha’i. NOTE: the references to sodomy and “the subject of boys” are generally interpreted as a prohibition of all homosexual relations.

^{xix} Sources: L. Ron Hubbard, *Dianetics, The Modern Science of Mental Health*, Book Two, p. 120; and *Science of Survival*, Book One, p. 131.

and it happens to be that the nature of male gay sex spreads venereal disease more rapidly than heterosexual or lesbian sex. So that may have something to do with the way the Bible focuses its hatred of homosexuality almost solely on gay men (in Genesis, Leviticus, Romans, Kings, and Timothy), practically ignoring gay women.^{xxi} It *could* be that gay women were more discrete and God didn't notice them as much, or that God has a double standard: that homosexuality is a wicked sin for men, but only a mild sin for women ... but the explanation that human authors would have a double standard is more plausible.

Now, if the prohibition against homosexuality were universal, such as the prohibitions against theft and murder (within one's own community anyway), one could make a more plausible case for saying that our said-God condemned it—even without knowing for sure which middleman was God's Chosen. But when we take a broader look at all the rival middlemen, we can see there's a wide range of opinions on the subject.

Theravada Buddhists, for example, condemn "sexual misconduct"—incest, adultery, child molestation, any type of coercive sex—but consider any adult consensual sex within a relationship as acceptable, whether straight or gay. Zen Buddhists, too, believe that any harmful, manipulative, or exploitative sexual practices—sex with anyone who's married or engaged, anything involving children or those unable to give informed consent—are forbidden, and also look down upon promiscuity as a "violation of the Middle Path." But within mutually committed adult relationships, they make no distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

In every traditional Native American religion I've read about, homosexuality has always been tolerated, even if with varying degrees of respect.¹³ Most Neo-pagan religions (Asatru, Druid, Wicca, and others) view homosexuality and bisexuality as "natural and unchangeable orientations for a minority of adults."^{xxii} And Hinduism's ancient *Kama Sutra* gives explicit homosexual directions for eunuch shampoo-ers in its chapter called "Of the Auparishtaka or Mouth Congress."

So although I'm 100 percent willing to follow our said-Creator's directions on the subject, I find I'm at a loss to know what those directions are. For as things stand, I'm faced with a multitude of middlemen all claiming to *know* God's feelings, but there's no consensus: some middlemen say homosexuality faces Holy Hatred, others say Holy Acceptance, others say Holy Indifference.

As we've done several times already, examining a theory's ability to explain a wide set of observations is a clue in determining whether something originated from the infallible source of God versus the fallible source of man. And to cite an admittedly unscientific study, when I compare all the gay people I've worked with to the straight people (and for many years I waited tables in Greenwich Village restaurants where the staff's gay/straight ratio was about 50/50), I find that gays are just as likeable, unlikable, generous, selfish, wise, foolish, open-minded, and as bigoted as heterosexuals. In other words, Christianity's depiction of homosexuals being unusually "immoral" and "depraved" (1 Timothy 1:10 and 1 Kings 15:24) doesn't seem to correspond with a wide set of observations.

CHRIS: For your "observations" to be complete, they'd need to include a look into hell! Then you would see how truly unerring the Word of God is.

Besides, isn't homosexuality's opposition to nature self-evident? Are you saying that you could possibly believe that such an abnormality is part of the natural order of things? That this sort of destructive behavior should be legally acceptable, right alongside normal male-female relationships?

^{xx} As mentioned in this book's Chapter 5, p. 49. Another example is the Pygmy tribes who believed that the gods must be angry with anyone struck by malaria. And prior to Hippocrates, the ancient Greeks, too, used to associate sickness solely with the will of the gods. Hippocrates (c. 470–410 B.C.) earned the title "Father of Medicine" because he was the first known person to link health and disease to environmental causes such as diet, physical activity, and the town's drinking water. All existing pre-Hippocrates written records associate disease solely with the supernatural.

^{xxi} The Bible includes only one passing reference to gay women: "... *for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature* ..." Romans 1:26, KJV.

^{xxii} "Homosexuality and Religion: Policies of Non-Judeo-Christian Religions," from the website *Religious Tolerance*, www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur3.htm.

SCOTT: As far as I can tell, it seems to be as natural as being left-handed. As for legalizing “destructive behavior,” well, certainly society has a right to outlaw any behavior deemed harmful to the community. And when we look at the world’s religions and governments, we can see they’re frequently united in their laws against sexual acts that are clearly criminal, such as rape and pedophilia.

Should consenting adults who choose partners of their own gender be added to the “clearly criminal / destructive to the community” list? Should homosexuals be fined, jailed, or locked up in psychiatric wards or confessional booths until they’re “rehabilitated”? Maybe there are good reasons for this ... though I’ve yet to come across any.

Of course if *God* thinks so, that’s good enough for me right there. No further questions asked. But I’ve yet to see convincing evidence that our said-Creator has said this, whereas I do see good evidence—namely, people’s history of intolerance toward nonconformity, and of associating disease with Divine anger—that humans could have just made up this claim on their own. And looking at the Untouchables of India, the Buraku of Japan, and the Osu of Nigeria, we know that man does have a track record of using self-created religions to justify, on Holy grounds, why certain groups of people deserve to be discriminated against.

But again, should you convince me of the divine authorship of the Judeo-Christian Bible, I will readily join in on the condemnation. Perhaps our last category is where I will see the light.

Sources of “The Word”

SCOTT: When we looked at how non-Christian religions arose, we noticed that many of their ideas were taken from pre-existing religions: Buddhism borrowed from Hinduism, Sikhism borrowed from Islam and Hinduism, Vodun and Santeria borrowed from Catholicism and traditional African religions, and so on. As I recall, you said that such an origin was good evidence that a religion came from man rather than God.

CHRIS: Quite so. Realize, however, that although the Bible was certainly not pieced together from other religions, God did not present it all at once. Rather, it was recorded by forty or more different men and women over a period of more than fifteen hundred years. Yet it’s clearly one book, with perfect unity and consistency throughout.

One minor note on the subject: some people make the mistake of thinking that God dictated the Scriptures word by word, but we can tell this is not so, because the various authors obviously all had their individual styles of writing. Just compare Genesis, Ecclesiastes, and Matthew! Rather, God filled each of these human authors with the Holy Spirit in such a way that each could use their own personality while recording—without error—His revelation to man:

No prophecy [of Scripture] ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

2 Peter 1:21, NRSV

SCOTT: That the Bible itself claims that God is its source is not what I question, but rather how reasonable such a claim is when ... well, before we go any further, let’s first make sure we’re in agreement about the Bible’s timeframe.

The Old Testament

According to every encyclopedia I checked, the books of the Old Testament were recorded roughly between 1000 B.C. and 164 B.C.^{xxiii} Do these dates sound right to you?

CHRIS: Let me check the literature I have with me ... here, my information places the oldest book from around 1500 B.C., and the youngest from 400 B.C.^{xxiv}

SCOTT: Let's say your source is correct and the encyclopedias are wrong. But even if the Bible does go back as far as 1500 B.C., other religions have records that go back even further, and contain stories very similar to those in the Old Testament.

The Flood and the Ark

From Sumer's^{xxv} 2000 B.C. *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, there's the story of "Utnapishtim and the Ark," in which the gods become so annoyed with the rapid increase of humans and all their noise that they decide to drown all of mankind with a great flood. The water-god Ea, however, has a soft spot for man—or at least for the sacrifices that man offers—and warns a man named Utnapishtim, telling him to build a great ark for himself, his family, and a pair of every animal.

The great storm begins just as all the animals are loaded aboard, striking the earth with an unprecedented fury:

Turning into blackness all that had been light ...

Submerging mountains in water ...

Making the land struggle like a woman writhing in labor ...

Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet XI^{xxvi}

When the clouds finally part, Utnapishtim sends out various birds to test the earth for dry ground. Utnapishtim knows the ground is sufficiently dry when the last bird doesn't return, so he releases all the animals and offers a sacrifice to the gods, who crowd about the sweet odor. The goddess Beletili then swears by her jeweled necklace that she will always remember the terrible days of the flood.

Besides the major parallels to Genesis's story of the flood, ark, and animal pairs, many smaller parallels are there too. Read the details in the Sumerian text on the birds sent to test the ground, the "sweet savor" of the sacrifice, and Divinity's promise to remember the damage done to mankind:

When a seventh day arrived I sent forth a dove and released it. The dove went off, but came back to me; no perch was visible so it circled back to me.

^{xxiii} My sources for these dates: the entries under "Bible" in the *2001 World Book Encyclopedia* (World Book, Inc.), the *Encyclopedia Americana 2001* (Grolier Incorporated), the *Young Students Learning Library* (Newfield Publications, Inc., 1995), Hershel Shanks's *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls* (p. 127), and John Gray's *Near Eastern Mythology* (p. 138).

^{xxiv} Based on the Christian sources *Mankind's Search for God* (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1990, p. 220), and www.bible.com and www.clarifyingchristianity.com.

^{xxv} When I first started researching this material, I was confused by all the various names that refer to what is now known as Iraq. A simplified history: Iraq's area is roughly that of what used to be called Mesopotamia. By the fourth millennium B.C., Mesopotamia's city-states included Sumer (in the south) and Akkad (in the north), the first known cities of the human race. By 1700 B.C., much of southern Mesopotamia became known as Babylonia, and the famous Babylon was a city within Babylonia. Over the next 3,000 years the area was ruled by different groups: Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and the British. In 1932 it became the independent state of Iraq.

^{xxvi} Translation from *Reading About the World, Volume I*. Edited by Paul Briens, et. al.

I sent forth a swallow and released it. The swallow went off, but came back to me; no perch was visible so it circled back to me.

I sent forth a raven and released it. The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back. It eats, it scratches, it bobs, but does not circle back to me.

Then I sent out everything [all the pairs of animals] in all directions and sacrificed (a sheep) ... and (into the fire) underneath I poured reeds, cedar, and myrtle ...

The gods smelled the sweet savor, and collected like flies over a (sheep) sacrifice. Just then Beletili arrived ... [and said]: "You gods, as surely as I shall not forget this lapis lazuli [gemstone] around my neck, may I be mindful of these days, and never forget them!"

Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet XI^{xxvii}

—and see how, centuries later, these same ideas show up in the Bible:

And [Noah] sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro ...

Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground; But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark ...

And again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more.

Every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl ... went forth out of the ark. And Noah builded an altar unto the Lord ... and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

And the Lord smelled a sweet savor; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake ... as I have done. ... And the [rain]bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature ...

Genesis 8:7–12, 19–21; 9:16, KJV

Babies in the River

SCOTT: As another example, the Akkadian *Legend of Sargon* (c. 2300 B.C.) tells of how Sargon's mother gave birth to Sargon in secret, and set the infant future king in a basket sealed with bitumen (an asphalt used in ancient times) upon a river:¹⁴

My lowly mother conceived me, in secret she brought me forth. She placed me in a basket of reeds, she closed my entrance with bitumen. She cast me upon the river, which did not overflow me.^{xxviii}

—and over a thousand years later, Exodus tells a parallel tale about Moses:

The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.

Exodus 2:2–3, NRSV

^{xxvii} Translation based on the "standard Akkadian edition." From the Academy for Ancient Texts, www.ancienttexts.org/library/Mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.htm.

^{xxviii} *The Legend of Sargon*, lines 5–7. Translation from George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible*, 7th edition, p. 375. See endnote 14 (p. 213) for more on Sargon, Moses, and the "monomyth."

Miscellaneous Like-Phrases

SCOTT: When we compare the Old Testament to religious texts that pre-date it, we find that certain phrases are nearly identical. Compare the ancient (c. 1400 B.C.) Canaanite praise to their god Mot for defeating “the crooked serpent”:

*Though thou didst smite Lotan the primeval serpent
And didst annihilate the crooked serpent ...*

Ras Shamra Texts^{xxix}

—to the praise for Jehovah for defeating a strikingly similar enemy in the Book of Isaiah, written centuries later:

*[The Lord] shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent,
even leviathan that crooked serpent ...*

Isaiah 27:1, KJV

And compare the third millennium B.C. Sumerian description of the earth’s early paradise:

*In Tilmun the raven utters no cries ...
the lion kills not,
the wolf snatches not the lamb,
unknown is the kid-devouring wild dog*

Enki and Ninhursag, lines 13, 15–17^{xxx}

—to the Bible’s first millennium B.C. description of the earth’s future paradise:

*The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together ...
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

Isaiah 11:6–7, KJV

The “Babel” Defense

CHRIS: I can see how it might appear that the Bible was influenced by the religious writings of others, but what you’re forgetting is that before God scattered the world’s population at the Tower of Babel site, everyone lived in the same area and spoke the same language. This is why different religions sometimes have similar stories and phrases: they all had ancestors who were among those dispersed.

You see, once people were spread all over the world, they carried bits and pieces of God’s True Teachings with them. Over the years, however, these bits and pieces became intertwined with childish polytheistic superstitions—to the point where the True God came to be altogether missing from their stories!

So even if it *were* true that the oldest records we have on hand are the distorted pagan versions, this wouldn’t diminish the fact that the Bible is the only inspired text, the only one that gives us the *true* teachings of God.

^{xxix} John Gray, *Near Eastern Mythology*, p. 83.

^{xxx} Gray, *Near Eastern Mythology*, p. 18.

SCOTT: Well ... let's say I accept, for the moment anyway, the Tower of Babel story that humans were once all concentrated in the Middle East. This still wouldn't explain all the similarities between the pagan stories and the biblical, because some of the Old Testament stories in question took place long *after* the alleged scattering. For example, the Bible places the birth of Moses *centuries* after the Babel incident, so the *Legend of Sargon's* baby-in-the-river story could not have been a distorted version that had been passed down from pre-Babel ancestors.

CHRIS: Keep in mind, however, that events in the Bible often occurred long before they were recorded. So post-Babel events such as the story of Moses's birth must have been copied by the pagans while the Bible was still in its oral stage. The Bible's records of such events are still the only true accounts: that the oldest surviving records are the muddled polytheistic versions proves nothing.

SCOTT: Religious literature generally places Moses's time period between 1450 and 1593 B.C., and the estimate from secular sources is fairly close: every encyclopedia I checked said the Hebrew Bible traces Israel's history back to 1200 or 1300 B.C. So how could the Akkadians have picked up on oral legends about Moses—whether these date back to 1200 or 1593 B.C.—if *The Legend of Sargon* was recorded back in 2300 B.C.?

CHRIS: How can you be so sure that the Akkadian records are truly that old? Archeology's methods of dating ancient texts are *riddled* with uncertainties, as I'm sure you're aware.

SCOTT: With some works, yes, but I believe there's no controversy about the dates of the cuneiform texts from the tablets that recorded the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Legend of Sargon*. Regardless, I'm willing to drop the issue,^{xxxi} for my larger problem with accepting your Tower of Babel explanation comes from trying to reconcile the Babel tale with what archeology tells us about the timeframe of when and where mankind has lived. For wherever I look up information on this—be it from encyclopedias, museums, articles in science journals, and so on—the general consensus (with the sole exclusion of religious literature) is that our early ancestors started out in Africa some seven to five million years ago, left in various waves between two million years ago and forty thousand years ago,¹⁵ and that it took them tens of thousands of years to gradually spread throughout Europe, Asia, the Americas, etc.

Furthermore, every time there are new findings of ancient tools, pottery, cave paintings, human skeletons or near-human skeletons, the locations of these findings always fit within this rough timetable. Not only does archeology consistently confirm this, but its findings are independently corroborated by every other field of science that touches on the subject. For example, geology tells us that some 20,000 years ago the last Ice Age opened up a "land bridge" between Asia and North America (enormous glaciers had frozen enough of the earth's water for the sea level to drop three hundred feet, exposing enough land to make it possible to walk from Siberia to Alaska), and this corresponds with the 15,000-year-old dates we have for the earliest findings of Native American spear points and graveyards.¹⁶

Another problem with the Tower of Babel tale is reconciling its story with the field of linguistics, as there are mountains of historical evidence on the way languages have evolved slowly over time. Look at the way Latin, the language of the Roman Empire, mixed with the native languages of Rome's expanded territories to evolve gradually into French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, and Spanish.

Just look at the way English has changed over the years. Here, compare the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–10) of today's Bible with the versions from 1611 and 1395:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

New Revised Standard Version, 1989

^{xxxi} "Faith" in archeology's claims is discussed further in Chapter 10, p. 173.

Our father which art in heauen, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdome come. Thy will be done, in earth, as it is in heauen.

King James Version, 1611

Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halewid be thi name; thi kyngdom come to; be thi wille don in erthe as in heuene.
Wycliffite Bible, c. 1395

There's overwhelming evidence, in other words, that humans' habitats and language did not spread as depicted in the Tower of Babel story. The tale makes sense only from the perspective that it's an attempt by ancient people to explain man's many different languages and locations—something akin to “How the Leopard Got Its Spots” from Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*.

CHRIS: You would have much less confusion if you learned to trust the Word of God more than you trust the mere research of man. Be that as it may, I'll do my best to clear up, one by one, all your misconceptions.

First of all, you say there are “mountains of historical evidence” on the evolution of languages, but remember that such evidence is of the *written* word. The biblical claim refers to the *spoken* word, which preceded the written word by many years. And while it's true that languages have changed over the last several thousand years, this in no way contradicts the biblical story of how they became so different in the first place.

As for the evidence of exactly where humans lived during what time period, don't forget that the fossils that coincide with the biblical account may have deteriorated over time, or possibly just haven't been found yet. More important, we need to refocus and realize that all these details are tedious and have little relevance to our everyday lives in comparison with the Higher Truths of the Tower of Babel story: the sin and arrogance of man, God's corrective punishment, and God's offer of hope for the future. God teaches us this again and again—through the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, the Tower of Babel, and the story of Jesus.

Last, you mentioned fossil records that are of “near-human” ancestors. You should be aware that all such evidence is based on error—looking at human skeletons of those badly crippled by arthritis and misclassifying them as part of some “separate species”—or outright fraud: forgeries constructed from ill-fitting combinations of ape and human bones.

SCOTT: To fully respond to your dismissal of archeology's distinctions between the fossils of the Australopithecus and Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons (and so on) would take us on a long tangent off the topic of the Bible's foreign influences ... I'll just say that I find it a bit of a strain to believe that all the textbooks, encyclopedias, science journals, and the museum displays of physical evidence are either all in error, or all in on some giant conspiracy to trick us. I find it far more likely that the archeological record is accurate, and the biblical is not.

But to return to the topic at hand, I brought up examples such as Utnapishtim, Sargon, and the Crooked Serpent to make the chronological argument that the stories of the ancient Hebrews were influenced by the even more ancient stories of their neighbors. As I listen to your answers, I can understand why you see things differently ... but let me approach this from a different angle: looking at what the Old Testament stories themselves reveal about their origins.

The Bible's Polytheistic Roots

SCOTT: Let's return to the biblical and the Sumerian versions of the Flood and the Ark story. In comparing the “Who copied whom?” evidence, look at how coherent the polytheistic *Epic of Gilgamesh* version is: it tells the clear-cut story of a group of gods who devise a plan to destroy all humans, of a lone god who devises a plan to save a few, and of the group-regret of the gods over their rash decision. But the monotheistic biblical account is much less coherent, as it portrays an “omniscient and omnipotent” God who is apparently neither.

First, God's method of extermination—given His alleged omnipotence—is strikingly crude: it includes the massive collateral damage of killing an untold number of presumably innocent animals along with the intended targets of wicked humans (including the destined-for-wickedness infants and toddlers). Contrast this with modern military's attempt to minimize the deaths of innocents with the so-called "smart bomb," which in theory destroys only military targets. These bombs of course don't always succeed, but at least today's military has tried to move beyond the WWII style of indiscriminate carpet bombing.

So when it comes to an Omniscient and Omnipotent God—a force I would think would be infinitely more sophisticated than today's military—I would expect that such a Deity would perfect the concept of the "smart bomb": that God could easily focus on the intended targets only.

But the god in the Noah and the Ark story shows no such sophistication, and His method of destruction is even worse than the WWII style of carpet bombing a city, as *everything* that can't fit on the ark gets a death-by-drowning sentence: puppies, kittens, chimpanzees, panda bears—all end up gasping for air as their lungs fill with water; all end up as bloated corpses:

[God] blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark.

Genesis 7:23, NRSV

Second, why would an Omniscient Wisdom be so fallible as to make decisions He repeatedly ends up regretting? For in Genesis 1, God is proud of every bit of His Handiwork:

And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis 1:31, NRSV

—but by the time we get to Genesis 6, God regrets the whole undertaking:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth ... And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."

Genesis 6:5–7, NRSV

So God floods the earth, but then regrets that decision too!

The Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done."

Genesis 8:21, NRSV

In the Sumerian version, the gods also express regret:

*"Why did we decide those evil things in our Assembly?
Why did we decide to destroy our people?
We have only just now created our beloved humans;
We now destroy them in the sea!"
All the gods wept and wailed ...*

All the gods sat trembling, and wept.

Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet XI^{xxxii}

—but their regret is consistent with the Sumerians’ belief that the gods’ knowledge and powers were limited.

I’m not saying the Sumerian version is “more accurate.” Every flood myth ever told is filled with historical errors: fossil records flatly contradict *any* story that says that the entire planet was ever submerged in water, or that the animal population was ever reduced to only one pair of every species, or that as recently as several thousand years ago there was only one ethnic group of humans. My only point is that it’s more coherent if we read the Hebrew myth as an adaptation of the Sumerian myth, rather than vice versa.

That the Noah version was adapted from previous sources also explains the conflicting details within Genesis itself. In Genesis 6:19–20, Noah is told to bring *two* of every living thing; in Genesis 7:2–3, Noah is told to bring *seven* pairs of all clean animals, and *one* pair of unclean animals. Some passages (Genesis 7:4, 7:12, 7:17, 8:6, 8:10, 8:12) have the rain lasting forty days and forty nights, with dry land appearing fourteen days later; other passages (Genesis 7:24, 8:3, 8:5) have the waters “growing strong upon the earth” for one hundred and fifty days, with dry land not appearing until a full ten months after the flood began.^{xxxiii} And as we agreed earlier when discussing non-Christian religions, such contradictions are what we would expect to find from human authors working on a group-project without a Supernatural Supervisor.

CHRIS: Again, I’ll address your misunderstandings one at a time:

God’s “regrets”: God was in no way confessing a mistake, but only saying that He regretted what had to be done.

The “conflicting” details: when the passage in Genesis 6 says “bring a pair of every living animal,” it simply means Noah needed to have at least one male and one female of every living thing, while the passage in Genesis 7 specified how many clean animals and how many unclean. These directions are not contradictory, but complementary. The same is true for the time period of the flood: it rained for forty days and forty nights, the water lasted for one hundred and fifty days, and the earth wasn’t safe for land animals to return for ten months. The “fourteen days” in the Genesis 8:10 and 8:12 passages don’t refer to how long the ground remained unsafe, but rather to the two seven-day periods that Noah waited between sending out the dove.

As for the animals and the “crudeness” of the flood and the “historical errors”—just as you did during our discussion on the Tower of Babel, you’re again getting so caught up in the minor details that you’re missing the *essence* of what God teaches us through this story: the opportunities we are given by God, the sin of mankind, God’s punishment of mankind’s sin, and of His mercy for the just. Mankind’s sin began with Adam and Eve, and the sins of their descendants reached their first climax just prior to the flood. God then starts afresh, and *again* man is soon sinning as much as ever. Yet God makes a constant effort to draw men to Himself, despite themselves.

SCOTT: I can see we’re not going to reach any agreements here ... nonetheless I’m impressed with your answers and would like to continue writing them down.

Moving on with the argument that the earliest biblical authors were influenced by their polytheistic neighbors, look at how the first ten or so books of the Old Testament are more intelligibly read from a polytheistic point of view. Starting off with Genesis, when God says:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...

Genesis 1:26, KJV

^{xxxii} Translation from *Reading About the World, Volume I*. Edited by Paul Briens, et. al.

^{xxxiii} The story of Noah and the Ark, according to many scholars, is a combination of two separate flood myths—a combination not well-edited enough to smooth out all the discrepancies. One of the many available sources of this theory is Henry E. Neufeld’s *The Two Flood Stories: A Comparison of the J and P Accounts*, www.energin.com/rpp/flood.html.

—the use of the plural lends itself more to polytheism than monotheism: who is God talking to about His plans if not other gods? The manner of speech is similar to that of the Mesopotamian god Marduk, who was also said to have spoken with fellow gods about his plan to make man:

Marduk [was] moved with desire to create a work of consummate art. He told [the god] Ea the deep thought in his heart. “Blood to blood I join, blood to bone I form an original thing, its name is man ...”

The Babylonian Creation Epic: Enuma Elish, Tablet VI^{xxxiv}

Genesis repeatedly portrays its deity as only a local god, and as one who has only limited powers. Note that in these next two passages, God not only appears to be speaking with other gods, He’s also worrying about the danger of man becoming too powerful—as if this could be a possible threat:

Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

Genesis 3:22–23, NRSV

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower [of Babel], which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

Genesis 11:5–7, NRSV

Furthermore, notice how often this God of the Israelites speaks of being concerned that He might appear weak to others:

Then I said to [the Israelites]: Get rid of every idol; do not defile yourselves with the Egyptian gods, for I am the Lord your God. But they rebelled against me and would not listen. They didn’t get rid of their idols, nor forsake the gods of Egypt. Then I thought, I will pour out my fury upon them and fulfill my anger against them while they are still in Egypt. But I didn’t do it, for I acted to protect the honor of my name, lest the Egyptians laugh at Israel’s God who couldn’t keep them back from harm.

Ezekiel 20:7–10, TLB

I will end the captivity of my people and have mercy upon them and restore their fortunes, for I am concerned about my reputation!

Ezekiel 39:25, TLB

The Lord said to Moses, “How long will these people [the Israelites] despise me? Will they never believe me, even after all the miracles I have done among them? I will disinherit them and destroy them with a plague ...”

“But what will the Egyptians think when they hear about it?” Moses pleaded with the Lord. “... if you kill all your people, the nations that have heard your fame will say, ‘The Lord had to kill them because he wasn’t able to take care of them in the wilderness. He wasn’t strong enough to bring them into the land he swore he would give to them.’”

Then the Lord said, “All right, I will pardon them as you have requested.”

Numbers 14:11–13, 15–16, 20; TLB

^{xxxiv} Translation by N. K. Sandars, from *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*. From the website *Babylonia and Ancient Near Eastern Texts - Britannica Keyed*, www.piney.com/BabIndex.html. The earliest records of *Enuma Elish* date back to the 1100s B.C. (on seven clay tablets in cuneiform), though some of the stories themselves are estimated to go back to c. 2000 B.C.

One of the most striking pieces of evidence is the following exchange between God and Moses:

But Moses asked, "If I go to the people of Israel and tell them that their fathers' God has sent me, they will ask, 'Which god are you talking about?' What shall I tell them?"

Exodus 3:13, TLB

God doesn't reply with, "*What* kind of question is that—I'm the only God there is!" Rather, God specifies which god He is:

Tell them, "Jehovah, the God of your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has sent me to you."

Exodus 3:15, TLB

And look at how the Ten Commandments start out:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. ... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God ...

Exodus 20:3, 5, KJV

For God to say, "Have no other gods before me" and "I am a jealous God," there must be other gods around! As further evidence, notice how the early books of the Bible acknowledge these gods without ever hinting at any denial of their divine status, even specifying the gods Bel, Chemosh, and Marduk by name:¹⁷

And I will punish Bel, the god of Babylon, and pull from his mouth what he has taken. The nations shall no longer come and worship him.

Jeremiah 51:44, NLT

This is the message of the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, against Moab ... Your god Chemosh, with his priests and princes, shall be taken away to distant lands!

Jeremiah 48:1, 7; TLB

This is the message from the Lord against Babylon ... Tell all the world that Babylon will be destroyed; her god Marduk will be utterly disgraced!

Jeremiah 50:1–2, TLB

Like other sacred scriptures of the day, the early books of the Old Testament place their god above all other gods, but don't deny that the others exist. Compare, for example, the way the Mesopotamian god Marduk was said to preside over subordinate gods:

Marduk summoned the great gods to Assembly; presiding graciously, he issues instructions.

The Babylonian Creation Epic: Enuma Elish, Tablet VI^{xxxv}

—with the way Jehovah does the same:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.

Psalms 82:1, NRSV

^{xxxv} From James B. Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (as cited in Andrew Benson's *The Origins of Christianity and the Bible*, p. 81).

And compare the Akkadian claim that their god alone, among all the other gods of heaven and earth, is exalted:

What god is like thee? In heaven who is exalted? Thou! Thou alone art exalted. On earth who is exalted? Thou! Thou alone art exalted.

Hymn to Sin (the moon god)^{xxxvi}

—to the nearly identical claim from the Israelites:

Among the gods there is none like unto thee ... for His name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

Psalm 86:8, KJV; Psalm 148:13, NRSV

Look at the evidence all together: God freely refers to other gods by name, says He's concerned with His reputation among them, and even admits to being jealous when humans show these other gods any attention. God is also oddly disturbed when man gains the ability to tell the difference between good and evil, and the Tower of Babel story depicts a God with ungodly worries about what humans will achieve if they work together. And Moses's question "Which god are you?" would probably be treated with rage in the later-written, and monotheistic, books of the Bible. But because the question is asked in Exodus, God simply answers this apparently legitimate query, specifying that He is "Jehovah, the God of your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

From the secular perspective, all this is easily explained: the gradual transition from polytheism to monotheism reflects the ancient Hebrews' shift in their belief of "my god is better than your god!" to that of "your god doesn't even exist!"

But how does the believer make sense of all this? For if an Always-Been-the-One-Almighty wrote the Bible, why would He modestly refer to Himself as just the local god of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and then wait hundreds of pages before consistently stating that He was *always* the One and Only?

CHRIS: You're once again misunderstanding the biblical context in all your examples. For once you take into account how widespread polytheism was in those days, you'll be able to recognize that God was simply communicating in the language of the times—acknowledging the *perception* of those gods.

Yes, these foreign gods had "names" that God could call them by, but something can have a name without having reality: a reference to Santa Claus doesn't equate a belief in his existence! So when the Bible speaks of God "punishing" Bel, Chemosh, and Marduk, it means He is punishing those who hold those false beliefs.

And although it's true that God speaks of being "jealous" of humans worshipping these imaginary gods, the word *jealous* is used in the sense of "protective," as we would talk about a caring mother jealously guarding her young.

As for "Let *us* make man in *our* image," well, it's perfectly possible that God was speaking to Jesus, who is eternally at one with the Father. As for why Jesus makes no recorded response, or why Jesus doesn't say anything else throughout the Old Testament, I cannot say: I don't claim to understand God's timetable, and why things are revealed when they are. When it comes to the limited capabilities of the human mind, I simply accept—and what's more *expect*—that certain aspects of God will remain a mystery.

SCOTT: I suppose this may be an indication of the way my mind is locked into the small-minded ways of human thinking, but if an Almighty Creator of the Universe had really authorized an instruction book for us humans, I would think that He would have set the record straight from the start rather than present "lessons" that appear to contain contradictions: contradictions that can be reconciled only through speculative interpretations (interpretations of the sort that we call *slippery* when New Agers try to use them to reconcile their "All religions

^{xxxvi} Translation from the website *Babylonia and Ancient Near Eastern Texts - Britannica Keyed*, www.piney.com/BablIndex.html. The *Hymn to Sin* was found on a tablet dated between 668–633 B.C., though copied from an older tablet of an undetermined date.

are One” beliefs). So I must admit that the explanation “religious beliefs change over time” remains more persuasive to me than “God was communicating in the language of those who got it wrong,” or “we *perceive* inconsistencies only because God’s ways are mysterious to us.”

And your answer that God may have been speaking with Jesus when He said “Let us make man in our image” leads to some Trinity issues ... but I’d like to stick to my book’s outline, and not explore that subject just yet. Let’s move on to the origins of the New Testament.

The New Testament

SCOTT: The timeframe of the New Testament is better documented, so here we have firmer ground to work with. Starting with Jesus Himself, most researchers agree that His timeframe was roughly somewhere between the years we now call 4 B.C. and A.D. 30. Agreed?

CHRIS: That was His time on earth as a human, yes.

SCOTT: And when I looked up the history of the writing of the New Testament, I found that biblical scholars have reached a general consensus on the following dates:

- The documents of the New Testament were written roughly between the 50s and early 100s.
- For over the next two hundred years, battles among Christian sects broke out over which documents were divinely inspired or not, and over clashing interpretations of some of the more confusing aspects of this new faith. The biggest dispute was over Jesus’s status: some followers interpreted His description as a “begotten Son” to mean that Jesus was a separate Being from God; other followers said that because Jesus is Divine and because monotheism insists there can be one God only, Jesus must be God Himself in the form of man. The Roman Emperor Constantine felt that the increasingly violent conflicts were a threat to his empire’s stability, so in the year 325 he called a wide group of church leaders together and demanded that they iron out their differences.¹⁸ Subsequent meetings of church officials produced the “Nicene Creed,” which introduced the doctrine of the Trinity to solve the “Jesus = God” versus “Jesus = God’s Son” dispute by declaring *both* as true. ^{xxxvii}
- By the year 367 the Church officially agreed on which books should and should not be included in the Bible, and by 435 a law was passed that made “heresy”—disagreeing with the Church’s decisions—punishable by death.

CHRIS: I have in fact read the works of scholars on Christianity’s stirring history, and yes, these dates sound correct. As for the religious bickering and the oppressive tactics of the Christian Roman Empire—certainly these things occurred. But these are examples of man’s flaws and sins, not the will of God.

SCOTT: Fair enough. So we agree that the New Testament documents were written sometime around the late first century, and we agree that many pagan religions existed long before then—after all, the Old Testament itself makes repeated mention of them.

CHRIS: Yes, of course.

SCOTT: Before we begin, I want to digress for just a moment to add some historical context, and note that Alexander the Great’s (356–323 B.C.) conquests resulted in the wide circulation of religious ideas in the centuries surrounding the birth of Jesus. For it was Alexander’s belief that he could best unite his empire by not only making

^{xxxvii} See endnote 18 (p. 215) for more on the Trinity solution, and endnotes 22 (subsection “The Greek Influence,” p. 221) and 25 (p. 229) for more on the history of the New Testament’s compilation.

sure his new territories had well-paved roads and clean water supplies, but also by encouraging a common acceptance of his empire's many different religions. Alexander wanted people to mix and share their religious beliefs, a goal he called *omonia*, best translated as "like-mindedness" (a goal much easier to accomplish with followers of polytheistic religions than with monotheistic¹⁹).

When the center of power later shifted to the Roman Empire, this mixing and sharing of religious ideas continued to spread, and this was the environment of Christianity's early years. I'm reviewing all this to help make my case for why I say it's plausible that the authors of the New Testament were influenced by other religions: a willingness to listen to the beliefs of others was "in vogue" at the time and even encouraged by the government.

This atmosphere of religious sharing is documented even in the New Testament itself, for Paul notes how easy it is to discuss his ideas with the Greeks and Romans while in Athens:

So they took [Paul] and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means."

Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Acts 17:19–21, NRSV

Virgin Births

SCOTT: Getting back on the track of looking at the pagan origins of Christian beliefs, let's start with the virgin birth. In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell writes that the virgin birth idea came not from the Hebrews^{xxxviii} but from the Greeks, whose stories of their gods' affairs with virgin maidens, of virgin births, and of half-god and half-human offspring preceded Christianity by centuries.²⁰

For example, there's the ancient Greek legend of "Leda and the Swan," in which Zeus turns into a swan before planting his seed in the young virgin named Leda, who then gives birth to their half-immortal children Pollux and Helen.^{xxxix} Zeus also impregnates the virgin Princess Danae when he visits her in the form of a ray of sunlight (described as a "shower of gold"), resulting in the birth of their half-god child Perseus.^{xl} Homer's writings (800s B.C.) are filled with half-god and half-human heroes, and the theme of a god impregnating a virgin is common:

Poseidon ... lay with her [Tyro, the young virgin] at the mouth of the river, and a huge blue wave arched itself like a mountain over them to hide both woman and god, whereon he loosed her virgin girdle and laid her in a deep slumber. When the god had accomplished the deed of love, he took her hand in his own and said, "Tyro, rejoice in all good will; the embraces of the gods are not fruitless, and you will have fine twins ..." and she in due course bore Pelias and Neleus ...

The Odyssey, Book XI

The Romans also had a pre-Christian virgin birth story, as legend has it that Rome's founders Romulus and Remus were born from the union between the virgin priestess Rhea Silvia and the war god Mars.^{xli}

^{xxxviii} True, most translations of the Old Testament's Isaiah 7:14 reads "a virgin will conceive"—but the Hebrew Bible's Isaiah 7:14 reads "the young woman shall conceive." See endnote 20 (p. 218) for the details behind this discrepancy.

^{xxxix} Example source: Euripides (Greek playwright), *Helen*. (412 B.C.)

^{xl} Example source: Pindar (Greek poet), *Pythian* 12. (400s B.C.)

^{xli} Example source: Titus Livius (Roman historian), *Ab Urbe Condita* (20s B.C.) Also, like King Sargon and Moses before them, Romulus and Remus went through the hero's babyhood-ritual of being placed in a water-worthy cradle, set adrift upon a river, and raised by a rescuer (in this case, a she-wolf). See endnote 14 (p. 213) for more on the "monomyth."

Campbell's explanation for the appeal of the virgin birth theme is that it represents a spiritual awakening, or "spiritual birth." He writes that only when a community rises above being concerned solely with food, sex, and conquering threats can this spiritual birth take place—that only when people have the luxury to turn their focus to compassion can the gods be born. The significance of the virgin mother is that this awakening is based not on our sexual animal selves, but on our spiritual or compassionate selves:

Heroes and demigods are ... motivated by compassion and not [conquering, or] sexuality, or self-preservation. This is the sense of the second birth, when you begin to live out of the heart center.^{xlii}

Campbell adds that Buddha, for the same reason, was said to be born from his mother's side, and from the level of her heart.

Another explanation for the virgin birth theme's popularity is "marketability": because so many local religions claimed that their founder had a miraculous background—Mom's a virgin and Dad's a god—any new contenders had to be *at least* as impressive as the competition if they wanted to survive in the religious market. Given their target audience of pagans, early Christian proselytizers might have had a more difficult time winning people over if they asked would-be converts to take the "step down" of following a wholly human prophet who had merely spoken to God. One supporting piece of evidence for this theory is the progression of Jesus's rank as we read the Gospels in the order they were written: Mark makes no mention of a miraculous birth, while the later-written Matthew and Luke both say Jesus was God's Son, born of a virgin. And the still later-written John improves Christ's status even further by making Him not only the Son of God, but also God Himself.

But needless to say, the notion that the New Testament got *any* of its ideas from rival religions is in utter conflict with the fundamentalist's stance that Christianity alone is God's Divine Dictation. For if the Bible is God's only True Word, the earth didn't have a virgin birth until about 4 B.C. Yet how do you make sense out of the numerous stories of gods and virgins that were recorded centuries prior to Christ? Is it your position that all the pre-Jesus virgin birth stories—of Perseus, Romulus, Remus, etc.—were just legends that people made up on their own for whatever reason ... and then hundreds of years later, a real virgin birth occurred?

CHRIS: First of all, the myths you speak of are about *sex* between gods and virgins: so these are hardly "virgin" births! As for those who get confused by the rough similarities, well, remember that Satan would have been perfectly capable of adding such stories to the pagan religions in order to mislead people. Don't underestimate the Enemy's ability to confuse man and turn him against God. In fact, the Church has been aware of this particular trick of Satan's from the earliest days of Christianity, and properly labeled the similarities that you speak of as "diabolical mimicry." Here are what two early church fathers had to say:

The devil, whose business is to pervert the truth, mimics the exact circumstances of the Divine Sacraments [and places them in pagan religions] ... Thus he celebrated the oblation of bread, and brings in the symbol of the resurrection. Let us therefore acknowledge the craftiness of the devil, who copies certain things of those that be Divine.

Tertullian (c. 160–220), *The Prescription Against Heretics*^{xliii}

When I hear ... that Perseus was begotten of a virgin, I understand that the deceiving serpent counterfeited also this.

Justin Martyr (c. 100–168), *Dialogue of Justin*^{xliv}

^{xlii} Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 176.

^{xliii} From Chapter XL, "In the Rites of Idolatry, Satan Imitated and Distorted the Divine Institutions of the Older Scriptures."

^{xliv} From Chapter LXX, "The Mysteries of Mithras Are Distorted from the Prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah." Translation from the website *Early Church Fathers*, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-48.htm#P4684_998975.

SCOTT: So you acknowledge that the New Testament was written centuries *after* the Greek and Roman myths—yet you’re saying that the New Testament is the source material for the virgin birth? On the face of it, that sounds something like, say, me writing a play called *Romeo and Juliet*, and then claiming that Shakespeare copied off of me ... but I suppose the difference is that Satan could have used supernatural intuition to preview the New Testament centuries prior to publication.

CHRIS: Scott, it all makes perfect sense once you realize that Satan has access to knowledge that man does not—that the devil undoubtedly knew of God’s future plans and Jesus’s pending arrival on earth. So it would be a simple matter to plant these ideas in other religions long before the New Testament documented them. Another term to describe this trickery of Satan’s is “plagiarism by anticipation.”

Resurrecting Gods

SCOTT: I suppose the explanation that “the New Testament was satanically plagiarized before it was written” could be applied to *every* circumstance in which the pagan sources appear to be the originals ... but I’d like to continue with my questions regardless, because for my next topic—resurrecting gods—the source of inspiration appears to be nature itself.

As mentioned earlier^{xlv} when discussing the role that geography has had in shaping the beliefs of non-Christian religions, the religions of hunting societies tend to be animal-based, whereas the religions of agricultural societies tend to be plant-based. As Joseph Campbell puts it:

In the now long-forgotten millenniums of the Paleolithic Great Hunt, when man’s ubiquitous nearest neighbors were the beasts in their various species, it was those animals who were his teachers, illustrating in their manners of life the powers and patterns of nature. The tribesmen assumed the names of beasts and in their rites wore animal masks. Among those dwelling ... where the spectacle of nature was predominantly of plants, the human game of imitation was rather of the vegetable world, and, as we have seen, the basic myth was of a god who had yielded his body to be slain, cut up, and buried, whence the food plants arose for the sustenance of the people. In the rites of human sacrifice common to all planting cultures, this primal mythological scene is imitated literally—ad nauseam; for, as in the vegetable world life is seen to spring from death and fresh green sprouts from decay, so too it must be in the human. The dead are buried to be born again, and the cycles of the plant world become models for the myths and rituals of mankind.^{xlvi}

Mythologist James Frazer offers a similar view on how the life, death, and re-birth cycle of plant life served as a role model for the imagined life of the spirit world:

The spectacle of the great changes which annually pass over the face of the earth has powerfully impressed the minds of men in all ages, and stirred them to meditate on the causes of transformations so vast and wonderful. Their curiosity has not been purely disinterested; for even the savage cannot fail to perceive how intimately his own life is bound up with the life of nature, and how the same processes which freeze the stream and strip the earth of vegetation menace him with extinction. ... They pictured to themselves the growth and decay of vegetation, the birth and death of living creatures, as effects of the waxing or waning strength of divine beings, of gods and goddesses, who were born and died ...^{xlvii}

^{xlv} In Chapter 5, p. 42.

^{xlvi} Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, pp. 55–56.

^{xlvii} Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, p. 283.

The ancient Egyptians, for example, believed that their wilted crops were the result of the death of their fertility god Osiris, and that it was the power of their prayers that brought Osiris and the crops back to life. The Canaanites believed that their gods Baal and Mot periodically killed each other and came back to life, their victories and defeats coinciding with the life cycle of their harvest. The dying and rising god of vegetation in ancient Phrygia was Attis, in Southern Babylonia it was Tammuz, and for the Semitics of Babylonia and Syria it was Adonis. The Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone follows a similar pattern: the crops die when the earth goddess's daughter departs for the World of the Dead, and come back to life when the daughter returns to the World of the Living.

I've talked to many Christians who speak of the resurrection as a strong "selling point," claiming that Christ's return to life is proof that Christianity is superior to all other faiths. But when we look at religions from other ancient agricultural societies—and all the above stories about resurrecting gods preceded Jesus by centuries, if not millennia—we can see that claims of dying and resurrecting gods were common. In the words of James Frazer:

The annual death and revival of vegetation is a conception which readily presents itself to men in every stage of savagery and civilization; and the vastness of the scale on which this ever-recurring decay and regeneration takes place, together with man's intimate dependence on it for subsistence, combine to render it the most impressive annual occurrence in nature, at least within the temperate zones. It is no wonder that a phenomenon so important, so striking, and so universal should, by suggesting similar ideas, have given rise to similar rites in many lands.

... Nowhere, apparently, have these rites been more widely and solemnly celebrated than in the lands which border the Eastern Mediterranean. Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Eastern Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually dies and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same.^{xlviii}

The New Testament itself even picks up on the agricultural-god theme, as Jesus is described as one who must die to renew the crops. Consider the following lines from the Book of John:

Jesus replied ... "I must fall and die like a kernel of wheat that falls into the furrows of the earth. Unless I die I will be alone—a single seed. But my death will produce many new wheat kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives."

John 12:23–24, TLB

To complete the picture, when was Jesus said to have come back to life? Is it just a coincidence that Easter Sunday is at the same time of year as were the alleged resurrections of Adonis, Attis, Baal, Osiris, Persephone, and Tammuz—during the spring?

CHRIS: Those pagan superstitions have nothing in common with the resurrection of Christ! Jesus doesn't fade in and out like the seasons!

SCOTT: So the similarity is not necessarily an example of diabolical anticipation, but only a coincidence?

CHRIS: Yes, and a very weak coincidence at that. Jesus's human body died but once—and that was not to save one season's crops, but to save all mankind from eternal damnation in the afterlife.

Life After Death

SCOTT: I do want to ask you more about the afterlife, for I'd like to better understand the Christian perspective on why the Bible appears to be inconsistent on the subject. Starting with the thirty-nine books of the Old

^{xlviii} Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, pp. 284–285 and 291.

Testament, there are only two brief mentions of any sort of a universal life after death—in Isaiah and Daniel, as we’ll discuss in a moment—and both of these books were among the last to be included in the canon.

Yet in the early books of the Old Testament we find no developed ideas about the afterlife: you never hear the characters of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Moses say anything like “obey God and be rewarded in heaven” or “disobey God and be punished in hell.” If any of these men believed in the doctrine of a divine judgment followed by an afterlife, I would think this idea would have showed up somewhere in the Bible’s text. Notice that the great majority of the Old Testament depicts God’s justice as given out solely while here on earth—the obedient are rewarded with rain, good crops, good health, lots of children, and military victories; and the disobedient are punished with droughts, famine, sickness, plagues, military defeat, slavery, slaughtered children, and early death:

If you obey all of my commandments, I will give you regular rain, and the land will yield bumper crops, and the trees will be loaded with fruit long after the normal time! ... You shall eat your fill, and live safely in the land, for I will give you peace, and you will go to sleep without fear ... You will chase your enemies; they will die beneath your swords ... I will look after you, and multiply you, and fulfill my covenant with you ... I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be my people ...

But if you will not listen to me or obey me, but reject my laws, this is what I will do to you: I will punish you with sudden terrors and panic, and with tuberculosis and burning fever; and your eyes shall be consumed and your life shall ebb away; you will sow your crops in vain, for your enemies will eat them. I will set my face against you and you will flee before your attackers; those who hate you will rule you ... And if you still disobey me, I will punish you seven times more severely for your sins ... Your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield its crops, nor your trees their fruit ... I will send wild animals to kill your children ...

Leviticus 26:3–7, 9, 12, 14–18, 20, 22, TLB

True, the Old Testament does include warnings about hell, particularly in Proverbs, but the word always refers to a difficult existence on earth, not a post-judgment eternal sentence. And yes, there are three brief mentions of humans who have an afterlife: Elijah goes to heaven in a whirlwind in 2 Kings 2:1, Enoch “walks with God” in Genesis 5:24, and Samuel makes a brief after-death appearance in 1 Samuel 28:12–19. But those three men are the only ones! Take away these stray and isolated exceptions, and the consistent message of the Old Testament is that heaven is for God and the earth is for humans:

The heavens belong to the Lord, but he has given the earth to all mankind.

Psalms 115:16, TLB

—and that our bodily deaths are the absolute end of life:

Yet [God], being compassionate, forgave [humans] their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger, and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again.

Psalms 78:38–39, NRSV

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Genesis 3:19, KJV

But when we look at rival ideas from that time period and earlier, we find *lots* of references to an afterlife. Turning back once again to the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, read how Gilgamesh’s friend Enkidu, back in 2000 B.C., gives an account of the underworld:

*To the house where those who enter do not come out,
along the road of no return,
to the house where those who dwell, do without light,
where dirt is their drink, their food is of clay ...
and light cannot be seen, they dwell in the dark,
and upon the door and bolt, there lies dust.*

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet VII^{xlix}

—and by 1750 B.C., the Sumerians were already writing about a divine judgment that determined whether one's soul would be rewarded or punished:

[the dead] come ... to the underworld river; [the god] separates the good from the bad ... the righteous will continue to exist, the wicked will not escape ...!

The ancient Egyptians also had deeply entrenched beliefs in life after death—as we can tell from their pyramids, filled with treasures for the pharaoh's journey to the world of the dead. They also believed in a Judgment Day: Egypt's *Book of the Dead* (1240 B.C.) describes a "weighing of the heart" ceremony, in which the gods put the deceased's heart on one side of a scale, and a feather on the other. If the heart was equal in weight to the feather, the deceased was judged to be virtuous, and proceeded to join the gods in an everlasting paradise. If it was heavier than the feather, the deceased was judged to be wicked, and the heart was devoured by the goddess Amemet. The following is an Egyptian prayer for those about to face judgment and wished to make their case for why they deserved a ticket into heaven:

Homage to you, O ye who dwell in your Hall of [Justice] ... deliver ye me from Beba, who feedeth upon the livers of the great ones on the day of the Great Judgment. Grant ye that I may come before you, for I have not committed sin, I have done no act of deceit, I have done no evil thing, and I have not borne [false] witness; therefore let nothing [evil] be done to me. I have lived upon truth, I have fed upon truth, I have performed the ordinances of men, and the things which gratify the gods. I have propitiated the god by doing his will, I have given bread to the hungry man, and water to him that was athirst, and apparel to the naked man, and a ferry-boat to him that had no boat. I have made propitiatory offerings and given cakes to the gods ... Deliver then ye me, protect then ye me, and make ye no report against me ... I am pure in respect of my mouth, and I am clean in respect of my hands, therefore let it be said unto me by those who shall behold me: "Come in peace, Come in peace."

"Address to the Gods of the Tuat"
The Egyptian Book of the Dead^{li}

The Greek philosopher Plato (428–347 B.C.) also wrote about the afterlife, and the reward of heaven and the punishment of hell:

^{xlix} Translation based on the "standard Akkadian edition." From the *Academy for Ancient Texts*, www.ancienttexts.org/library/Mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab7.htm.

ⁱ Sumerian tablet from 1750 B.C. Source: W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development*, p. 87 (as cited by Andrew D. Benson in *The Origins of Christianity and the Bible*, p. 113).

^{li} From the Papyrus of Nu, Brit. Mus. No. 10477, Sheet 24. Translation by E. A. Wallis Budge. From *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, www.lysator.liu.se/~drokk/BoD/toc.html. (*The Book of the Dead* is the most well-known title, but the more proper translation is said to be *Going Forth [from the Tomb] by Day*.)

[Human souls] receive judgment when they have completed their first life, and after the judgment they go, some of them to the houses of correction which are under the earth, and are punished; others to some place in heaven whither they are lightly borne by justice, and there they live in a manner worthy of the life which they led here when in the form of men.^{lii}

Judgment Day is described in detail in Plato's story of the soldier Er, who is slain in battle and then summoned before the judges of the afterlife. As Er approaches the judges, he notices two openings in the earth, and that the righteous are led to the opening that proceeds upwards to heaven, and the unrighteous are led to the opening that leads downwards for punishment (and keeping in line with the ancient world's bias against the left-handed, the righteous path is to the right; the unrighteous to the left):

[The just who were sent to paradise] spoke of the joys of heaven and sights of inconceivable beauty. ... [As for the unjust], for every wrong done to any man, sinners had in due course paid the penalty ten times over ... in order that the punishment for every offense might be tenfold. Thus, all who have been guilty of bringing many to death or slavery by betraying their country or their comrades in arms, or have taken part in any other iniquity, suffer tenfold torments for each crime; while deeds of kindness and a just and sinless life are rewarded in the same measure.^{liii}

When Er gets close to the unrighteous souls, they plead with him to return to earth and become the messenger to warn mankind of what lies ahead. This was written over four centuries before the first New Testament documents appeared, and was arguably the inspiration for the story in Luke 16 of the rich man in hell who tries to save his brothers by pleading with Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn the wayward.

Getting back to the Old Testament, the great majority of it recognizes no such continued existence. In fact, some passages even argue *against* such "heathen" ideas, as does Solomon (whom the Bible identifies as the wisest of men—1 Kings 4:31) when he writes that those who claim to have knowledge of an afterlife have no proof:

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?

Ecclesiastes 3:19–21, NRSV

It wasn't until much later—specifically, not until the Israelites were exiled to Babylon in the 500s B.C., where they were exposed to Zoroastrianism^{liv} and other religions that held afterlife beliefs—that the books of the Hebrew Bible began to pick up on the life-after-death idea. (Possibly because that aspect of heathen faith was more appealing than the Hebrews' own "unto dust thou shalt return" fate.) This idea first appears in a solitary sentence in Isaiah, which mentions that at least a select group (possibly only the Israelites) will get to experience an afterlife:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!

Isaiah 26:19, NRSV

^{lii} Plato, *Phaedrus*. Translation by Benjamin Jowett, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/phaedrus.html>.

^{liii} Plato, "The Myth of Er," from *The Republic* (Chapter XL), p. 352. Translation by Francis MacDonald Cornford.

^{liv} See endnote 23 (p. 227) for details on Zoroastrianism's possible influence on Judaism.

—and finally, there’s Daniel, one of the last books to be added, which includes the new detail of the life-after-death experience having separate categories for the righteous and for the wicked:

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Daniel 12:2, KJV

I’ve heard some Christians argue that the afterlife beliefs were there all along, citing vague passages such as the Genesis 25:17 line about Ishmael being “gathered to his people” after he died. But if this Genesis passage were truly a reference to a subject as central as the afterlife, why would a Divine Author (a) use such unclear language, and (b) say nothing else on the subject until hundreds of pages later?

As testimony to the Hebrew Bible’s conflicting stances, look at the life-after-death beliefs in today’s Judaism, and you’ll find—even in Israel—that there’s no consensus. Some followers believe in an afterlife, and have Isaiah, Daniel, and various rabbinic commentaries as evidence. Others don’t believe, and can cite passages from Genesis, Leviticus, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and rival rabbinic commentaries as *their* evidence.

From a secular point of view, the Hebrew Bible’s contradictory ideas are easy to explain: religions may ridicule their rivals, but they’ll also borrow from them. Accordingly, the earliest books of the Bible either ignore or scoff at the notion of an afterlife, and the later books start to work this new idea in. As is typical in all religions, some followers accept new ideas, others reject them, and different sects begin to branch off. And for that Jewish sect that came to believe that their messiah had arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, the new beliefs on Judgment Day and heaven and hell became core parts of their religion—as we can see from the pamphlets in your hand!

Working from the premise that the authors of both Testaments were influenced by the religious beliefs of their neighbors, we can make sense of the internal contradictions within the Old Testament, *and* the contradictions between the Old Testament and the New Testament, *and* all the similarities between the ancient beliefs of the pagans and the new beliefs in the New Testament. In other words, this secular premise explains a wide set of observations—from whichever angle one looks.

But how does one make sense of all this from the fundamentalist’s premise that the Bible is the only book that has Sanctified Say? Why did God inspire contradictory passages on the afterlife within the Old Testament, and inspire New Testament afterlife passages that have more in common with the pagan than the Hebrew?

CHRIS: Scott, the Old Testament was recorded *centuries* before Jesus came to earth: before He offered His gift of salvation! So you see, there was not yet a way to gain access to an everlasting life! This goes for Elijah, Enoch, and Samuel too—for even though these three were brought back to life, that’s not the same thing as achieving an everlasting afterlife: that comes only through the grace of Christ. You must understand that the Days of Grace brought forth many things that simply did not exist in the Days of the Law. As for the references to an afterlife in Isaiah and Daniel, those were prophecies of the days ahead.

SCOTT: Let me get this straight: does that mean that in Ecclesiastes, when Solomon was criticizing the pagans for their merely wishful thinking about an afterlife, he was right—there was no afterlife at the time?

CHRIS: Right.

SCOTT: So it also follows that Moses couldn’t get into heaven when he died, because Jesus had yet to die on the cross and pay the penalty for Moses’s sins—correct?

CHRIS: Correct.

SCOTT: So the same would go for Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and everyone else who died before Christ was born ... this may be a tangent issue, but what do you think happened to them in the time between their deaths and the sacrifice of Jesus?

CHRIS: Their *physical* bodies turned to dust, but their life force came back to God: a life force returned to them after the resurrection.

SCOTT: And if accepting Jesus as one's savior is the only ticket into heaven, on what basis could the likes of Abraham and Moses—not to mention the billions of others throughout history who were never exposed to this Middle Eastern religion—be judged?

CHRIS: I'll confess that this is something that used to trouble me as well, but although the Bible doesn't specify what God's arrangements are for those who never heard of Jesus, it does provide us with clues. For example, when Abraham asked God if He was going to let the righteous perish alongside the wicked in the city of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham was quickly able to answer his own question: that the Judge of All *will* be fair (Genesis 18:22–32).^{iv} And read Romans 2, in which Paul speaks of God's judgment and the individual's deeds:

God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds.

Romans 2:5–6, NRSV

SCOTT: When I read Abraham's discussion with God in Genesis 18, Abraham's remark about trusting the Judge of All to be "fair" seems to contain a touch of irony:

Then Abraham came near and said [to God], "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you!"

Genesis 18:23–25, NRSV

Rather than expressing confidence in God's fairness, Abraham strikes me as complaining about the way the Almighty's wrath tends to be on the indiscriminate side.

As for the Romans 2 quote about "God repaying according to deeds," the focus of that chapter is limited to the Jews and local Gentiles, so it seems a bit of a stretch to apply it to the likes of the Chinese, Native Americans, and Australian aborigines ... not to mention that the Bible shows no awareness that such people even existed. Furthermore, the message of that sentence leads to yet another tangent topic—whether salvation is based on deeds or faith²¹—but now I'm heaping digression upon digression.

Returning to the issue at hand—that is, the apparent discrepancies between the Old Testament and the New Testament when it comes to the afterlife (and the two isolated sentences in the Old Testament versus the rest of its 1,000+ pages)—your stance, as I understand it, is that there are *no* discrepancies: the Old Testament lines such as "to dust thou shalt return" simply reflect the reality of that time period, the Old Testament passages from Isaiah and Daniel were prophecies of events to come, and the New Testament's stress on Judgment Day and heaven and hell represent the new post-Jesus reality.

CHRIS: That's right.

SCOTT: And as for why the pagans knew about Judgment Day and its rewards and punishments long before Jesus's arrival ... I suppose that's where the theory of Satan's diabolical anticipatory plagiarism fits in.

CHRIS: Yes, precisely.

SCOTT: One difficulty I have with the demonic plagiarism theory is that it leads us back to the loophole problem. It's like the defense that the Bible's primitive descriptions of our solar system are God's metaphors: accepting such a rationale for Christianity means it's open for other religions to use as well. If we're to allow the argument that Satan could have pre-plagiarized Christianity's doctrines about the virgin birth and Judgment Day, sneaking them inside the pagan religions centuries in advance ... well, with that loophole in place, a Buddhist apologist could say that demonic forces must have pre-plagiarized *Buddha's* ideas about karma and reincarnation,

^{iv} Chris's answer is based on a combination of the views of C. S. Lewis (in his book *Mere Christianity*, p. 65) and Ravi Zacharias (in Lee Strobel's *The Case for Faith*, p. 157).

pre-advertising them within Hinduism. Opening up an escape hatch that wide would also allow Vodun, Sikhism, and Santeria to claim that they borrowed from no one—any evidence that suggested otherwise must be a case of diabolical mimicry!

I also find it difficult to buy the idea that Plato was being a dupe for the devil when he included the story about Er in his 360 B.C. classic *The Republic*. For this is a book focused mainly on moral and political philosophy (the definitions of “good” and “justice,” how these definitions apply to the structure of an ideal government, what’s the best that can be expected from a real-life government, etc.)—a book that can hardly be read as bent on undermining the future text of the New Testament. The brief section on Er is not even particularly well-known, so the theory that “Satan made Plato include it” because it was part of his demonic plot that Christians, in the centuries and millenniums to come, would notice the parallel between Er and Lazarus and thus start to doubt the originality and integrity of their religion ... I can only say that such a scheme seems curiously tame (not to mention eggheadedly ineffectual) from what one might expect from the Force of Darkness.

What’s more, far better-known ideas from Plato have been used to *defend* Christianity. Plato’s theory that our physical world is only an imperfect copy of Divinity’s “eternal ideas,” for example, was used by Saint Augustine and many subsequent Christian philosophers to explain the difference between our material world and our immaterial God. Is it rational to believe that Plato’s obscure story about Er was inspired by Satan to sabotage Christianity, even though more influential Platonic ideas have been widely used to further Christianity?

CHRIS: Let me ask you this: is it really *out* of character for the Enemy to disguise his influence in pagan literature?

The Devil

SCOTT: To answer your question with a Yes or No would require that I accept the premise that such an enemy exists ... but I’ve yet to find any convincing reason to have this belief. And in fact evidence from the Bible itself—the radically different depiction of Satan as we go from the Old Testament to the New—strongly suggests that Christianity’s “devil” is yet another example of a belief that the New Testament authors picked up from neighboring religions.²²

The Old Testament contains nobody who comes close to being a supernatural rival of God’s. True, Genesis contains a story about a serpent that tricks Eve into eating the fruit, but notice that the Bible’s introduction of the serpent mentions only that he’s “crafty”—it contains no hint that this is a god of evil:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.

Genesis 3:1, NRSV

And God’s reaction to the misdeeds of this crafty creature is hardly that of a Holy Confrontation—God simply turns the serpent into a snake:

And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.

Genesis 3:14, KJV

Like the Tower of Babel’s description of “why humans have different languages,” this story fits into the category of Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories*: a tale that explains why snakes have no legs.

CHRIS: That *is* the devil in Genesis, speaking *from* the serpent.

SCOTT: So what was the significance of turning the serpent into a snake? So the devil would be stuck in that form, cursed to forever “eat dust for all days”? That doesn’t match up well with the rest of the Bible—no other passage describes Satan as being trapped in a snake’s body.

CHRIS: Satan, though evil, is still a spiritual being. So no, he could not be “stuck” in any one physical form.

SCOTT: So the *serpent* was being punished ... for what? For allowing itself to be used? How much of an opportunity for resistance could a reptile possibly have if an evil spirit chose to occupy it? Besides, I don’t see how a snake is any worse off than a reptile that has its legs, especially given that God apparently saw fit to make sure that snakes were henceforth blessed with flexible spines and enough ribs and muscles to ensure that their movements are among the most graceful of all the creatures on this planet.

Now if the devil had tempted Eve through a cow—*then* limb loss would be something to mourn. But what would be the point of punishing a creature that was not only an innocent bystander, but wouldn’t even notice the punishment?

If, however, we approach the tale as an explanatory-myth—that this is a fable that holds the premises that animals can talk, are accountable for their actions, that the very first snake misbehaved, that it was “taught a lesson” through punishment, and that its punishment was passed down to all descendants—then the story makes perfect sense. There’s nothing puzzling about this story as long as we put it into the same category as the Kipling tale of the disobedient Elephant’s Child who got too close to the great green-gray Limpopo River, where a crocodile seized him by the nose and stretched it to its present shape.

CHRIS: That folk tale about the elephant’s trunk has *nothing* in common with God’s Word! The point of taking away the serpent’s legs was not to “punish an innocent bystander,” but to provide man with a symbolic warning of how sin corrupts us: how it lowers us in God’s eyes.

SCOTT: Rather than rehash my point about how metaphorical interpretations open up loopholes that are large enough to invalidate all your objections to Christianity’s rivals, let’s move on to the Book of Job, the next alleged appearance of the devil, where he goes by the name—depending on which translation you use—of either “Satan,” “Satan the Accuser,” “the Adversary,” or as the Hebrew Bible calls him, “Hasatan.”^{lvi}

Now it’s true that this Hasatan is portrayed as an enemy of man, or at least of Job, but he’s *not* portrayed as an enemy of God. Look at how Hasatan and God interact: Hasatan is introduced only as one who personally reviews mankind, he approaches God accompanied by an assembly of gods (or, the “sons of God”), and he and God then speak to one another without animosity. When Hasatan accusingly questions Job’s loyalty, God simply takes Hasatan up on the challenge—something along the lines of a friendly bet. God even lends Hasatan “the fire of God” (Job 1:16), and He then stands back and watches the destruction of Job’s livelihood, health, and family:

There was a man in the land of Utz, whose name was Iyov [Job].^{lvii} That man was blameless and upright, and one who feared G-d, and turned away from evil ... Now it happened on the day when the sons of G-d came to present themselves before the Lord, that Hasatan also came among them. The Lord said to Hasatan, “Where have you come from?”

Then Hasatan answered the Lord, and said, “From going back and forth in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.”

The Lord said to Hasatan, “Have you considered my servant, Iyov? For there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and an upright man, one who fears G-d, and turns away from evil.”

^{lvi} The ancient Hebrew (a language without vowels) word for the character in question is “Stn,” which means “the Accuser,” or “the Adversary.” Modern Hebrew Bibles translate the name as “Hasatan”; Old Testaments usually translate it as “Satan,” or “Satan, the Accuser,” or “the Adversary.”

^{lvii} These passages are from the *Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible*, and except for the different titles—Satan is Hasatan, Job is Iyov, God is spelled G-d—it parallels the Old Testament.

Then Hasatan answered the Lord, and said, “Does Iyov fear G-d for nothing? Haven’t you made a hedge around him, and around his house, and around all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will renounce you to your face.”

The Lord said to Hasatan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power. Only on himself don’t put forth your hand.”
Job 1:1, 6–12, Hebrew Names Version (HNV)

Though Job continues to worship God even after all his animals, servants, and children are killed, Hasatan is still unconvinced of Job’s loyalty—so he asks, and receives, God’s okay to further torment Job with painful boils from head to foot. Note that this Hasatan is no rebel: he waits for permission from God for everything he does.

The Lord said to Hasatan, “Have you considered my servant Iyov [Job]? For there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and an upright man, one who fears G-d, and turns away from evil. He still maintains his integrity, although you incited me against him, to ruin him without cause.”

Hasatan answered the Lord, and said, “Skin for skin. Yes, all that a man has will he give for his life. But put forth your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will renounce you to your face.”

The Lord said to Hasatan, “Behold, he is in your hand. Only spare his life.”

So Hasatan went forth from the presence of the Lord, and struck Iyov with painful sores from the sole of his foot to his head.

Job 2:3–7, HNV

Note also that although the question “why do the innocent suffer?” is the major theme for the following forty chapters, the explanation that an evil spirit might play at least *some* role isn’t offered by any of the book’s characters: not Job’s friends (who say that suffering is either God’s punishment for sin or a blessing with hidden benefits), not God (who tells Job that God’s Almightyness is incomprehensible to puny humans), and not Job (who says God causes good and evil alike and is indifferent to life’s injustices—Job 9:20–24).^{lviii}

Hasatan is mentioned only two more times in the Hebrew Bible, and both appearances give us nothing more than trivial and fleeting glimpses: in Zechariah 3:1–2, Hasatan accuses Joshua of “many things”; and in 1 Chronicles 21:1, Hasatan makes David take a census in Israel. In all the major stories of mass suffering—the Great Flood, the enslavement in Egypt, the civil war between Israel and Judah, the military defeats at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, the exile to Babylon—Hasatan is never mentioned as the cause, or even mentioned at all.

When we get to the New Testament, however, Hasatan becomes “Satan” and is not only mentioned more frequently, he is suddenly “the god of this evil world”:

If the Good News we preach is veiled from anyone, it is a sign that they are perishing. Satan, the god of this evil world, has blinded the minds of those who don’t believe, so they are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News that is shining upon them.

2 Corinthians 4:3–4, NLT

Unlike the Book of Job’s conversational and obedient Hasatan (deemed responsible enough to be allowed to borrow the “fire of God” in Job 1:16), this is no longer a dutiful staff member who accuses others of being insufficiently loyal to the Head Chief. The New Testament transforms him into an evil superpower who actively supports *disloyalty* to God—one who has been (retroactively) a liar and murderer “from the beginning”:

^{lviii} The Book of Job is discussed further in Chapter 7’s “Job,” starting on p. 134.

The devil ... was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

John 8:44, NRSV

You [people of Ephesus] used to live just like the rest of the world, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God.

Ephesians 2:2, NLT

Christianity interprets the New Testament's devil as the same character as the Hebrew Bible's serpent and Hasatan, but it's a shoehorned interpretation: Judaism, from ancient times to today, contains no teachings about an evil supernatural being.^{lix} The idea that the serpent, Hasatan, and Satan are one persona is barely coherent—if a human author submitted such a story for publication, an editor would send it back and insist that the author make the following changes:

- revise Satan's character for consistency from the Old Testament to the New, or at least create an explanation for the radical change;
- develop Hasatan's eye-blink appearances in Chronicles and Zechariah, or just leave him out of these books;
- rewrite the Book of Job to better explain what part Satan has, and doesn't have, when it comes to the suffering of the innocent—that is, the role of Satan should be discussed by Job's friends, by God during the whirlwind speech, and by Job when he asks "from whence evil?"(Job 9:24);
- explain *how*—if God's credentials include being All-Powerful, All-Wise, All-Good, and the Creator-Of-All—a demonic superpower could possibly exist in the first place.

As incoherent as the Judeo-Christian Bible's presentation of Satan may be, it all makes sense when we take the approach that the New Testament's authors based their ideas about Satan—and his destination—not as much on the Hebrew religion as various pagan sources.

The ancient Greeks, for example, believed in a god they called *Hades* that ruled the realm of the dead, and in spirits they called *daimones*. Hades was also the name of the underworld itself: a world that contained a fiery river (*Phlegethon*) and a dungeon called *Tartarus*, where the wicked were eternally tormented. The New Testament authors—who were surrounded by Greek culture, and even wrote in Greek—picked up on all these themes: demons appear throughout the New Testament (Mark 1:24–39, Matthew 4:24, etc.), Luke 16:23 refers to "Hades" as the residence of the deceased wicked, Second Peter 2:4 refers to "Tartarus" as the dungeon where sinful angels are punished, and Revelation makes repeated warnings the underworld's fiery waters: "[The beast and the false prophet] both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone"—Revelation 19:20 (plus Revelation 20:10, 20:14–15, 21:8, etc.)^{lx}

^{lix} The word *devil* is never used in either the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament: Judaism teaches that we commit evil all on our own, needing no help from the supernatural. Judaism's belief is that the battle between good and evil is an internal battle between our own inclinations, and that we should look to God to help us strengthen the good and overcome the evil.

^{lx} The belief that the underworld contains fiery water pre-dates even the Greek belief in the fiery river *Phlegethon*, as the 1240 B.C. Egyptian *Book Of The Dead* mentions that the god who eats the dead watches for them at the "Lake of Fire": "... from the god whose face is like unto that of a greyhound ... who feedeth upon the dead, who watcheth at the Bend of the Lake of Fire ..."

Zoroastrianism was arguably²³ an even greater influence, as its Creation story tells of a good god and an evil god that compete for followers, and that at the time of “ultimate retribution” there will be longtime suffering for the evil and longtime bliss for the righteous:

*In the beginning there were two primal spirits,
Twins spontaneously active,
These are the Good and the Evil, in thought,
and in word, and in deed.
And when these Twin Spirits came together at first,
They established Life and the Denial of Life ...
Between these two Spirits the Demon-worshippers could not discern aright.
To them Deception came at the time of decision,
And they chose the Worst Mind.
With violence then they rushed together,
Life, in the world, to destroy.
And when there cometh the ultimate retribution for the evil ones,
Then, at Thy Ordinance, shall the Good Mind establish the Kingdom of Heaven ...
Then truly cometh the blow of destruction upon Untruth;
While those of good renown shall be received in the promised abode,
The blessed abode of the Good Mind, of Truth, and of the Wise Lord.
O ye mortals, mark these commandments,
The commandments the Wise Lord has given for happiness and for pain:
Long suffering for the doer of Evil, and bliss for the follower of Truth.*

Yasna 30: 3–11

When the Bible is read cover to cover, the oddities about the character that Christianity refers to as “the devil” are difficult to make sense of: his lack of a coherent origin story, his sporadic appearances, and his multiple distinct forms and names and personalities.

But when we take the perspective that the New Testament’s Satan derives largely from neighboring beliefs—and that the Hebrew Bible’s serpent and Hasatan were only reinterpreted as “the devil” in an after-the-fact attempt to make the Old and New Testaments look like one unified text—all the oddities suddenly become comprehensible.

CHRIS: First of all, the only similarity between Satan and the Greek god “Hades” is in pop culture, which often misrepresents Satan as the ruler of hell. The *biblical* teaching of Satan is that he temporarily rules *this* world (2 Corinthians 4:4), and will be *punished* in hell (Revelation 20:10). And any alleged borrowing from the dualistic Zoroastrianism is farfetched, as Zoroastrianism has it that the “Good and Evil Spirits” are primal twins—something totally removed from the Bible’s Truth that God is the *only* god, and creator of all.

Second, the Bible does indeed tell us how Satan came to be: Satan had been an angel of high power and authority, but Satan perverted that power by his desire to exalt himself above God. In Isaiah, note that God calls Satan “Lucifer,” which means “Morning Star”—and the line “How art thou fallen from heaven” is a reference to Satan’s fall from his high rank:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

Isaiah 14:12, KJV

Last, it’s true that Satan appears in different forms and sometimes makes only shadowy appearances, but is it any surprise that the father of lies and deceit would be difficult to recognize from section to section? Besides, note how Satan’s introduction in each Testament betrays his disguises. Read Genesis 3:1–5, and look at the way this

“serpent” tries to install doubts about God to Eve: “Do you *really* think God was speaking the truth when He said that eating from the Tree of Knowledge would be a bad thing? Follow my directions to disobey and you can be as wise as God Himself!” Then read Matthew 4:1–11, and see how Satan reveals the consistency of his nature when he tries the same trick with Jesus: “Do you *really* have the power of God within—sufficient to perform miracles on your own? Follow my directions to reject Him, and you can be the ruler of all the kingdoms on earth!”

SCOTT: I know that the isolated passage in Isaiah 14:12 is sometimes interpreted as a reference to Satan and his supposed fall from heaven. But when I read Isaiah 14, I see that the whole chapter is about a once-powerful Babylonian king who in the past had been merciless with his enemies but was now himself being crushed. “Morning Star / Lucifer” is the king’s nickname, and “fallen from heaven” refers to his loss of power. The interpretation that the name Lucifer “also” refers to a demonic rival of God comes out of *nowhere*.

As for Satan’s deceptive ways making him “difficult to recognize from section to section,” a problem with this defense is that the Bible itself is the culprit. It doesn’t quite follow that God, if indeed the Bible’s Author, would permit a supernatural rival to have his way in the Holy Handbook.

As for the parallel between the speeches of the serpent in Genesis 3 and Satan in Matthew 4, the first thing I have to say is “Not a bad defense!” ... although I need add that your paraphrasing makes those passages seem more similar than they really are. And the Matthew 4 bit about Satan trying to get Jesus to “reject God” leads to the difficulty of reconciling this story with the Trinity^{lxi} belief that Jesus *is* God—because to believe that Satan (who’s presumably not a total idiot) would do something as nonsensical as try to get God to reject Himself ... well, let’s not wander off track.

Okay, the root issue of this section on “Sources of The Word” was whether the Bible was influenced by foreign religions, and you have in fact answered all the questions I brought with me. Let’s take a step back, and I’ll review my notes with you.

Here’s what I have—in trying to figure out why so many ideas and stories in the Judeo-Christian Bible can be found in pre-biblical pagan scriptures, we’ve covered two opposing explanations:

The Fundamentalist Explanation: the Bible is *the* original source—the pre-biblical pagan versions are the results of either (a) the pagans picking up these stories from their pre-Tower of Babel ancestors, or (b) the pagans picking up on God’s True Word from back when it was still in its oral form, or (c) Satan filling the ancient pagan religions with stories of virgin births, half-god and half-human heroes, Judgment Day, etc.: pre-plagiarizing the Bible so that future readers would be confused and led astray.

The Secular Explanation: the biblical authors were influenced by pre-existing religions.

As supporting evidence for the secular explanation, I pointed out that the Bible’s own text reflects its multiple religious influences, using the examples of its contradictory passages on monotheism, the afterlife, and Satan.

You countered that I was misunderstanding the Bible in all my examples: the Bible’s polytheistic passages were there because God communicated in the language of the times, the to-dust-thou-shalt-return passages of the Old Testament reflected the no-afterlife reality of the pre-Christian era, and the various names and personality changes of Satan were simply typical of the Enemy’s deceptive ways.

Is this an accurate summary?

CHRIS: Yes, but I just want to add that for these issues to be properly understood, you must be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to guide your studies of the Scriptures. For when you read the Bible accompanied by the Spirit of

^{lxi} Endnote 18 (p. 215) discusses the history of the Trinity doctrine.

God—and read it as a whole, and not just pick out isolated passages—you will realize there are truly *no* inconsistencies.

SCOTT: I do want to talk to you more about both the Holy Spirit and biblical inconsistencies, but if it's okay with you, I'd first like to record your positions on all those other areas of proof you mentioned when I first asked you how you knew the Judeo-Christian Bible was God's Word: the evidence of archeology, the prophecies, and what you referred to as "the miracle of the resurrection."

Archeology, Prophecies, and the Resurrection

CHRIS: Gladly. Let's start with archeology—for look at how time and time again the work of archeologists has backed up the inerrancy of God's Word. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the references to the many different Assyrian kings, the names of all the various tribes mentioned throughout the Scriptures: all these and many more have been proved accurate through archeological findings. And because the Bible is shown to be trustworthy in all that can be verified, we therefore know it's trustworthy in all the ways that can't be verified.^{lxii}

SCOTT: First, we can look at any number of ancient sacred texts—from the Egyptian to the Greek to the Indian—and find at least a few historically accurate passages. It would be much more unusual to find a lengthy sacred text that was completely the product of imagination. So I don't follow the logic that *some* accuracy is proof that you can trust everything a book says. As I'm sure you'd agree in the case of the non-Christian holy books, it's perfectly possible to have a sacred text that contains scattered historical facts interwoven with legends about the supernatural.

Second, even though archeology corroborates some biblical stories, it fails to support many others: there's no archeological evidence, for example, that matches the Bible's descriptions of Jerusalem during David and Solomon's reigns, and no traces have been found of Hebrew tribes ever living in the Sinai, despite the biblical story of them living there for forty years.^{lxiii}

The Bible also sometimes makes anachronistic mistakes about the names of cities—the Egyptian city of Rameses, for example, is referred to as existing several hundred years prior to the birth of the city's namesake, the pharaoh Rameses. To be specific, the Bible's chronology tells us that city of Rameses was already established by the 1500s B.C. at the latest:

- 1 Kings 6:1 claims the Exodus took place 480 before Solomon's fourth year of rule;
- Biblical chronology tells us that Solomon ruled in the mid-900s B.C.,^{lxiv} meaning that the Exodus took place sometime in the mid-1400s B.C.;
- the Bible tells us that Rameses had already long been in existence by the time of the Exodus—for not only does Exodus 12:37 claim that the Israelites journeyed through Rameses during their escape from slavery, Genesis 47:11 tells us that Joseph settled his father and brothers in Rameses;

^{lxii} Chris's argument is based on Lee Strobel's interview with Norman Geisler in *The Case for Faith*, pp. 128–129 and 251. In Geisler's words: "... if we can trust the Bible when it's telling us about straightforward earthly things that can be verified, then we can trust it in areas where we can't directly verify it in an empirical way" (p. 128).

^{lxiii} These examples were taken from the 9 March 2002 *New York Times* article "As Rabbis Face Facts, Bible Tales Are Wilting." An excerpt of the article is included in endnote 24 (p. 229).

^{lxiv} The time period of the 900s B.C. for Solomon's rule comes from the number of years assigned by the Bible to Solomon's successors. Sources: the Catholic Encyclopedia (www.newadvent.org/cathen/14135b.htm) and ChristianAnswers.net (<http://christiananswers.net/dictionary/solomon.html>).

- Exodus 1:6–8 tells us that “many generations” had passed between the time of Joseph and the enslavement of the Hebrews, thus placing the existence of the city of Rameses in the 1500s B.C. or even earlier;

—yet archeological records tell us that the pharaoh Rameses didn’t rule until the 1200s B.C., so the city of Rameses couldn’t have possibly existed when the Bible says it did.

But anachronisms and date mix-ups related to the alleged Hebrew escape from Egyptian slavery are not surprising, for another one of archeology’s strikes against the Bible’s credibility is the total absence of evidence that the Exodus ever even happened. Egypt’s written records—to cite just one such piece of evidence—are well-preserved and contain thorough details going all the way back to 3000 B.C., yet they contain absolutely no mention of any plagues that are similar to the biblical account, or losing troops to the Red Sea, or runaway slaves, or having Hebrew slaves at all.²⁴

CHRIS: As for the plagues and the escape of the Hebrew slaves being missing in the records of the ancient Egyptians, would you expect such a people to document their shame and defeat?

As for the “anachronism” of Genesis’s mention of the city of Rameses, your accusation rests on the premise that there could not have been a place named Rameses prior to the pharaoh Rameses who ruled in the 1200s B.C. Realize, however, that “Rameses” is simply a title that means “Ra created it”—so it’s *easily* possible that there were lesser-known towns named Rameses long before Pharaoh Rameses was born.^{lxv} Given the existence of an area named Rameses sometime in the sixteenth century B.C. or even earlier, then Genesis 47:11, Exodus 12:37, and 1 Kings 6:1 become completely compatible with one another.

When it comes to archeology’s missing details on these issues—the lack of documentation on the Exodus, and on the existence of an area named Rameses prior to the pharaoh Rameses—also remember that archeology’s records are incomplete, and that failure to confirm a biblical detail is not the same as contradicting it. Or as the saying goes, “absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence.”

So let’s move on to areas in which the hand of God is even more clearly at work. Let’s look at the Bible’s incredibly accurate prophecies, such as the predictions of the Jewish return to their homeland in Israel in 1948. Read Isaiah 43:5–6, Jeremiah 31:38–40, and Jeremiah 16:14–16: man could *not* have written these without divine assistance.

Even more astounding are the Old Testament prophecies that accurately describe the future messiah to be Jesus Christ. Here, read the following passage from the Christian philosopher Norman Geisler:

... Psalm 22:16 says his hands and feet would be pierced; verse 14 says his bones would be out of joint; verse 18 talks about the casting of lots for his garments; and Zechariah 12:10 says he would be pierced, as Jesus was with a lance. That’s obviously a picture of his crucifixion ... And, of course, Isaiah 53:2–12 has perhaps the most amazing predictions about Christ in the entire Old Testament. It foretells twelve aspects of his passion that were all fulfilled—he would be rejected, be a man of sorrow, live a life of suffering, be despised by others, carry our sorrow, be smitten and afflicted by God, be pierced for our transgressions, be wounded for our sins, would suffer like a lamb, would die with the wicked, would be sinless, and would pray for others.^{lxvi}

SCOTT: First, I agree that “absence of evidence does not equal evidence of absence”—but mainly in those circumstances in which the expectation of finding evidence was low. For example, if a close friend told me his

^{lxv} Chris’s argument is based on the defense found in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, under its entry on “Rameses” (www.biblemaster.com/bible/ency/isb/view.asp?number=7209). This article does acknowledge, however, that defenders of this theory admit that evidence for the existence of any area named “Rameses” prior to the life of Pharaoh Rameses (1301–1234 B.C.) is “still to be found.”

Another theory for explaining the appearance of Rameses back in Genesis 47:11 is that Bible copyists of later eras must have updated whatever the ancient and obsolete name of the city was, replacing it with the more modern name. Some defenders-of-the-faith object to this explanation, saying it compromises biblical inerrancy.

^{lxvi} Geisler, in Strobel’s *The Case for Faith*, p. 132.

home was recently robbed, I would believe he was telling the truth, even if I couldn't find corroborating evidence from the newspapers or the television or the internet. If, however, this same friend told me that his former home had been blown up by space aliens—and again, I could find no corroborating evidence from newspapers or television or the internet—the lack of evidence would lead me to disbelieve his claim. Because of the differing expectations I would have in these two different circumstances, absence of evidence does not damage credibility in the first example, but deals a knock-out blow in the second.^{lxvii} So when it comes to an event as major as the Exodus, the total absence of corroborating evidence casts strong doubt on whether it really happened.

Let's now turn to the passages you claim are predictions about the Jewish return to Israel in 1948:

Do not fear, for I am with you [Israel]; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth ..."

Isaiah 43:5–6, NRSV

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when the city [of Jerusalem] shall be rebuilt for the Lord from the tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. The whole valley ... shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall never again be uprooted or overthrown.

Jeremiah 31:38, 40, NRSV

There will come a glorious day, says the Lord, when the topic of conversation will be that God is bringing his people home from the countries of the north, where he had sent them as slaves for punishment. You will look back no longer to the time I brought you out from slavery in Egypt.

Jeremiah 16:14, TLB

In the context of the Bible's story, these passages all refer to the 587 B.C. fall of Jerusalem, the subsequent exile of the Israelites to Babylon, and the 539–516 B.C. return to Jerusalem (and this can hardly be called a "prophecy," because the Hebrew Bible was not fully compiled until centuries after the fact). If these were about the return in A.D. 1948 rather than the return in 539 B.C., why aren't *both* returns mentioned, and why no reference to the nearly 2,500-year wait in between? If Jeremiah 16 were about the 1948 return, why would the Jews be described as simply "slaves in the north," with no reference to the Nazi genocide during the Holocaust? If these sentences were truly a divine prophecy about the twentieth century, how could God neglect to mention so cataclysmic an event?

As for the alleged Jesus prophecies, it's true that Psalms, Isaiah, and Zechariah contain phrases such as "being pierced" and "bones out of joint"... but these phrases are more coherently read as references to the suffering of Israel, not the suffering of a future messiah. Look at how Zechariah 12 works its way up to the tenth verse that Geisler refers to:

This is the fate of Israel, as pronounced by the Lord ... "I will make Jerusalem and Judah like a cup of poison to all the nearby nations that send their armies to surround Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be a heavy stone burdening the world. And though all the nations of the earth unite in an attempt to move her, they will all be crushed."

"In that day," says the Lord, "I will bewilder the armies drawn up against her, and make fools of them, for I will watch over the people of Judah, but blind all her enemies." ... "The Lord will defend the people of Jerusalem ... For my plan is to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. Then I will pour out the spirit of grace and prayer on all the people of Jerusalem, and they will look on him they pierced, and mourn for him as for an only son, and grieve bitterly for him as for an oldest child who died."

Zechariah 12:1–4, 8–10, TLB

^{lxvii} I came across this analogy in an internet video called *Debunking Christian Apologetics: "Argument from Silence,"* by John L. Armstrong (www.youtube.com/DeistPaladin).

I know that in dealing with metaphors there will often be equally plausible arguments for different interpretations, and whose interpretation is correct can be impossible to “prove” one way or the other. But the suffering-Israel interpretation has a strong defense, for the books of Zechariah, Isaiah, and Psalms are all about God’s relationship with Israel: His love for His chosen people, His fury with their failings, His even greater fury toward their enemies, and His promise to crush those enemies in bloody slaughter. Geisler reads Zechariah 12 as a reference to Jesus, but look at the opening sentence: “This is the fate of Israel, as pronounced by the Lord.” To interpret select words like “pierced” as a prophecy about Jesus comes out of nowhere.

And if we’re going to talk about prophecies, let’s look not only at the metaphorical ones, but at specific predictions about everlasting destructions “coming soon” that never occurred:

For the Lord God says: I will destroy Tyre to the ground. ... Your city will lie in ruins ... Never again will you be inhabited or be given beauty here in the land of those who live. I will bring you to a dreadful end ...

Ezekiel 26:19–21, TLB

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; Arabs will not pitch their tents there, shepherds will not make their flocks lie down there. ... Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged.

Isaiah 13:19–20, 22, NRSV

I will make the land of Egypt an utter waste and desolation, from Migdol to Syene, as far as the border of Ethiopia. No human foot shall pass through it, and no animal foot shall pass through it; it shall be uninhabited forty years. I will make the land of Egypt a desolation among desolated countries; and her cities shall be a desolation forty years among cities that are laid waste.

Ezekiel 29:10–12, NRSV

Tyre is now the fully inhabited Lebanese city of Sur, and unless you count a name change as “destruction”—which would be unimpressive future-telling—this prophecy remains unfulfilled. And although it’s true that Babylon may no longer be “the glory of kingdoms,” that area (now in Iraq) has always had people in it, despite the 2,500-year-old prediction that the land will “never again be inhabited ... its time is close at hand.” And Egypt has never been desolate for forty years.

CHRIS: In contemplating the eternal, we can’t assume that what is “soon” by human standards is “soon” by God’s. And just because something hasn’t happened *yet* is no proof it will never happen.

But beyond the proofs of archeology and the prophecies, the strongest documented evidence is of the *miracle* of Christ’s resurrection. Look at all the independent corroborating sources confirming the vacant tomb and the encounters with Jesus after His bodily death on the cross: the Book of Acts has several affirmations of Jesus’s resurrection, and Mark’s Gospel and First Corinthians 15 both mention witnesses by name. These documents go back to very shortly after the event occurred—they were fresh data, and could not possibly have had time to be the products of legend.

Note also that we have no documentation from skeptics of that age who challenged any of these claims. The pagan Romans had every incentive to investigate and show the world that the tomb still contained Jesus’s body—but Christ having risen, they were forced into silence.^{lxviii}

SCOTT: As for the lack of Roman documents from Christ’s time period that dispute the claims about the empty tomb or the resurrection, well, that’s true, but it’s also no surprise given that during Christ’s lifetime, we know of

^{lxviii} The “proof by resurrection” argument is based on Strobel’s interview with William Lane Craig in *The Case for Faith*, pp. 71, 82, 267, and 268.

no Roman—or anyone else for that matter—who recorded *anything* about Jesus. Sects among Judaism were common, and historians didn't notice Jesus's particular sect until about eighty years after the alleged resurrection.^{lxix}

You also say the New Testament contains “fresh data,” but even Christian biblical scholars acknowledge that the earliest documents weren't written until at least some twenty years after Jesus's death. And stories can become exaggerated in much shorter periods of time than that: circulated among enough people, this can take less than a day.

When it comes to the corroborating pieces of evidence you cited, *all* come from the New Testament, so these sources are not independent, and not first-hand. Christian biblical scholars acknowledge this point as well: that the Gospel writers were not the disciples themselves, but anonymous authors who copied down oral stories attributed to Christ's disciples (which is why the books are referred to as “The Gospel According to ...”). So the Gospel authors were often copying from the same oral stories, and copying from each other.

Even the Bible itself, in the opening of the Gospel According to Luke, tells of how second-hand accounts formed “God's Word”:

Dear friend who loves God: Several biographies of Christ have already been written using as their source material the reports circulating among us from the early disciples and other eyewitnesses. However, it occurred to me that it would be well to recheck all these accounts from first to last and after thorough investigation to pass this summary on to you ...

Luke 1:1–3, TLB

What's more, when the Church's leaders finally put together an official version of the New Testament, decisions on which documents to include and exclude were based not on any test of authorship, but on how closely those documents conformed to doctrines the Church was already teaching.²⁵

Everything about the formation of the New Testament had just the sort of chaos to it that one would expect from a “holy book” put together solely by human effort: not a complete package handed down by God with clarity and conviction, but a jumble of loose ends pieced together by men amidst arguments and ambiguity. Even the *Catholic Encyclopedia* admits this (though its wording is far gentler), as we can see from its article “Canon of the New Testament”:

The idea of a complete and clear-cut canon of the New Testament existing from the beginning, that is from Apostolic times, has no foundation in history. The Canon of the New Testament, like that of the Old, is the result of a development, of a process at once stimulated by disputes with doubters, both within and without the Church, and retarded by certain obscurities and natural hesitations, and which did not reach its final term until the dogmatic definition of the Tridentine Council [in 1547].

There are no indications in the New Testament of a systematic plan for the distribution of the Apostolic compositions ... Nearly all the New Testament writings were evoked by particular occasions, or addressed to particular destinations. ... It was doubtless in this way that the collections grew, and reached completeness within certain limits, but a considerable number of years must have elapsed (and that counting from the composition of the latest book) before all the widely separated Churches of early Christendom possessed the new sacred literature in full. And this want of an organized distribution, secondarily to the absence of an early fixation of the Canon, left room for variations and doubts which lasted far into the centuries.

^{lxix} The earliest known non-Christian acknowledgement of Christianity was written in the year 110 by the Roman historian Tacitus in *Annals* XV 44, in which Tacitus provides the following unflattering description of Christianity's blossoming popularity in Rome: “This noxious superstition [Christianity], suppressed for the moment, broke out again not only in Judaea, where it began, but even in Rome itself, where the scum of shame flows and becomes the vogue.” (See endnote 3, p. 200, for more on the historical records about Jesus.)

CHRIS: It was not a matter of the Church “deciding” which texts were inspired, but *discovering*. The early church fathers cannot be compared to those in a board meeting bickering over company policies that might just as well go in one direction as the other, but something more akin to scientists’ discovery of the properties of gravity. The *truth* is out there, even if the process of precisely defining it may take some time.

But regardless of the history behind the New Testament’s formation—whether the Gospels were written by the disciples or by those who knew the disciples, or however many times the flawed mind of man fumbled before the record was set straight—an unbiased look at the finished result reveals that *God* was the one behind the inspiration of this holiest of books.

SCOTT: Saying that God was the inspiration behind the New Testament matches up, of course, with the root premise you’ve held all along—but it also disqualifies what you just said about treating the books of Mark, Acts, and First Corinthians as independent corroborating pieces of historic evidence.

The Creator of the Universe, of course, would be a much more credible source than average humans ... but the evidence still favors the explanation that average humans were the authors—people who compiled Jesus tales that had grown as they were circulated. As further evidence, we can see that despite the hundreds of Christian documents the Church sifted through while attempting to put together a coherent package of their religion, the New Testament *still* contains internal contradictions. In Luke, for example, the demon-possessed man that Jesus cures was mute:

Now he [Jesus] was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed.

Luke 11:14, NRSV

—but the later-written Matthew improves the story by saying the man was both mute and blind:

Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see.

Matthew 12:22, NRSV

Matthew’s embellishments are evident in other sections as well:

- In Luke 8:41, a rabbi asks Jesus to heal his dying daughter. When the same story is told in Matthew 9:18, the rabbi says she’s already dead, and asks Jesus to bring her back to life.
- In Mark 10:49–52, Jesus heals one blind man. In the version told in Matthew 20:30–34, Jesus heals two.
- In Mark 5:1–15 and Luke 8:27–35, Jesus heals one demon-possessed man. In the version told in Matthew 8:28–33, He heals two.

CHRIS: If the man described in Luke is mute, does it mean there’s a “contradiction” when Matthew writes that the man was both blind and mute? Luke doesn’t say the demon-possessed man’s *only* affliction was being mute. As for the dying girl, both Luke and Matthew agree that the girl was dead by the time Jesus arrived, and that Jesus brought her back to life—so the difference between the two accounts is insignificant.

As for the numerical discrepancies of the blind and the demon-possessed men, well, consider that whenever you have two of anything, you also have one. So again, there is no contradiction.^{lxx}

SCOTT: It just strikes me as unlikely that an Omniscient Author would write in a way that would call for such strains on logic—generally speaking, a report of seeing “one” of something means there was *only* one: not that there were two, and you’re just being mysteriously quiet about the second.

CHRIS: Scott, once you allow yourself to welcome the Holy Spirit’s guiding presence and become immersed in the Scriptures, all these minor details melt away. You will then recognize that the Bible’s theme, developing in grandeur from Genesis to Revelation, is clear and consistent: the telling of God’s great work in His creation, and His redemption of all things through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In all aspects that *matter* and affect our daily lives—morality, sin, forgiveness—you’ll find that the Bible’s ideas are unchanging. Given its history of over fifteen hundred years in the making, its perfect unity could not have happened by chance.

SCOTT: I’d like to ask you a bit more about unchanging ideas ... for “perfect unity” is something I often hear when I speak with Christians about the Bible, but with all due respect, I feel like we’re not talking about the same book!

But I should let you know that my questions about biblical inconsistencies go into some in-depth detail, and I’ve kept you for quite a while already. Do you have the time to continue?

CHRIS: I do have some things I need to attend to—can we schedule to meet again?

SCOTT: How about next Sunday, same time?

CHRIS: That sounds perfect. See you then, and God bless.

^{lxx} Chris’s defense is based on Lee Strobel’s discussion with Norman Geisler in *The Case for Faith* (p. 139) over the discrepancy between Matthew’s mention of one angel at Jesus’s tomb vs. John’s mention of two angels. To quote Geisler: “... have you ever noticed that whenever you have two of anything, you also have one? It never fails. Matthew didn’t say there was *only* one. John was providing more detail by saying there were two.”

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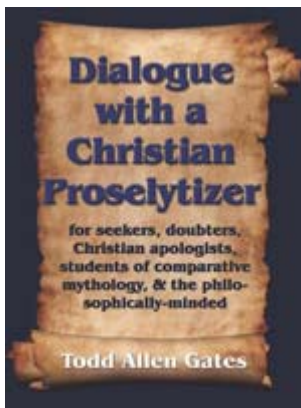
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