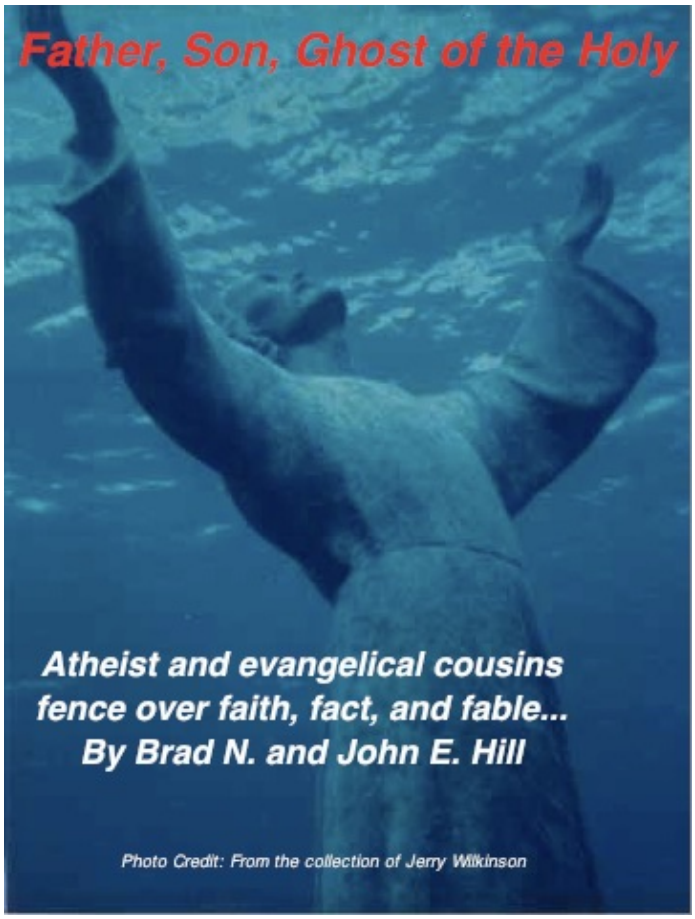

Father, Son, Ghost of the Holy

by Brad and John Hill

Table of Contents

Preface

In the Beginning...John Asks

the cousins play catch up

Summary

The Phenomenology of Prayer

Summary

Theodicy: The Problem of Evil

Summary

Church and State

Summary

Debates and Links

Summary

Inerrancy and the Bible

Summary

The Resurrection: Just another tale?

Summary

Ai, Archeology and Accuracy

Summary

Goodness and Morality

Summary

Intelligent Design

Summary

Evolution: The Origin of the Specious

Summary

Evidence and Evolution

Summary

The Sum of All Fears: It's a wrap

It's a rap

Preface

Brad (BH) writes:

"May I ask you a couple of question about the Bible?" This was an email I received from my cousin John several years ago now. I had neither seen John nor heard from him in decades. I had no idea what prompted this question at this time. But I was delighted! As a Pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church, I yearn for such inquiries- they are rare enough. I was thinking to myself "The Holy Spirit is stirring my cousin!" So I emailed back, "Sure. What's on your mind?"-- confident that I could easily answer the kind of basic questions he might have, like "What does 'propitiation' mean?" or "What happened between the Testaments?"

As you will see, this was not the nature of our unfolding dialogue. John astonishes me. He knows the Bible very well and is familiar with major (and minor) theologians and biblical scholars. He is willing and able to debate the trustworthiness of Josephus as a source and thinks Lee Strobel is a lightweight. He has a grasp of

scientific method, and the "findings" of biology, physics and evolution.

And he is an atheist. Not just an "atheist" but a "Strong Atheist" who doesn't waffle with the usual "I just don't know if there is a God" but who asserts and defends "there is no god!" At least the lines are clear in our arguments! My cousin the Atheist has published articles for the Secular Web (www.infidels.org), The Skeptical Review Online, SWIFT (James Randi Foundation), and the Free Inquiry. He has publicly debated numerous fundamentalists on the Skeptical Review's errancy discussion list, and in his own words "I think I wiped the floor with them!"

John and I share some commonalities other than genes. We both grew up in Des Moines, WA, just south of Seattle. Our families would get together now and then, especially for Christmas. Both our Dad's served in the Navy in WW II. We both were affected by Vietnam. We both love jazz. Our morals and ethics are almost indistinguishable to the naked eye (except for this oddity, I am not adverse to a smoky single malt scotch and a good cigar, John eschews such poison, but he shouldn't since he will "only go around once" and had better grab for what he can!). We both have loving spouses and two daughters.

But don't let all this deceive you! We have two very different world views and though our morals may be similar, their source and meaning are about as divergent as can be.

John (JH) writes:

Without the Internet and email, I doubt I would have ever approached a family member to discuss religion with them. During Brad's career as a missionary and minister we very seldom saw each other. However, my mother would keep me abreast of his adventures. I had often wondered, what if? As in, what if I ever had the chance to ask really sit down with Brad, what would the conversation look like? Where might we agree, and where might we disagree on matters of religion and religious philosophy. That opportunity was presented one day when another cousin happen to send out an email Christmas greeting to every extended family member there was in the Hill clan. There was Brad's email address and I took a chance that he might accommodate me. He did. I really don't know if he thought there was another soul to win, or just a chance to catch up on the years behind us. In any case, I tried to (as gracefully as one could) ask him some questions behind what he believed and how fervently he might believe it. If I astonished Brad, Brad certainly surprised me. I thought he'd be more in line with John Shelby Spong, Robert Funk, or the minister featured on Doonesberry; a laid-back liberal who thinks the Bible has problems, but the message of love and peace is more important than the theology or ideology. He doesn't think much of the Jesus Seminar (neither do I, but for different reasons) and will defend inerrancy...to a point to where it metamorphs into metaphors, poetics, and epic history. I had debated numerous fundamentalists on the Bible Errancy discussion list sponsored by the Skeptical Review Online, and, frankly, can not believe how entrenched some of these folks were; So entrenched in their inerrancy doctrine and their fundamentalism that they seem not to care or completely ignore common sense, the evolution of their own religion, and any evidence that the Bible has errors, inconsistencies, contradictions, and some just plain nonsense. I don't think Brad is there, but he certainly skirts the boundaries and I do have a difficult time understanding his evangelical bent and yet seem so progressive and, dare I say, liberal to some degrees.

Interestingly, for as much as Brad and I have in common, we do not share common religious beliefs. As readers will find, we went to the same church as kids and through adolescence, yet our religious philosophies went in completely different directions. Maybe it was because religion was not reinforced in our household like it was in Brad's. My parents rarely went to church and were more of the freethinking variety; Brad's folks were very involved (I remember on time when I was in my early teens, a new church was being build and I helped Brad's father, my Uncle Art, pull telephone wires and sweep-up after the work parties were over.)

However, around that same age, I became aware that something wasn't quite right about this. In the following dialog I delve into this further. But in a nutshell, I have been an atheist since my early teens even while

attending church. I am not one that was recently de-converted, or a lapsed Christian. I believe, like most other religions, Christianity, at its fundamental levels is a flawed and antiquated religious philosophy that, in some cases, causes more harm than good. In turn, at its social levels, I do believe that some religions provide a necessary outlet for people that need that sort of thing. My conversations with Brad have been interesting and I have learned a great deal about both these levels.

BH

The following dialogue takes place over a three-year period. John would email a question or comment and I would answer it, often throwing one or two back at him. Months would go by, then the answer would come, sometimes the answers were long essays, other times short rapier thrusts, then more months would go by. As you read this, do not imagine a quick back and forth, but months spacing each exchange. We would interrupt each other's essays with comments along the way. I have reworked and reconstructed some of the flow because years of emails became cumbersome and hard to follow, but the exchanges and ideas and challenges are substantially as they were written.

It is our hope that this dialogue first of all serves as a model for a civil discourse on the issues of faith and atheism. Secondly, that the readers will find here some of their own questions raised and discussed, and, thirdly that our discussion raises its own questions in the minds of the readers. And, I, Brad, would add, that in reading this you too will find that faith is not irrational, and yourself seek a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

JH

Brad is correct. This is not a quick back and forth. I have had to fit this in to all my other activities and then there were periods where I just didn't want to think about it. I would have to think too much to keep the dialog as civilized as I could without yelling and screaming, "BRAD, Why can't you see this"? I think the reader will see some of my frustrations surfacing at times, and I have the notion that Brad has felt the same way at times with my statements. I have also tried very hard to keep this discourse at a readable level. In other words, I have tried to keep the overall scholarship level a bit low for better readability and understanding. If regular people cannot understand the issues then we are talking above and over them. This is something I wanted to avoid at all cost.

Readers will notice the lack of book references. In my mind, nothing kills a conversation more than a statement that one should just read this book or that. To me is a cop- out of the worse kind. If I cannot argue my position from my own knowledge base, I probably shouldn't be arguing. I am not claiming 100% originally for my arguments since many of these arguments have been around for a couple of hundred years or more and are very common to atheists, agnostics, and other freethinkers. Hopefully they will be more commonplace now.

I do have one disclaimer though: in my years on the Skeptical Review errancy discussion list, we have discussed these issues many times over. If I have in any way used any material directly or indirectly from someone else on that list from rote memory, it is entirely unintentional.

I certainly would want to reiterate what our hope is with this dialog and Brad put it very well in his statement. And, I would add that you seek rationality and reason for your beliefs. "It is wrong always, anywhere and anytime to accept something upon insufficient evidence." ---W.K. Clifford

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In The Beginning, John Asks...

The Cousins Play Catch-up

It was formless and void, and then the emails began...

JH

Brad, do you mind if I ask you some questions about the Bible?

BH

John! How nice to hear from you. How long has it been? I can't remember; were you at my Father's funeral in 2001?

JH

Nope, all of us were there but me...sorry! I saw the picture though of all the cousins together. It must be ten or more years since we crossed paths. So, what do you think about the Bible in general? Is it the "word of God?" You are a pastor, so I assume you believe it in some way, teach it and preach it.

BH

Sure, the "Word of God"- I believe that it is true. It is not the entire Word of God. Jesus was called the Word. God speaks in other ways too. But before we get into all that, I am interested in what you have been up to, where you have been, etc. I also am curious as to why you are asking!

I seem to recall that you spent some time in Vietnam...I don't remember what you did there, or the nature of your time in the VA Hospital. I actually enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1969, and no doubt would have gone, but I "providentially" had a motorcycle accident just before and badly injured my knee. I have an "honorable discharge" paper. I still love motorcycles. Rode a Honda 250 motocross thousands of miles in Congo.

Your current living situation sounds something like ours in Congo. We served as missionaries there from 1972-1991. We lived on the edge of the Ituri Forest. Our two girls grew up there. We did have a generator that gave power from 6-9 each night. Some others though did have a little gizmo that sat in the river and generated power. We were switching most things to solar when the evacuation interrupted.

JH:

Brad, you should know that I do not believe the Bible is the word of God at all. In fact, I would assert there is no (G)od, gods, goddesses, demons, angels, and such at all. I have thought of you as being perhaps open to a dialog and less "fundamentalist" than some others....are you?

I was in the Navy from 71-74 and served in Vietnam, kind of a atheist in a foxhole if you will. Saw some action, but certainly not as much as in country folks. I contracted tuberculosis while in SE Asia. I spent about seven months at the TB sanitarium at the Naval Hospital in NY, and then another six months at the Veterans Hospital. in Vancouver, WA.

I think I remember something about the motorcycle accident, but not you joining the Marines. I spent over a year in Naval and VA hospitals with Tuberculosis I had contacted in Vietnam. Not one of the best experiences of my life. After that I went to College and worked for a short time as an air traffic controller and then went to work as a ship-board navigator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. After I met Janice, we moved from Western Washington to Northeast Washington to raise the kids. I've been at my current job with the community action agency for 17 years now and still enjoy the work. We build our home and have a hydro-plant that supplies all our electricity. We are remote, but not really isolated. I like the quietness. You can hear yourself think at our house!

BH:

So you are an Atheist? OK. This should be interesting! Perhaps you can describe for me something more about your atheism. On the continuum of atheism, where do you place yourself?

JH:

I would like to know your definition of "continuum of atheism" before I venture too far out on that limb.

BH:

Hmm, well, maybe there isn't a continuum, but this is what I have gleaned about possible kinds of atheism. On the "left" shall we say is the thoroughgoing, complete naturalist. The Universe, as I think Sagan said, is all there is and all there ever was. Matter is eternal, then. Some form of Darwinian evolution explains all that we see among living forms. When we die we are worm food and that's it.

Then there would be the atheism that is perhaps more "Eastern"- that sees the whole of the world and maybe the universe as itself being an impersonal force or "god", kind of like Gaia. At our death we just become the drop back into the sea. Would you be more like the first than the second? Or something else entirely? I think you can help me understand what atheism is really about.

JH:

I would subscribe to the first more than the second as a philosophy. However, there is what is popularly called strong and weak atheism. A weak atheist, (not a term of reproach) is one who simply doesn't believe in gods, goddesses, the supernatural, the superstitions of religion, (all religions). A non-theist. That the material world is all there is and so we'd better make the best of it.

A strong atheist is a weak atheist, but may actually offer arguments to the negative for the non existence of god, goddesses and the supernatural and rejects the spiritual arguments for the supernatural. I thought this was a good summation of a strong atheist: The proposition that we should not suspend judgment about the non-existence of a god or gods. More extensively, a positive position against theistic values, semantics and anti-materialism, a rational inquiry in the nature of religious thought, a new way of thinking about religious and spiritual issues.

An atheist does not deny God's existence. This is the usual (and wrong) definition. By saying that we deny God's existence we inadvertently imply that god(s) exist (a' priori or not) and we simply choose not to believe. An atheist does not believe in the concept of gods and goddesses and sees no reason to accept the burden of proof to disprove something that has never been proven in the first place.

Then there are the issues of Material naturalism, Moral Objectivism, Rationalism and Scientific Inquiry.

BH

Thanks, that helps me understand a little bit more.

JH:

Always a pleasure to light a lamp.

BH

The fuel for the lamp makes it a feeble yellow smoky light...

JH

Depends upon the fuel...I prefer JP-5. Your mileage may very.

BH:

Actually I have a serious question here. Do you view yourself as "hostile" to the church and would like to see Christianity disappear, maybe all religion (opiate for the people...)? It is very possible that the church I am serving may close soon...how do you feel about that? Or are you one that sees some value in the religious community and moral teaching it offers?

JH

Ooooooh. Good soapbox question. I heard that Gandhi once said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." If the Christian organized religion (or any organized religion for that matter) were not so hostile to everything that is not Christian, did not suffer from a persecution complex, demand exclusive ownership to our institutions, minds, science, I wouldn't have much to criticize. Many of these "wounds" are simply self-inflicted (evolution for example). I really do believe that religion causes more harm than good, especially when in the hands of demagogs, jingo's, and the unscrupulous. I believe that Christianity has become over-burdened with layers and layers of junk (for lack of a better word) that detract from the teaching, and denial of it's real roots for the upholding of fundamental positions that today are simply untenable and in some cases just dangerous.

What is the big problem accepting the principle of the separation of church and state? Evolution? Higher Criticism? Scientific inquiry? Or that the Bible may have errors? Do you really think that any one of those items will bring Christianity falling down? I certainly don't have a problem in accepting some of what Jesus said, but is it all worth the fight just to uphold ancient religion supersitions over objectivity because those objects stand opposed to our modern world?

I can see some value in the community and in some of the moral teachings. However, I also see value in Aristole's moral teachings. I don't believe that Jesus or Christianity has any more answers than any other religions. Moreover, though, I see religion as a great separator; Something to use against people who don't share the common belief.

I do like what Jefferson said about this: "I have sworn upon the alter of god,(sic) eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." A subtile irony by Tom, to be sure, but an effective statement nonetheless. I do believe that religion is that form of tryanny.

BH:

Is it a "persecution complex" if there is real persecution?

OK. I can go along with parts of that, especially the part about whose hands it is in. I am very hostile to "Jesus junk" and anything that overlays and so obscures Christianity. I wonder who is shooting whose foot when it comes to Evolution. No doubt we'll get to that in due time.

JH

I was against the war. I thought it was an enormous waste of time, energy and lives. I felt a lot of empathy toward the Vietnamese people. I feel the same about Bush's wars today. The only way we are going to win the

hearts and minds of our enemies is to show compassion, care, and give hope. The more we let corporations economically rape and pillage countries and cultures, and support genocidal dictators when they do our dirty work, we will continue to reap the consequences. Ever see the movie, "Grand Illusion"? It's a classic commentary about the inane (and insane) nature of war. I joined the Navy because I was probably going to be drafted. I thought the Navy would have better choices. I absolutely detest the efforts of modern day revisionists who try to twist history to reflect that we could have won the war if it had not been for the protest movement, a weak-kneed congress, and that damnable liberal press. I wrote a review of one such book ("Unheralded Victory" by Mark Woodruff) when I was having an argument with an acquaintance. Would you like to read it?

This was at a point in my life where I was greatly influenced philosophically by the likes of Albert Einstein, Elbert Hubbard, and socially by Pete Seeger, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon and other folk singer/songwriters I really considered myself a pacifist and very much against the military establishment (I also didn't think that organized religion did enough to oppose the war...kind of like today.) Yet my internal contradiction about making the Navy a career did seem appealing at the time, especially when the war was ending; Sort of a fight-for-peace type of approach. However, when I left the service, I had a bit of self-awakening about my role and life, and returned to an even more determined pacifistic world-view.

BH

I was greatly influenced by Benedict Spinoza, B. F. Skinner (mostly in tension with them...!), Simon and Garfunkel, Elton Trueblood, C.S. Lewis, Francis Shaeffer, and especially Robert Ludlum! Not to mention the Far Side, and more recently Dilbert.

As to self-awakening, I don't know what I was thinking when I tried to join the Marines in 1969. I think I thought I could get into the band. Just how pacifistic are you? I would say at heart I am pacifist, but I would defend my family (I think, I have not had to!). And I recognize that sometimes war, as evil is it is, can be the lesser evil (e.g. Hitler). The Just War Theory I also think is valuable guidance, but once a country goes to war, that becomes hard to hold to.

JH

I am really opposed to any war. We simply don't deal with the causes of war and aggression, and just use a "might is right" ideology. I do believe that is somewhat different from defending your family if someone were to break into your home. Most hawks would take that and make it into a false analogy about our enemies, but it really is different, especially if completely unprovoked. Hitler (a Catholic) could have used the Just War Theory as justification also. It can work both ways. I think Aquinas was just looking for that type of justification when he came up with that to satisfy the bloodshed that permeated Europe at the time. One can always justify war if one has the power and is insane enough to use it.

BH

We're in substantial agreement here. I think I have few illusions about power and its corrupting ability, and neither do I have illusions about the innate goodness of humankind. We have an enormous capacity for both good and evil, hence the "balance of powers" that our American system tries to maintain.

Incidentally, I am not big fan of the Iraq war...I can understand how we got there, but when we invaded Ruth and I were appalled. Getting out is a harder problem!

JH:

The history of our (read Western powers here) involvement in the Middle East is as appalling as perhaps the

colonization of Africa by the 19th century European powers.

BH

Agreed. Much "revisionist" history today is actually just getting to the untold truth.

However, defending the family against a real enemy is not that far from defending my neighbor's family also, and by extrapolation, eventually a nation. And to do so would necessitate a military establishment of some kind.

JH:

I find this interesting that since we shared so any commonalities growing up (same grandparents, same high school, same general neighborhood, same Sunday school) that we ended up on the opposite ends of the religious spectrum; you're a minister and me an atheist.

BH:

It is, isn't it? I ponder what this does or doesn't mean. I think first of all our upbringings were not as similar as they appear. I love your folks and respect them immensely. What they are doing to help my mother is beyond any means I have of expressing gratitude. But they have not been "Christians" as I think you and I might define it, adherents of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In fact, I think your Dad was involved in the Masons. They offered you great moral examples and lived exemplary lives, but Christian devotion was not emphasized. As you know in our home, it was. So no doubt our upbringing has influenced us both to some degree as to what things we are receptive. At some point in our journeys, though, we both decided for ourselves what were to be our essential allegiances in life.

JH:

I am not too sure how far I want to carry some family dynamics, yet I do believe that it has a great effect on how we view things. That might be because Mom and Dad are really not religious nor could they be considered Christians. They could be best defined as deists. I am not sure if you knew that our Grandpa Clark was not a religious person, nor was Grandma Alice. Clark had been influenced and developed a long adherence to the philosophy of Elbert Hubbard, as did Dad. That philosophy could be summed up in just a few words, (kind of like Thomas Paine) work hard and do good because that's the right thing to do. Yes, Dad is a Mason, but not practicing. He certainly lives by the philosophy of brotherhood the Masons promote. He may have a Masonic Service when he dies, but is undecided right now.

Actually the person who affected my religious viewpoints to a great degree (including rejecting Christianity), was the minister of your church back when we were kids. I was trying to earn my God and Country award for Boy Scouts and he suggested I read the Bible. I did and really had a hard time with those stories and he certainly couldn't explain why God allowed all the violence and killing. The more questions I asked, the less satisfied I became with the answers. I did read the entire Bible then, and just couldn't buy it. If that (Christian devotion) was the only real difference, then how come our outcomes are so similar? We both lead good lives, work at providing a better life, love our families, are involved with our communities, want the best for our daughters & etc.

Oh, I don't think I've mentioned that Mom has dementia. Not good.

BH

Not that I will use this in any debate-sense, but do the women in your family also hold your atheist position?

JH

It doesn't matter to me if you use any of this in a debate sense. My wife Janice can best be described as a deist. She grew up in a Lutheran (father) and Christian Science (mother) family. Go figure. Our oldest daughter, Kerry, is a Christian and pretty devout. She enjoys the social aspect and camaraderie. Jesse is a not a believer. She thinks religion should be a personal thing, and that people should be judged on their actions not their religion. Several years ago she lost her job because her supervisor kept pushing religion on her. When Jesse told her to stop and that she didn't believe in what her supervisor did, her hours were cut and eventually she was terminated. She has filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on the grounds of religious discrimination.

BH

Ouch. Nobody should use their position of power and authority to promote their personal "agenda" like that. Any results from the complaint filed?

JH

The EEOC has done some interviews, but that's about it so far. The store, (a national pizza chain) has 86'd Jesse from coming in and buying from them, and had threaten other employees with dismissal if they talk to the EEOC. Well, the EEOC finally told us that they weren't going to pursue our complaint. Basically they said that Jesse, being a teenager was being over emotional. It's too bad. Kids don't need this type of pressure when learning how to work and get along in the workplace.

BH

But I am so sorry to hear about your Mom! That will be a long difficult road for you all. I am not sure how you take such statements, but we will be in prayer for you all, esp. your Dad.

JH:

I guess I just wonder what it is exactly that you're praying for.

Summary of In the Beginning:

BH:

If one were to stand us up side by side and simply look at our lives, one would see little distinction. An objective observer would see that we are faithful to our wives, loving and responsible to our children, are engaged in our communities and working towards societal good in various ways. We do not (well, in general...!) lie or steal, though like Jimmy Carter, I do admit to lust. We were both affected by Vietnam. We love nature, literature, and jazz (but how my cousin can like fusion, I'll never understand!). But there are some anomalies. I, being an evangelical Christian, do drink and smoke a cigar from time to time. John, an ardent atheist, does not. How can that be? I take the Bible as a complex compilation of various genre, authors reflecting cultures and motives but still inerrant and inspired. John tends to take it very literally-- as you will see below. A closer exam would reveal that our motives for our shared values and morals stem from very different sources. Mine are derived from "above" if you will, John's from within.

JH:

I think Brad sums this up well. I am beginning to think a glass of wine with dinner might make me live longer and have considered that, but keep forgetting to indulge! My not drinking or smoking is a life choice. Nothing

more. I found that I simply function better without these vices. I might add to his pain and misery with this, but I don't drink coffee either! Again, a life choice.

That I tend take the Bible very literally is a bit of a misnomer. As one will see, sometimes it's necessary to enter the lion's den to get any answers.

The Phenomenology of Prayer

BH

John, you asked in an outside email "What are you praying for? Prayer is personal and multi-faceted. I don't always pray "for" something. It is mostly just my communion with the Lord. For anyone who faces such huge issues in life, I would be praying for them. For your Mom and Dad (my Aunt and Uncle), I would pray in much the same way as I did for my Mom and Dad as they faced my Dad's Parkinson's. I pray for inward peace as they struggle through this. For hope and faith, that members of the family would grow closer in love and care, to supply strength and patience to the care givers. Sometimes I pray for healing, but that depends on the Lord's specific guidance to do so, which I don't have.

JH

I would think a phone call would do more since they have no idea someone is praying for them in the first place. And what good does it do to pray if nothing really comes from it? I would imagine that you are starting off your prayer with something like, "Dear heavenly Father" and ending it with something like, "In Jesus' name I (we) pray." How can this not be an intercessory plea for something to be done? Jesus even said that anything asked for in his name will be granted (John 5:14-15, Matt. 21:21-22.) Indeed the New Testament claims that if one believes in what they are praying for, God will hear it and he will receive it. Certainly healing, inward peace, love and care are within God's will to intervene on behalf of the prayer. If mom were to make a full recovery from her present state, would it be because you were praying for her good health or the fact she has some pretty good doctors? To me, while prayer may make you feel better, it really does nothing, goes nowhere, and has no efficacy whatsoever.

I am not so sure I understand the statement that you sometimes do pray for healing, but you have to depend on the Lord's guidance to do so. Does God talk to you to give you this guidance on whether or not you should pray for a healing effort? Has anyone ever been healed solely by your prayer efforts?

BH

Of course, given your atheist axioms, I would not expect you to see prayer as effective in any way. A number of "scientific" studies have purported to show a link between prayer and healing. They have a group praying for folks in the hospital who don't know about it, and a "control" group that is not prayed for. The first group shows more improvement. I think these studies are all suspect, from motive to methodology. And in any case, it is not "Christian" prayer at all, it would be kind of spiritual aura that "reaches out and touches someone."

JH

You're right that I would not see prayer as effective because there has never been a case where prayer, and prayer alone has caused any efficacy. The studies you have mentioned have all had problems...some numerous. I wrote an article on this that was published in Free Inquiry and in Swift on this very subject (Media Scan - Readers Beware of Digest Report - John Hill). Reader's Digest and other publications have touted the efficacy of prayer yet on a very superficial level and usually with very little, if any, opposing views. The person most responsible for this stuff is a Doctor from Duke University, Harold Koenig. Dr. Koenig, et.al. have seriously compromised any study by claiming their conclusion first and lacking any true control

group. He is hardly an objective researcher. These studies have not been double blind, an important factor in any kind of objective study. For instance, the control group you mention that is not prayed for, is not a true control group, since there may be many others that are praying for them that are not part of the study. In other words, if someone comes into the hospital who is not part of the prayer group, and says a prayer for everybody in the hospital, unaware of the study, well, there goes your study. It's been compromised. This is why these studies are fundamentally flawed, and rely completely upon ad hoc and anecdotal explanations

Why do you think they are suspect? If it isn't Christian prayer at all, then why does it always begin, "Father" and end with, "In Jesus name"?

BH

You have explained why I found these studies "suspect" with better analysis than I had. Thanks. I would suspect any study that seemed to have a goal in mind (e.g. prove that prayer works) then eureka! amazingly the study comes to that conclusion. This has been true of scientists also that sought to prove a certain thesis.

"Christian Prayer" is not mere formula. Recently I was with a group and the leader prayed "Dear Lord, bring Bush down. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen." Whatever one's sentiments about President Bush, I do not see that as authentic prayer. To invoke Jesus' name, even to add a Trinitarian formula and an Amen does not qualify it. Jesus said many would say "Lord Lord..." but he would not know them. "In Jesus' name" is praying more like Jesus prays. "The name" stands for the person, the whole identity of Jesus. I cannot pray things contrary to his will and nature and by adding "In Jesus' name" compel him to do anything. Some Jewish exorcists tried that in Acts 9 and were tossed out by the demons.

JH

The difference between prayer "studies" and scientists out to prove a certain point is peer review, duplicating results, and falsification. If the hypothesis cannot be validated, then it has to be reevaluated to assess efficacy. It's the scientific method.

Yet if Bush were to be impeached and thrown out, the prayer leader would assert that his prayer worked. This violates many logical principles. There is no such thing as demons...back then or now.

Did you see the recent study as reported by in the Washington Post?

BH

Yes, done on cardiac patients, right? Maybe prayers only work for lesser ailments! So a more properly designed experiment did not corroborate those earlier ones, no surprise there. That an assortment of religions people (from Muslim to Christian) prayed impersonal prayers for people they do not know as part of an experiment to prove or disprove that God works in and through prayer (or that prayer 'energy' reaches out...) did not have results does not astonish me.

JH

All people of ardent religious faith believe their prayers are answered. Yet Christians assert that Muslin prayer cannot possible work; Muslins assert that Hindu prayer cannot possible work; Hindus know Christian prayer cannot work. This gets distilled down to one inconvertible fact: intercessory prayer cannot possible work. Does it make the prayer feel good? Perhaps. Does it work as a mechanism to cure or heal? No. Never has an amputated arm or leg been prayed back normal. Never has a tragic event been altered by prayer. Never has a dead child taken from a burning building been brought back to life.

All the people in Texas praying for the Cowboy's to beat Seattle didn't change the fact the quarterback simply mishandled the snap for the last-second field goal. For those in Seattle who were praying for a miracle, sorry to disappoint; The quarterback simply mishandled the snap; Nothing more; nothing less.

BH

That Seattle lost is astonishing...as the Coach is a Christian and even a Covenanter !!!

Unanswered prayer happens for many reasons. Frivolous prayer, prayers that contravene the will of God, prayers that do not issue out of a pure heart (eg. scriptures teach that prayers of those who ignore the poor and mistreat their wives also go unanswered...). Prayer is primarily keeping company with God and is not just a pragmatic tool. There are unanswered prayers in the Bible too (eg. David praying for the life of his infant son). Some of the more "lavish" promises regarding prayer were directed by Jesus to his immediate disciples. Not all were universal in application. Other prayers violate human agency, like " make her love me" and so go unanswered (or maybe postponed...). Prayers that demand violation of God's created order are rarely answered; suspension of time, resurrection from the dead, replacement of limbs.

No one verse controls the entire Christian teaching on prayer. The prayer "in Jesus' name" is not like pulling the handle on the gum ball machine and out pops the gum. To pray "in his name" is to pray as he would pray, much like an ambassador speaks "in the name" of the president or king. There are all kinds of prayers, from meditation, to lament, to petition, to adoration, praise, thanksgiving. But prayer is first of all an exercise of relationship. It does not compel God to action, yet somehow, God also chooses to be affected by prayer. Prayer changes me. But it is not just spiritual psychology. God does respond to it. It is written that sin hinders our prayers, as does rebellion and disobedience. I cannot pray for my daughter's healing if I am still sitting on the loot I robbed from the bank. God says in effect "we have other issues to deal with first..." It is also written that selfish motives undermine the answers to our prayers (cf James 4:3) and even mistreating our spouses (I Peter 3:7)

JH

I would agree that no one verse controls the entire teaching, but it has to be what Jesus says about prayer, not what others think he said about it. So does that mean the following verses are to be disregarded?

Matthew 21:21-22 *Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done. And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.*

Matthew 18:19 *Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.*

And this is confirmed in 1 John:

1 John 5:14-15 *And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.*

Clearly Jesus is saying that whatever is asked for in his name will be granted.

BH

The scriptures you offer (love the King James...you need a new Bible though) in regards to prayer are

certainly part of the core. Let me address them briefly.

Matthew 21:21-22 How powerful is faith- and what is faith? It is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Pistis- it is also translated belief, which is not just assent to doctrine but personal trust. It is not confidence in a particular outcome, it is trust in God. How much faith is needed? Apparently not much, but it may be that even the grain of mustard seed faith is more than I have. So it begins with the assumption of real faith/belief/trust in God. Nobody, not Jesus or any apostle, prayed and moved a mountain. This is metaphor for great things. When I have faith and pray with that kind of real faith, I do receive.

JH

If this is a metaphor, then what else is a metaphorical in the NT? How about the Last Supper? Historical or Metaphorical?

BH

Historical. Implicit in your question I think is this assertion, if you allow me to put words in your mouth, "The NT contains a mixture of 'historical' and 'metaphorical.' We can't tell which is which, therefore we can't rightly interpret or apply these writings." I would say (see below when we talk about the Bible) that we can distinguish, say, 90% of the material. But, interesting point about the Last Supper. The Gospels portray it as a real event, but it is mandated to continue in some form as commemoration and all commemoration is also metaphor. When we do Communion now, the elements and ritual are metaphor for another reality.

JH

Good job. How did you arrive at the, say, 90%? Could it be, say 80%? Or even 50%? In any case, lets use your 90% of the material. Who chooses the remaining 10% of the material as metaphorical and what criteria do you use to make those selections? The same question can be asked here also: Is 90% inspired as well? If so, how does one know what is 10% uninspired and what is not.

If the Last Supper is historical, what supporting independent collaborative evidence do you have to make that claim? Other than the insertion of what may be a midrashic attempt as a Passover event, there is no evidence this event ever happened. Even stranger, is the Gospel of John never mentions it. Check out my essay, "Dining with Jesus" (http://www.theskepticalreview.com/JEHillDiningWithJesus.html).

John supplants this emotional repast with the episode of the emotional washing of the disciple's feet (Jn 13:1-12) at a supper, but omits the scene with the bread and wine. The only food at John's last supper is the morsel (v 26) offered to only Judas. One question that arises here is how could or why would John omit the details of the last supper and Matthew, Mark, and Luke omit the foot washing scene? Especially curious is why John did not write about the eating of the bread and drinking of the wine at the supper. These are heavy theological underpinnings to the other evangelists, yet not a shred of this supper event is to be found in the Johannine opus. This is an extraordinary contradictory situation. Did the foot washing really occur? Was the last supper just an informal sit-down, not worthy of John's praise?

How come you all don't commemorate the foot washing ritual? (Rhetorical question.)

In any case, 10% being metaphorical is still quite a bit to deal with. I am curious, though: what criteria are used to arrive at what may be metaphorical. An example would be nice. I'm willing to wager that I can use the same criteria you decide upon to make more than 50% of the material metaphorical or poetical.

BH

A repeated issue between us will be this: because all the Gospels writers do not give the same details, none of their records can be deemed reliable. Again, in our section on the Bible we come to this in more detail. But it is a matter of emphasis and perspective. An omission or an addition is not required to be a contradiction.

I will give some guidance on basic hermeneutics- how to discern what is metaphor, etc later. Some traditions do in fact practice foot washing...

But back to prayer. Matthew 18:19 and I John 5:14-15: These verses help to flesh out more teaching. It is not just "having faith", it is also prayer in community, in agreement and unity and prayer that is according to his will. Try to line all these up...trust/unity/will of God/name of Jesus as explained above. It cannot be a matter of rounding up a couple of people and doing the incantation and getting results. That is more like the occult. When believing people gather to pray, they wait on God first of all FOR his will, to know it and discern it, from that emerges unity and from that emerges faith to pray as He has directed.

JH

If you wait on God for his will, prayer cannot possibly have any effect since the issue has already been decided by God and your prayers cannot change his will.

BH

That is a predeterministic fatalist view of prayer and life that is not really the Biblical view at all. In His sovereignty, He has also opted to be responsive to prayer.

Jesus warns that when we come to worship, we need to deal with reconciliation first (Matt. 5:23-24), and as I said above, praying puts the pray-er in the crucible. The Lord will require that we deal with matters such as sin, offense in marriage, mistreatment of the poor, as we bring our petitions.

There is a lot more about prayer that needs exposition to frame up the whole picture, such as praying the mind of Christ (I Cor. 2:10-16;) praying in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18), praying according to the will of God (Romans 12:1-2), and of course the Lord's Prayer.

JH

In other words, you have an 'in' if prayer works and an 'out' if prayer doesn't. I am sorry, but it simply cannot be as complicated as that.

BH

I would like theology to be uncomplicated and simple. I would like the Bible to be simpler and clearer. There are lots of things I would like to have different or think they "should be different" but are not. The analysis of prayer gets complicated but in praying I do not feel the complexity but only the immediacy.

JH

It would seem to me an omnimax God (one that is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscience or more conventionally a triple aught [0-0-0-] deity) could have certainly made the Bible simpler and clearer and eliminated all the confusion and debate about what 90% of what is what.

BH

Simpler and clearer to whom? It may be written "for us" but it was written to others, of other culture,

language, worldview, etc.

Yes, I have had what I believe to be many direct answers to prayer over the years. Are they miraculous interventions, or does God work within process? If he works within process it is not a "clinical miracle" as in laws of physics being suspended, but it is his intervention just the same. Can I prove it? No. But there is the miracle of coincidence that just keeps happening. Just one example. Rachel our oldest daughter got a terrible ear infection while in Congo. No meds were working. Soon her ear drum would burst and they were concerned about cerebral infection. They medivaced her out. Ruth and the girls flew to Seattle. She was in excruciating pain for a while, then the ear drum did burst. It was Saturday when they got in. Sunday Midway Covenant Church formed a prayer group and prayed for her. Monday she saw the doctor. He cleaned it all out and said "I see where it had been badly infected, and the ear drum burst, but it there is no infection, it is fine now." OK, of course one can find some explanations that are purely natural. But it wasn't only natural. God was at work here. Though I can add a bunch of stories like that, this one example can stand for discussion purposes. Often the miracle is in the timing, not the event in itself.

JH

And exactly how was God at work? Wasn't God compelled to action here? And, are you not contradicting what you said above about not compelling God to action? You cannot have it both ways.

I don't want to dismiss the seriousness of Rachel's illness, but this prods me to ask the question: Didn't you just pray for her? At what point (and there had to be a point) did you become aware that prayer wasn't working and that medical attention was necessary? Why didn't you just depend on prayer and God will? If it is as you describe, why did it take a 15,000 mile journey, and another prayer group to do what you could not?

Just how is it that God was at work fixing Rachel's ear, but lets other children die of far more hideous inflections? Indeed if you cannot prove it, then why do you believe it? It seems to me you applied the verses above here, but discount them when prayer doesn't work...for whatever reason you give to the failure of prayer. The example of Rachel is simply applying the logical fallacy of false cause: pro causa non causa, and post hoc ergo propter hoc.

When our daughter, Kerry, was 4 or 5 she developed a urinary infection that was spreading to her kidneys. We took her to the hospital and they gave her antibiotics. After a few days, she was fine. I am sure there was some that were praying for her since the local Hospital is a Catholic- run place. So, what is the most likely cure: prayer or the antibiotics?

Are you aware that something like 70% of all maladies that affect our bodies, are self-curable? In other words, our bodies do an amazing job of self-healing...as do most animals.

BH

Regarding the example of Rachel, yes, I understand that your comments do not minimize her illness. We are just using this as an illustration to discuss. God did act. He did heal her. Your questions have to do with means. I cannot dictate to God how he must answer or even when. He will answer "exceedingly abundantly beyond all we can hope or think (Eph. 4:20)."- I don't know WHY the journey was necessary. I can speculate. Maybe this is why or partly why. God's answers are not isolated to the single petition. We had been praying about our relationship to a family member. We were always praying for others at home. When Ruth was home she had opportunity to deal with a critical family situation. I was alone for a month. What did that do for me? I spent more time with a couple of needy students, and so on. As to why another prayer group, same answer. Did they too need something that God provided for them? It was also a connecting across the globe, a sharing in life and ministry that this provided.

JH

If God really healed her, why did it take so long and what verse, above, do you attribute to the intercessory efficacy? Can you think of one other reasonable explanation other than prayer that might have been responsible for her recovery?

BH

The "why" and the "how" are not always known. I can speculate on the "why"- there was more than one straight-line dynamic at work. While in Seattle, Ruth was able to make some very critical connections with other individuals in great distress, totally apart from this; there was the faith-building exercise of the church and a doctor who had a significant conversation with Ruth about God; and is there nothing to be gained from patient prayer as opposed to rapid-answer prayer? The "how"- miracles are rarely independent of means. The Jordan dries up, yes, maybe there was a rock slide.

I would not want to say to God "heal her this way or that way." He may choose his means. In most cases a natural means is what ensues. In fact, many of the miracle stories in the Bible reflect God's use of natural means (locusts, or using present water to turn to wine rather than just filling an empty urn, or the stone that felled Goliath, etc. Maybe a landslide blocked the Jordan River for Joshua, etc.).

JH

This is committing the Ad Hoc fallacy. Grievously, I might add. You simply want to believe this happened because this is what you believe will happen.

If God uses natural means, then how can you tell what is directly attributable to God and what is directly attributable to nature?

BH

Ad Hoc, well, you asked for an explanation of events. One can hardly give it ahead of time! One cannot always tell what is "nature" and "what is God." But the juxtaposition and coincidence of prayer and response puts dots out there to connect.

The point at which we decided to go the States for treatment is a bit obscure, but you are right, there was such a point. It came also in prayer, and prayer with others as what we should do.

JH

If one cannot tell what is caused by nature and what God causes, then you really don't know. And, you're committing the fallacy of non causa, pro causa. If the juxtaposition and coincidence of prayer puts the dots out there to connect, we should be able to use empirical methods to tell for sure.

So somewhere, in prayer, you were told to fly 12,000 miles and then Rachel would be healed? How come prayer doesn't seem to work for children in cancer wards?

BH

As to "told to fly 12,000...", yes. As to "and then Rachel would be healed..." No. The healing was never a guarantee, but our obedience to his leading was our decision.

Prayer and the emptying of cancer wards... Jesus also could have cured all the lepers but did not. In fact he

could have stopped all diseases, were he really your 0-0-0 aught deity, right? I must also ask, what would be the effect of ward-emptying? Joy, for sure. Then what? Is that different than praying over a barren land and the next day a bumper crop sprouts up? Prayer is not the antidote to nature, it does however from time to time allow that opportunity for God to demonstrate his sovereignty over it.

JH

The 0-0-0- aught deity is what the biblical gods is asserted to be; that is, Omniscient, Omnipresent, Omnipotent. How could such a deity not stop all diseases? If he did, the pain of thousands of children would be gone; their hunger would be gone. Their strife would be gone. And not only would God have demonstrated his sovereignty over nature, he would have demonstrated his compassion, love, and deep godlike humanity for all his creation...not just a select unworthy few.

BH

Yes indeed, we yearn for that state of existence, don't we? We call it the New Heaven and New Earth...which comes with Jesus' return.

I do take your question "If I cannot prove it, why believe it" to heart. I took some time to reflect on that personally. I can't give a short answer (but I'll try), but don't want to give you thirty years of my personal journals either! It really comes down to two things. First, I do see a correspondence between praying and God acting. Yes, I know that correspondence does not prove causality. But the connection, the relationship is there. For me, it has been there for decades, that God answers prayer is the witness of the Church. I am changed in my praying. Often as I start to pray about things, my perspective on them changes, and then so does my praying change. Secondly, there is the more mystical/subjective side that just "knows" outside of the entirely rational and logical. This is "faith." As an atheist, I would suppose that you cannot really acknowledge mysticism per se as having any validity. But for the one experiencing it, it is real (and, yes, I see how this can be used to 'validate' other religious experiences as well). We evangelicals talk a lot about a personal relationship with God. What is personal, like love, is not just rational. No lover thinks of love as just a series of chemical reactions!

JH

I don't acknowledge the validity of intercessory prayer either, since there has never been a decisive, clear cut, validated example of where intercessory prayer has had any efficacy. I believe that as a Christian you are told by the Bible that it works, you believe the Bible, ergo, prayer works. Certainly you can see the circular reasoning at work here. Besides, how do you account for the claims of prayer fulfillment in other religions? Hindus and Buddhists among others claim prayer fulfillment. And, they certainly are not praying to the same god you are...are they? Mysticism and/or spiritualism have no justifiably valid basis or empirical evidence to support their precepts. Just asserting a spiritual world doesn't create one.

BH

I don't use language like "prayer works," it is not a utensil strapped on our Christian tool belt.

As to prayer fulfillment in other religions, sure. As an example of negative prayers, I have seen someone fall ill and die as an ostensible result of a curse put on him in the Congo. There are other entities at work than God (meaning Yahweh, the God of the Bible).

Right, not the same God at all (just try to line up a profile of the characteristics of these gods and Yahweh - very different). So, who is the god to which they pray? As I understand it, Hinduism has a pantheon of gods and people pray to any or all of them. The gods are "job specific"- and the supplicant must seek the right one

and avoid the wrong one. I believe that in "high philosophical Buddhism" (all religions have a folk strata to them...!) there is a concept of a non-personified god therefore who does not directly answer any prayer (and so the people turn to other gods more familiar, often Hindu gods). In my last trip through Thailand and China, in discussions with converted Buddhists and Hindus, I gathered that answered prayer comes at a cost. Certainly among the animists in Africa that was true. Always, some kind of payment is involved

I believe that in his mercy God also may answer prayers of non-believers or rather believers in something "else."

The most famous line in Jerry McQuire is "show me the money." But there is another one too. Tilwell asks McQuire, "Do you love her?" and he replies, "How do I know?" Tilwell gets all worked up and says "You just know what you know what you know." If I were to ask you "Do you love your wife?" you would say yes, but you can't prove it, yet you know it and you believe that you do. "Knowledge" is not just a summary of empirical data....your turn!

JH

Your thinking is becoming circular here. I think I have shown the futility of prayer and addressed the fallacies of your arguments for the efficacy intercessory prayer. You can't have a living, personal god that talks to you, intervenes on your behalf every now and then, and then claim it's all an abstraction.

BH

In giving the example of Rachel I am not attempting to prove anything but to state what happened as an example of an answered prayer. In multiplying these examples by a hundred I would be no closer to "proving prayer" than by the one. This is no doubt true for miracles in general. Yes, this "case" does not make "law" nor does the fact of healing after the prayer prove the account of prayer. However, don't you commit the logical fallacy that correspondence can nunquam exsisto causa- or something like that. Sorry, I couldn't resist. So much latin flying around.

This example is about healing. But we pray for just about every aspect of people's lives as well. Not all are answered that we know of or in the way we expect, but some are. We are also enjoined to pray according to the will of God. Not all are healed, and, yes, I often feel (discern? hear?) God's direction for me to pray in a certain way (no audible voices though. Well, just those odd ones in my head from time to time...left over from too much Larium- an anti malarial drug!) Prayer is first of all relational; it is communing with God. The rest flows from that. And yes, it does not replace a phone call. But I cannot personally actively care for all the people I pray for.

JH

How do you know the prayer facilitated the healing? What proof do you have that God intervened on your or her behalf? Did God tell you that he answered your prayers? So God's direction for you is more of an intuition than an actual voice?

BH

I cannot know it in the scientific sense. And, yes, His direction is mostly "intuition"- though the "voice of God" is felt and experienced differently than other intuitions.

JH

How do you know that the 'intuition' you think is God, isn't just your good ol' common sense telling you to do

the right thing?

BH

Practice.

JH

Thank you.

Summary of discussion on prayer

BH

Our disagreement here is natural and flows inevitably out of our contrary world views. Naturalistic presuppositions cannot, of course, ever either verify or falsify something super-natural. All science is sensory by nature, what we can see, touch, measure, etc. What is extra-sensory becomes problematic. We touch on the question of epistemology, which will color all our interchanges. How do we know and how do we know what we know? John, I believe, is an empiricist. Knowledge is the product of sensory perception (and rational analysis of that perception). I believe that we can "know" in other ways as well, subjective knowledge is still knowledge but I cannot objectively "prove" it to another. Kant suggests we have inborn categories of cognition, like space, time, objects and causality. If so, we have a priori inward, i.e. subjective ways of thinking and therefore "knowing." Most things personal and relational are not reductionistic to chemistry and physics.

JH:

First, Kant is very boring. Second, if the success or failure or intercessory prayer falls on contrary world-views, it would then follow that all I should have to do is start believing in some sort of spirit world, preferably the Christian spirit world. Yet, this is fallacious and evinced by the utter failure of intercessory prayer under any kind of actual observed conditions. If all science is sensory by nature, then just what is religion? Extrasensory? If all science is naturalistic, then what is religion if not supernatural? If natural presuppositions are proved, they become fact. How are the supernatural presuppositions proved? They cannot be proved, because they remove themselves even the possibility of being proved. Brad believes we can know. However, to know the supernatural one must suspend belief long enough to be objective about the evidence. I agree that most personal and relational things are not reduced to chemistry and physics; after all we are humans. But when personal and relational things are distilled by religious tenets that tell us what we should believe in complete disregard to the evidence or logic, we are doing ourselves, humanity, and Kant a very grave disservice.

Theodicy: The Problem of Evil

BH:

Why does God "fix" Rachel's ear but lets others die of hideous infections? We can broaden that question to the general one called the "problem of evil." How can a good and all powerful God allow pain and suffering? Either he is not good or he is not powerful (or from your viewpoint, he doesn't exist, this is a moot question for the atheist).

The "problem of evil" is the question of Theodicy, or the justification of God. David Hume described the problem of evil when he said about God, "Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

The problem of evil is not a question unique to Christian faith, every world view has to deal with it in some way. The Pantheist affirms the reality of the divine but not reality of evil. Atheism, if I follow you correctly, affirms the reality of evil but not of God.

JH

The problem of evil occurs because you have a God that is supposed to be all loving and all powerful. I don't recall saying atheism affirms the reality of evil. We affirm that we live in a sometimes violent, unjust world (Who ever said life was fair?). But this is component of our natural world. Tornados, diseases, and such. We certainly don't subscribe to the biblical approach that WE are inherently evil and deserve just treatment from a god that created evil and then condemned people for being evil.

BH

Hmm...Biblical concept that we are inherently evil? That we are sinners yes. Is that the same as being "evil"? If you are thinking of "total depravity"- it refers to sin being pervasive not total.

Below (page _____*) you say that goodness and evil both exist. "Good and evil would still be with us...." And later " "I don't deny the reality of evil." Maybe that is splitting hairs, "atheism affirms..." or you personally affirm. But that aside, yes, I agree that the "problem of evil" exists* because *of God. But variations on that problem occur for you too. If you don't deny the reality of evil, your problem is identifying it, if it is an "it", as anything other than what you subjectively abhor.*

JH

Isn't sin evil?

It's not a "problem" for atheists since we accept the fact we didn't create evil or worship gods that do. And, that evil (in all its forms) is inherent in human nature or nature itself. Natural events are not evil...they are natural events. Societal evils (if you will) come to be when you put lots of people in one place and expect them to all act the same. We accept that evil (bad things) happen. It's how we deal with them that make the difference.

BH

Christianity affirms both the power and goodness of God. The argument is that if God is all powerful and perfectly good and all he created is good, then how did evil arise? There is also the "problem of goodness" to deal with. How one explains "goodness" is no less perplexing than trying to explain evil.

JH

Goodness is just as abstract as evil.

BH

Are you willing for forego both, then?

JH

I'm not so sure I understand the question. Forego them to some Edenic scenario where we don't know good from evil or visa a' versa? I don't know why I would. Our awareness of evil increases our knowledge of good and visa a' versa. But, there has never been a time in human history, gods or no, where we have not had to

deal with the evilness in mankind. If God is responsible for creating evil, he is also responsible for the effect of that creation.

BH

Forgo both "evil" and "goodness" as realities, that was what I meant by the question, since they are "both abstractions."

I think the answer is that evil arises out of the nature of goodness, but indirectly. It is good to have freedom, to have free choice. But to be truly free, there must be choice and choice must have real consequence. Yes, God made evil possible, something inherent in the Good; but humans made it actual. God creates the fact of free choice but humans create the act of free choice. It would follow that "evil" is not a stand-alone kind of substance or entity, but is a corruption of the good, a kind of lack or privation, distortion if you will.

JH

If an all-loving God made evil possible, what the hell was he thinking?

BH

Interesting turn of phrase...! Why does God allow it or permit it? What is the alternative? Could God force people to freely choose the good? That is a bit oxymoronic. If there is no real moral free choice, then the possibility of true moral goodness also disappears.

JH

It would have nothing to do with free will if God knowingly created evil. It more describes the character of God, not man. Besides that, we are not just distilling this down to what evil man does, but what evil man does in the name of God. An 0-0-0- Deity would have known this before he created evil and then expected man to act like it doesn't exist.

BH

The freedom exists only in the choice and in the consequences of choice. What evil man does in the name of God is also evil, just another variation on it. Again, to be precise, God did not create evil but the context for it, the choice to opt for it, the conditions that made evil and therefore moral choice possible. "...expected man to act like it doesn't exist?" Au contraire, it would be the thorough naturalist that says it doesn't exist, since an impersonal randomly created universe can't produce an abstract like "evil"- but the scriptures from beginning to end clearly show this battle with evil. We have a name for it, spiritual warfare.

JH

*You have a bit of a sticking point here: If God created everything, he must have created evil. If he did not, then he didn't create everything. If he did not created evil as you say and for some reason left that to his creation to create, it seems to contradict what God said in Isaiah 45:7, "*I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things."

BH

I am sure you are aware that other translations render this "...and create calamity..." The word "rah" occurs often (more than 600 times). Even in your KJV it is rendered as "evil" "wicked", "bad", "sorrow" and other ways. Evil is not the required translation. Contextually this is referring to natural disasters and not

moral/metaphysical evil. This raises other questions of why God would do this, but it is not the same as saying God created metaphysical evil.

This brings us to the question of what is optimal or perfect design which is sure to come up when get into evolution too. I ask, perfect for what? The world design has as part of its essence the goal of the greater good of true moral choice.

JH

Then we have no need for God.

As a point of clarification, let's look a bit closer at this translation as I am sure you're aware that more than just the KJV renders this as evil. The American Standard Version, Darby, and Young's Literal Translation all translate this as "evil." More importantly, the Septuagint (LXX) renders this as "evil." Additionally, Strong's Exhaustive Concordance does define ra(h) (7489) as both natural and moral evil. Furthermore, the word "calamity" is derived from ra(h). Strong's (1942,7451) defines calamity (hav'vah) as bad, evil, iniquity, wickedness: natural or moral.

Again, contextually God is telling Isaiah, in both preceding and following verses that he creates all these things: "I the lord do all these things." More importantly, though, is the entire phase, and the word "create" as in I (the Lord God) create calamity and evil. I certainly disagree that contextually this is referring to natural disasters, as this would make no contextual sense. In order to accept your explanation, we would also have to accept that "peace" is referring to "natural peace" (whatever that is) and not moral peace. This would make a mockery of the verse.

BH

I think you more or less establish my original point which was that "rah" does not necessarily require "evil"- in our sense as metaphysical ontological evil. Words have ranges of meaning. It does not change the sense of "shalom" or peace at all. An interesting verse is Is. 47:11 which is couplet, the second adding clarification to the first, wherein "evil" and "disaster" are linked. But I will even agree that ultimately God is responsible for evil, since He created the spawning conditions, the potential for it but not the actualizing of it.

But back to the previous track of the goal of life and of God's creation...that goal of "greater good" is not the only goal or purpose of life.

JH

What are some others goals of purposes of life? To serve gods? To be at their beck and call and do their dirty work for them since they seem incapable of doing anything themselves? To worship them? Are gods so vain they need to be worshiped by us lowly humans for their own enjoyment?

BH

Why would God create at all then, if he knew, as he must, that evil would be the consequence? Why create a world he knew would fall? The answer to that is above my pay grade. What is the answer to "to be or not to be?" Why is something better than nothing? Can we compare a non-world to a created world and ask "is one better than the other?" Or if God created a determinative world in which all choices were compelled, we would have to argue that such a non-free world is morally better than a free world (a non free world would be non-moral also).

JH

The answer is because there is no god who created this stuff.

BH

That is the topic under discussion, isn't it?

Natural disasters...sure, some natural evil does not come from free choice. However what the cumulative impact of millennia of sinful choice has on the cosmos, I don't know. When I see a drought in Sudan and the suffering there, my mind goes down several paths. One, the suffering in Sudan (just to use one example) is hugely compounded by a violent repressive corrupt regime that enforces privation as a political tool. Distribution is prevented, thus suffering is compounded. I would call this sin- sin has aggravated and exacerbated the suffering. I watched nearly half the children in Ngakpo (a very remote village up a river in Congo) die of measles. Measles came from white colonizers, a result then of sin, if you will. Vaccines were available, but not accessible. These people lived back in the jungle to avoid the Belgian tyranny many years ago. Had they been closer to a road, many would have been saved. So, again, sin is involved.

JH

There is no such thing as sin or that this type of sinful karma has any affect on the cosmos. Natural disasters happen, even in Christian territory. We live in a difficult, wild, unpredictable world. Sin has nothing to do with global warming, or plate tectonics. Belgian tyranny? Weren't the Belgians Christians? Measles may have come from white colonizers, but from an ignorance of how diseases are spread not sin.

BH

The sin was in the heartless subjection of a people, and so sin of oppression becomes the vehicle of the disease. This is only one sad example in he annals of history (King Leopold's Ghost, a terrible recounting of those years)

JH

Carrying the Bible and sword of Christianity with them.

BH

Yes, many repressive regimes use Christianity (or another religion) as justification for other ends.

But what about the virus itself? I wish I knew. It is part of the bigger question of death and mortality. In some way or another, we all do die, whether it is by old age (but then, what was the cause of deterioration?), or accident, or illness. To argue that nothing in the environment should diminish our health would be to argue against the necessity of death as part of the design. I will stop there...for now.

JH

Measles and other diseases are not connected with sin whatsoever. They are a natural process of the environment we live in.

BH

Logically, you know how hard that assertion is to prove, that disease is never, has never been and in no way is connected to sin in any instance, ever. If, for example, venereal disease is rapidly spread during wartime, is there not a relationship?

A butterfly effect is pretty much unverifiable.

JH

It's no assertion it's a fact. Naturally occurring germs, bacteria, and viruses, are the causes of diseases, not sin. It was only after this was discovered that (most) reasonable people threw out sin as a cause of diseases. Remember, I said diseases are not connected with sin whatsoever; I never said they have never been connected to sin. From the beginning of recorded history until the 19th century, disease and sin were closely connected. Germ theory and modern science dispelled that myth completely and totally.

BH

I am glad you at least use the concept of "sin"... But some natural evil is the byproduct of the goodness. If we are to have rain, wind, etc. we need dis-equilibrium in the system, and so perhaps tornadoes result, etc.

I will freely admit to you, John, that among all the questions and various attacks mounted against Christian faith, the question of Theodicy has been the most troubling for me, for the very reasons I have alluded to above.

JH

In that respect I wish I could be more succinct and provide deeper detail in my answers. However, the explanations in your attempts to rationalize the problem, is the problem with your thinking (if I may use that term not being one of reproach). I cannot answer these very well because they are the problems in your religion. I am impressed that you see these as troubling as we do. Of course atheism doesn't have to try to fit square pegs in round holes. For us, since there is no such thing as sin, and there is no such thing as god (sic) created evil; that leaves us with a natural world that is sometimes is just plain bad. It can also be wonderfully splendid. I think one of the main problems with problem of evil, as with intercessory prayer, is that one praises God for the good, and blames themselves for the bad. To reiterate somewhere else in this book, this is one of the most heinous and regressive tenets of Christianity. I am not so sure what, again, "various attacks mounted against Christian faith" means. If you mean we should just roll over accept what how Christians explain this dilemma, I would very much disagree. If Christians cannot explain it to a logical and viable explanation, I certainly cannot see that as an attack, but something that reaches to the core of Christianity that simply cannot be dismissed. Maybe, just maybe, Christians are wrong about what the Bible says, and about the nature of God.

BH

This paragraph is a good summary of your position. Various responses to it are imbedded elsewhere in our dialogue.

Hey John, we just spent three great weeks in the great Northwest, sorry we couldn't connect! We ended our stay on a houseboat on Lake Union (just down from the famous Sleepless In Seattle boat). Even did a hike around the lake. Hard to come back to 100+ degrees and humidity. But now Chicago is marvelous. Ruth is traveling a lot for her work this Fall, one trip through Germany, Prague, France and Spain, and another to Medellin Colombia.

JH

Glad you had a good time 'round the old stomping grounds. I really love Seattle, but it just ran out of room for me.

While at Lake Union you were next to the Pacific Marine Center. That's where I sailed out of for a number of years when I worked for the Department of Commerce, NOAA, National Ocean Survey. Big White Ships. However, most were probably out during your visit.

BH

My home computer has crashed, so I am working on this a bit at church...it is church work, isn't it??? Sure it is. I am now finding myself gazing out the window. It is 80 degrees today (April 10). I want to go home, run a few miles, do some yard work, read a book. By the way, do you think all this time I put in dialoguing with you are "billable hours" for me?

JH:

Church work? Well I suppose, at least according to 1 Tim, 4:13, Titus 2:15, Jude 3, and 1 Peter 3:15. Take rest of the day off.

Summary of Theodicy:

BH

I have been wrestling with this question all my life (as my parishoners will tell you!). Some theologians like Rabbi Kushner try to resolve it by saying God is less than absolutely omnipotent. Others like Clark Pinnock of the "Openness theology" view end up in the same place, by diminishing God's omniscience (He can't know a future that hasn't happened). Others will solve it by making God mostly a disinterested Prime Mover. John is right, Christianity (and all religions that have a "personal" God) in a sense creates the problem. However the fundamental clue in all this is the purpose of creation. If in the beginning it was "good" as God keeps saying in Genesis chapter one, then the possibility and potential for evil resides within that creation. In the end, it is better to have a creation that contains both free moral agency and evil than to have one that does not.

JH

There is no easy answer for the problem of evil and it poses the old dilemma: If God is all loving he would wish to abolish evil; and if he is all-powerful he must be able to eliminate all evil. Evil exist, therefore God cannot be not all loving or all-powerful. This is often represented in the classic syllogism:

(L É A) × (P É A)

*-A*_____

-L × -P

I think the bigger problem Brad has here (as in many cases) is the Bible itself. Here we read where God claims to have created evil and certainly in Genesis, which introduced the abominable notion of original sin, which I ask to be defined later in this opus to where man is inherently bad; a premise that atheism unequivocally rejects. Indeed, the question why does God permit this human suffering or to allow it to continue only exacerbates the question. Here we find most Christians going through mental gymnastics to not blame God, but his crowning achievement of creation, man. We must ask, then, how does having a divine purpose to produce good end up not doing so? The internal contradiction must be apparent now -God is the cause of our actions, but we are free in relation to God. However, we cannot be both made by God to act a certain way and then condemned by God when we do, or try to live independent of God. The problem of theodicy reaches to the moral argument, which we will explore in greater detail later. The causes of human suffering are manifold and certainly are not limited to non-Christians. When tied to the intercessory prayer

argument, it would appear that God can heal minor afflictions, but doesn't seem to know how to handle the bigger problem, which he himself admits to creating. Christian's fervently and earnestly believe we do have an all-loving, all-powerful, ever present God active in the natural and moral affairs of both mankind and the world. I wonder how different the world would be if we didn't.

Church and State

JH

What is the big problem accepting the principle of the separation of church and state? Evolution? Higher Criticism? Scientific inquiry? Or that the Bible may have errors? Do you really think that any one of those items will bring Christianity falling down? I certainly don't have a problem in accepting some of what Jesus said, but is it all worth the fight just to uphold ancient religious superstitions over objectivity because those objects stand opposed to our modern world?

I can see some value in the community and in some of the moral teachings. However, I also see value in Aristole's moral teachings. I don't believe that Jesus or Christianity has any more answers than any other religion. Moreover, though, I see religion as a great separator; something to use against people who don't share the common belief.

I do like what Jefferson said about this: "I have sworn upon the alter of god, (sic) eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." A subtle irony by Tom, to be sure, but an effective statement nonetheless. I do believe that religion is that form of tyranny.

Religion tells you what wrong with you and that it's the only thing that can cure what wrong with you; A position that I find rather amusing.

Next time you're talking to some of your congregants as them what they think about atheism and see what their (initial) reaction is. Then ask them why they have such a negative aspect toward atheists.

I do believe that religion is a very personal matter. It is not something that should be dragged into the public square or in politics. I served for 13 years on our local school board and never once did I let my beliefs interfere with the systemic operation of the District. We had one member that did. It made life just miserable for the rest of us.

I am not jumping up and down that your church may close, shouting, "yippee, there goes another one"!! On the contrary, I think you have worked hard, shared of yourself in a very humble service to what you believe in. I cannot see you as a fire and brimstone evangelical, (but do find some of your responses in this dialog curious in an evangelical/fundamentalist [fundagelical?] way) but like your dad, a warm, kind, and humble servant. As such, I am convinced that you do try to reach for the higher good religion CAN promote and teach that to your congregates; things such as the Sankofa, I find great value in that.

Stepping off the soapbox for now.

BH

Thanks for sharing all that. It was not too soapy, more like Lava- the soap with sand. There are a number of comments that I of course do not agree with, but the body of our dialogue is where my responses to this is mostly to be found.

I too think separation of church and state is necessary. But it primarily means that the state cannot influence religion or create a State Church, like still exists in some European countries. It does not mean that no

religious influence should have effect on the State.

Some might say we have a "persecution complex..." Well, it matters a great deal whether or not one is persecuted. There is no overt persecution in the US, but there is a decided shift towards "christian-bashing." In parts of the world there is overt extreme oppressive persecution.

JH

How about all the atheist bashing? How come an atheist cannot win a higher elective office in this country? Sure in other parts of the world there is overt persecution. But those places do not have separation of church and state and have government sponsored or sanctioned state religions. Can you imagine what groups would be persecuted here if Christianity was the state religion? Since the churches have been disestablished in most if not all western nations, we have had very little sectarian oppression. I want too keep it that way.

BH

I would not want Christianity to be a State religion any more than you. The history of what happens to the Way when it comes to power is not pretty. I want neither the State to use God to sanction its actions nor the Church to use the State to enforce it's agenda. There are still state churches and they do not persecute much these days. In some form, Lutheranism is still the 'State Church" - as part of the German tax money goes to the church.

I actually don't like the term " Christianity" though I have been using it. It is that "-ity" part that is the cumulative cultural junk and carries all the baggage of history and its various institutions.

You ask "What is the big problem accepting the principle of the separation of church and state? Evolution? Higher Criticism? Scientific inquiry? Or that the Bible may have errors?..." This is not all one plane. I for one do see the necessity of that separation, but that is not the same as insulation.

Higher Criticism if done justly and fairly is what must happen, and though you think not, I do applaud scientific inquiry. I just don't think some of what is asserted to be scientific fact is in fact, fact. As for errors, well, we'll come to that won't we? "It is not worth the fight just to uphold ancient religious superstitions..." There again we agree. We have so much common ground!

I too think religion is a personal matter, but not only *a personal matter. It is a major tenet of Christian faith that it needs to be shared, that faith in Christ must necessarily inform our opinions, views, and actions (e.g. the metaphors of salt, light, and leaven)- it is hard to read the Sermon on the Mount and not see that the Kingdom should permeate all of society- and so it takes us necessarily into the public arena.*

JH

And it is this tenant that becomes a vehicle for arrogance, denigration of other views, intolerance and even violence.

You say, "but there is a decided shift towards "Christian-bashing" and faith in Christ must necessarily inform our opinions, views, and actions...into the public arena."

Brad, what I am going to tell you, may be the most important thing of this entire dialog: If Christians are going to inform about opinions, views, and actions in the public arena, they take the same risk as ANY OTHER group, society, organization, or citizen when voicing their views. PERIOD. It is nonsense to claim "Christian-bashing" when others respond to your free speech with free speech. If you are going to be part of the public dialog, you have to accept the fact that others are not going to agree with you. This is the risk you

take. This is not persecution in any way, shape, or form. It is exercising our right to disagree. Christians, much to their dismay, do not own the public square...all citizens do. Whether religious, atheist; long hair, short hair; white, black; north, south; gay, or no; we all have the right to the public dialog with no one having an advantage, better/worse access, or being discriminated against by some cultural majority.

BH

OK, we all have equal access to the public square. But can institutions reflect history and culture, which is bound up with the history of religion in this country? Now I will not argue that we are a "Christian nation", or even that we were founded as one. I would readily grant that Jefferson, Paine, Adams and Madison were more what we call deists. However others like Washington and Benjamin Franklin were pretty convincing Christians. We have something like 51 of the 55 "founding fathers" at least identified with a Christian denomination. But beyond that, the ideas of transcendent law are rooted in Christian concepts.

JH

And I will admit what we are nation of Christians. You are correct that Jefferson, et al. were deist. Adams (John, that is) was a Unitarian and considered himself a Christian. Washington was a deist, (a Mason, no less) and Franklin a Quaker. The statement the 51 of 55 founding fathers were identified with a Christian denomination is an argumentum ad numerum. It doesn't mean they meant to create a Christian Nation. If they did, they certainly didn't tell anybody about it.

I am not so sure I understand the comment about the ideas of transcendent law is rooted in Christian concepts. Most, if not all our basis of government is based upon the Greek and Roman models, not the Hebrew or Jewish models.

BH

Well, that is debatable, if you mean by "our basis" Western government. I don't think that when the Declaration of Independence mentions "unalienable rights" the Greeks were in mind, or when Lincoln wrote of the "overruling power of God" he was thinking of Zeus. What "truths are self evident?" Are "all men created equal..." and "endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights" really a Roman concept? The Christian concepts derive from the Old Testament, which antedates the Greek and Roman. Of course Plato and Aristotle also argued for justice being defined by higher truths, or natural law if you will. I think they really begin to flow together after about 380 AD when Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. The "balance of powers" idea also I think is rooted in the biblical understanding of human nature and of God as judge, lawgiver, and king. I should stop, I am way beyond my depth here!

JH

Where in the Bible do we find "unalienable rights" or "all men are created equal"? Where is the "balance of power" found in the Bible? If it's such an important biblical understanding of human nature and God as a judge, lawgiver, and king, as you say, why isn't that language found in our Constitution? Flatly stated: There are no democracies in the Bible. None. We have no kings anointed by God and our form of government has no resemblance to anything in the Bible. What you're looking at above are abstractions, not the concrete underpinnings. Lincoln, a deist, was not a founding father, and "of the people, by the people, for the people" says volumes.

Jefferson, Adams, and Madison, et al. were very well versed in the failures of such governments run by kings anointed by gods...and their failures. Unalienable Rights was a Greek concept. While Tom, John and Jim (Get it?) had a wealth of material (and mistakes) to draw from, the Bible, while somewhat instrumental had very little concrete material for forming the type of government envisioned by them. I suggest works of Solan, an

Athenian (c. 638 B.C.E.) Provide a better foundation that anything one could find in the Bible. Solan founded the principle of Western democracy and is the first ever to state the concepts of equal rights for all citizens. You will find some of the following concepts in the writings of Solan: Democratic Assemblies, right of appeal and trial by jury, private property, civil constitutions, majority votes, and legal verdicts. None of which are in the Bible.

Remember, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, we were plunged into 1500 years of virtual political, social, economic, and creative darkness... Nothing that Plato or Aristotle would have approved of. There are many other ancient models, both Hellenic and Roman based, that have drawn upon. References upon request.

BH

There can be misrepresentation of history by any party that is selective in what parts of the story are told. Is history knowable at all, or do we have only interpretations of history? And Jesus would not have approved either...The "1500 years of...darkness..." is a huge sweeping overstatement, that pins all the "darkness" on Christianity and is blind to anything good it brought. This takes us too far a field, but think about benevolent institutions, and universities for starters, as mitigating against what you said.

No "verse" for inalienable rights. It is the concept I am talking about. A bill of rights that is purely humanistic cannot appeal to anything "inalienable" or "self evident." A humanist bill of rights "grants" rights to the people instead of acknowledging the existence of these rights. And where do they exist? The State cannot just define and redefine rights (thought it does this all the time...). It seems plain that Israel was to be a theocracy, the monarchy was only God's permissive will. There is no form of Christian government per se, including democracy. The Christian influence should be that no matter what the form, justice is the basis of action.

So you don't detect in the general media an anti-Christian bias at all? I wonder how well it would go over if some of the recent vitriol aimed at Christians was aimed at Muslims or Jews? Free speech- I am all for it. I happen to NOT think that free speech is the same as license. Christ in Urine, or the defiling of Mary on a South Park show, or Bryan Gumbel caught saying "What an Effing idiot" after an interview with a Christian...Actually I am not surprised at this, even expect it. But that is not an example of free speech responding to free speech in the public square, it is more like slander. It is also an important part of this entire dialogue to note that free speech must also be civil. You and I are engaged in "civil speech" between us but that is not the case out there (on either side, Christian spokespersons are also culpable).

JH

An anti-Christian bias in the media? Not at all. Virtually every city newspaper has a church and faith section every week that is overwhelmingly Christian. Nary a week will go by where there is not some "churchy" article in these same newspapers. Human interest journalism, in any major media format, is sprinkled with tales of faith, miracles, praying, and a nod to the churches. Every time the pope farts or Billy Graham burps, it's news. Maybe if the media would stop giving airtime and print inches to Christ on a tortilla, or the virgin Mary on a stop sign, maybe South Park would stop using religion as a parody that the media has turned it into. While Bryan Gumbel may have been insensitive to the Christian (I have not seen the context of this), you have Pat, Jim, and Jerry doing this to everybody that disagrees with them everyday of the week.

BH

Don't look to me to defend them!

JH

What you're exhibiting here, Brad, is selective outrage. I can't imagine you actually saw the Christ in Urine (sic) picture, (I believe it was a crucifix) or Mary denigrated on a South Park episode, (how is this much different than the news media reporting Mary on a hotdog bun?) but are just reacting to what has been said or written about these things.

I probably wouldn't spend much time looking a picture or watching a program I find objectionable. I have this uncanny ability to say, "this is not something I like" and move on. As a point in case, I browsed a local video store; Where was the collective outrage of Christians against the movie "Black Christmas" a horrible movie released in December or "Evil Behind You" a movie billed as a "Christian thriller" or any of these other quasi-religious movies that feature the supernatural/paranormal with religious overtones that represent religion as entertainment? Isn't this what Jesus was totally against? (rhetorical questions.)

The fact is, the media is overwhelming friendly to Christianity. Sure they must, much to their chagrin, report on things like the Catholic Church's priestly penchant for young boys (which, by the way just touches the tip of the iceberg on crimes committed by the clergy of other denominations) or when a Swaggart or Bakker comes along, but far and wide, and admittedly so, they are very pro-Christianity.

The problem I have with this is the Christians, in all likelihood, are being put up to these activities by their churches, ministers, and conservative commentators (Jimmy, Pat, and Jerry are a few that come to mind) just to cause these incidents so they call yell and scream "foul"!!

In a way I almost feel sorry for them. They want free exercise as long as they can drag everybody else along, except the ones they specifically want to exclude.

The upshot to this is Christians treat everybody else like second-class citizens and then complain about being persecuted. It's a joke.

For example, why, why do Christians need a Bible club in a public school; especially one that excludes certain students and then cry foul! What's the matter with having one in their church and inviting students to join them? Instead they are trying to bring their church to the students and want the power of the state and media to help them. That's the problem; the real problem. If religion cannot succeed on its own merits, then, like anything in a free society, it deserves to fail.

BH

It is called "Piss Christ." I like the new nude Chocolate Christ called "My Sweet Lord" better.

I will state my own emotions...."selective outrage" is the word you ascribe to me. Outrage is a bit too energetic. Appalled maybe. Certainly concerned. I did not view Piss Christ or the South Park episode until I heard about it, then viewed them. Surely, though, you don't want to say that we cannot be concerned over things we have not personally been affronted with?

This may amaze you, but I am beginning to take your major point about the media and Christianity. Hollywood is another game though, but, yes, I have taken what you said and examined the major media a bit more objectively and see that you are largely right about this. Largely. This is British, not American, but Andrew Marr of BBC has admitted that BBC has not been impartial or neutral in its reporting. Astounding.

All this emailing takes a lot of time, doesn't it? The level of your dialogue demands a lot of time and thought. The thought has occurred to me that after we do this for a while more, that we could polish it up and see if it is remotely publishable.

JH

Hmmmm, great thoughts must run in the family. I had several visions of publication

also. Just don't know quite how to format such a beast. Know any good editors not from Grand Rapids?

BH

I am glad you agree that Grand Rapid's has good editors...of course! I know of some in Colorado Springs!

JH

Good editors NOT from Grand Rapids....

BH

February is half over as I start this, will probably be over by the time I finish this reply. I am glad it is the shortest month. However today it is 44 degrees out and a great day for a run (that was true when I started this letter, today the 23rd it is 19 degrees out). I am starting to train for a Marathon end of May. I have been a runner all my life, but haven't done a marathon since 1990.

This reply has once again taken some time to write. I was gone on the "Sankofa", then was in Port Orchard for a week with Rachel and our grandson (Ben her husband is in London to do primary research for his doctoral dissertation), then some crazy busy times at Church.

JH

Ben her...is her husband?!!! (Get it?)

BH

LOL and LTM. But backing up a bit, speaking of church and state...exactly what did you mean by Hitler was a Catholic (page ___)? By baptism? By faith and practice?

JH

I really don't like using the "Hitler" card and try not to. Hitler was a Catholic by baptism and practice until he left the army after WWI. After that his "faith and practice" is somewhat shadowy. Personally, like any good politician, Hitler used religion to rally, coerce, and marginalize others. Speer, Manchester, et al. all comment on Hitler's religious rhetoric, which reflects his real convictions and appears to be based in part upon the writings of Martin Luther. Even if Hitler was not a practicing Catholic, he never renounced Christianity, nor has Christianity ever renounced him.

Here is an article from a friend of mine, provided as information only. It is entitled Hitler Was Not An Atheist by John Patrick Michael Murphy (The following article is from Free Inquiry magazine, Volume 19, Number 2.)

BH

Great article, I moved it to our growing appendix. I am not anxious to get into a position defending the Catholic Church or trying to justify church collaboration or such things as the atrocities of the Inquisition or Crusades. Within the political institutional "church" is also a confessing church, such as the Bonhoffer-led group during WW II. Against the post-Constantinian church also arose a counter, prophetic/ monastic movement. The true and real church is often within the outer political and institutional church.

"Even if Hitler was not a practicing Catholic, he never renounced Christianity nor has Christianity ever renounced him." Wow, that is a huge statement, John. First, "Christianity", where is that exactly? It is not a monolithic entity that can do this or that. But I assert that Christianity by and large has abhorred and indeed renounced him in just about every way possible. You are right, though, that as far as I can find out, the Roman Catholic Church has not done a formal excommunication. However elements of the church did do so. Before Hitler came to power, the German Episcopate condemned the National Socialists. Anti-semitism was condemned by the Pius XI. The Nazis also confiscated and destroyed all kinds of church property. By one estimate, about a third of the clergy suffered persecution and numbers ended up in the camps. Large numbers of Christian martyrs were generated. Religious publications were closed down. It seems to me that he had a real hatred for the Church. There was a council of bishops during the 30's that did renounce him and Nazism (that is by memory, I can't find specific info on it). Hitler was known to mock Christianity and its "Jew God." Priests were called "Priest-pigs." Notably, Golda Meir and Israel commended Pius XII for his work in saving Jews.

But to the question of influence on Hitler...First to Nietzsche, who seems to be one of the primary influences on Hitler. His concepts of the master race and the Superman find expression in Mein Kemph. Hitler, like Nietzsche, despised Christianity as weak. Nietzsche had nothing but contempt for the compassion of Christian teaching. He devoted an entire book, "Der Anti-Christ" to smashing Christianity. I doubt if he ever wrote anything in appreciation of Natural law or universal moral principles, but rather he championed the "will to power" which is essential Nietzsche. "Good" Nazis were not church members - they changed their affiliation to "gottglaeubig" (believing in God) in their official documents and IDs.

Luther wrote some rather appalling things about the Jews later in his career. They are unconscionable, and the Lutheran church has done some formal renouncing of these writings. Nazi propaganda and Hitler's writings do quote from Luther, but dissemination of his anti-semitic writings waned in the 1600's. Rather than say they were a primary influence on Hitler it may be that they were resurrected in the 20th century to help justify what was happening- which is bad enough to be sure! It would be hard to prove that Lutheran theology transformed Germans into Nazis.

A guy named Ken Shei (http://www.atheists-for-jesus.com/about.php) wrote, "I was also aware of the fact that Christianity has (by certain people) been used throughout history as an excuse for some of the most brutal, heartless, and senseless atrocities known to man.... A religion that was based on this actual message of Jesus could never have been used as an excuse for the atrocities that I have listed above..."

JH

When I use the phrase, Christianity has not renounced Hitler, I am referring to organizational Christianity. They seem more interested in making Hitler an atheist or humanist, rather than dealing with the facts. I cannot find one Christian denomination that has publicly dealt with Hitler as a Christian and renounces him and his actions. You don't give a source for the material you reference above, but I'd sure like to see it. This looks like a bit of a cut and paste job from some apologetic site. Please, instead of just finding something that agrees with you, research it a bit further. The main Hitler biographers, Speer, Manchester, or Tolan simply do not support your statements above. This is one reason why I don't like using Hitler. The issues are very complicated. Indeed Hitler was a person who used virtually anything and everything to his advantage when necessary. He denigrated the Church when necessary and glorified it when needed.

I am not sure you are that familiar with Nietzsche. You may want to research this before drawing too many conclusions about him. He was very much against anti-Semites and, please note that Hitler was influenced by many including Wagner, Fichte, Hegel, Kant, Goethe, Beethoven, Diock, and made a dreadful menagerie out of all these influences to fit his own twisted ideology. Nietzsche is a favorite whipping boy of Christians, mostly, I believe, because he was so imperfect, and didn't have much use for Christianity or God (but then neither did Hume). Too often, Nietzsche is associated, erroneously, in my view, as the face of atheism. But,

what influenced Nietzsche? Well, one influence was Hitler's hero, Wagner, who Nietzsche later broke with because Wagner became corrupted through Aryanism, Christianity, and anti-Semitism. Any introduction to philosophy book will bear this out. If Hitler took anything from Nietzsche, it was the concept of the super man. But reading Nietzsche, one can easily see the difference between Nietzsche's super man and Hitler's super race. One would also be hard pressed to reconcile Nietzsche's repulsion to anti Semites. If I remember rightly, his sister, after his death, edited and redacted some of his works to fit her anti Semite views and published them under his name) which Hitler did use, again in his own twisted way.

Bottom line, Hitler was a Christian, not an atheist.

I do take exceptional exception to Mr. Shei's statement. So much so, I am going to reprint it here:

Ken Shei (http://www.atheists-for-jesus.com/about.php) wrote, " I was also aware of the fact that Christianity has (by certain people) been used throughout history as an excuse for some of the most brutal, heartless, and senseless atrocities known to man.... A religion that was based on this actual message of Jesus could never have been used as an excuse for the atrocities that I have listed above."

This is called the "No True Scotsman" fallacy, or in this case, "No true Christian" fallacy. Basically it goes, since no true Christian would commit these atrocities, Christians did not commit these. The fact is, whether it's the inquisition, witch hunts, crusades, slavery, or killing abortion doctors, Christianity and the actual message of Jesus has been used to committed senseless atrocities, sometimes in his name, and using his words. It's a wonder that Jesus couldn't do something about this. But let us remember, Jesus killed a herd of pigs, killed a tree for not bearing fruit out of season, (against OT proscriptions I might add, see: Deut. 20:19), accepted slavery, told followers to arm themselves, and ends a parable by instructing that his enemies be killed. I am not sure whom Ken Shei is, but he certainly has not thought this statement through.

BH

Sometimes there is a condescending flavor in your answers. "Read some Nietzche" or "cut and paste" or "please, instead of just finding something that agrees with you, research a bit more." Obviously, then, your grasp of Nietzche is far superior and your research more impartial. "Cut and Paste" -you got me there. The German titles I copied out and pasted in.

Without a doubt the "actual message of Jesus has been used..." Your statement summarizes mine as well. Hitler used everything to his advantage, and his use of Christianity and Luther did not make him a Christian. Bottom line, baptism and rhetoric does not make one a Christian.

The quick-list of Jesus' "bads" are entertaining. I really don't want to deal with each one. You should read Deut. 20:19, no ax or siege involved here! Is everything that happens in a parable a directly analogy to a universal command?

Gotta run. You used to sail a bit. There can't be much sailing in Eastern Washington!

JH:

I do apologize about the condescending flavor. But you seem to be parroting a standard apologist line here.

Here's Deut. 20:19 (KJV) (NASB) (ASV) (YTL) When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege:

We are a few miles from Lake Roosevelt. It's really some pretty good sailing. But, it's either up wind or down wind; not much in between

Summary of Church and State:

JH:

The separation of church and state is as a bedrock principle as freedom of speech, the right to assembly, or the right to bear arms. Christianity in this country owes it growth to this time honored principle. The genius of this simple statement is staggering, and I cannot see why some Christian commentators argue against it. Perhaps, if they understood that the same people who want Christianity our state religion can determine which denomination will comprise that state religion and it just might not be their denomination, then they might be able to see why this is such an important concept. Certainly Catholics would not be in favor of having the Protestants in charge and vis-versa.

The public square belong to all citizens, and the government should not be promoting or giving an advantage to one religion over another in the Square. The promoters of placing the Ten Commandments in County Courthouses certainly wouldn't want to see the Five Pillars of Islam alongside their block of marble. No, they only want their monument there. For the government to endorse this, for any religion, is promoting religion. That is not the job of the government and the First Amendment prohibits the government from doing this. This doesn't mean individual citizens cannot carry signs, make speeches, or promote their views in the Square; they just cannot have the government help them. Nor is it the duty of the government to interfere with matters of conscience. Virtually all of the founding fathers, regardless of their religious views, agreed with this basic tenet of government non-interference with religious matters. Separation of church and state does not separate the faith of citizen or to exercise that faith at the ballot box. It does separate the ballot box from being a religious litmus test by its very nature and guarantee of privacy.

Let's not confuse the rights of all citizens with any kind of perceived rights of being a Christian, Muslim, or Wiccan citizen, or thinking that belonging to a group somehow grants special-citizen status. Christians, et al. have no more or less rights as atheists or no more or less privileges. All are equal under the law. In turn, the Government, no matter the faith of those elected, need to learn and respect that very simple concept, and quit pandering to the religious right; that we have no state religion and one religion cannot take precedence over another. If a religion needs the power of the government to succeed, it is not a religion worthy of such an endorsement, and, indeed, should be, like any other endeavor succeed or fail on it own merits.

BH

We seem to agree on a broad concept of separation of church and state but certainly not as to what it all means. The principles of balanced power derive from a sober view of humankind, one that would restrain power. Plato's Republic would have government by philosopher-kings, who, presumably, would be above abuse of power. I would never argue that democracy is a Christian form of government. However the idea of inalienable rights and so forth demands something beyond mere ascription of rights by government consensus.

The State cannot be insulated from religious influence. Inevitably that would result in litmus tests for judges and other officials. "What influences affect your decision making?" If anyone cites "faith", well, too bad.

Hitler is an orphan, nobody wants him. John argues that Hitler was not an atheist. Actually, I never said Hitler was an atheist. I do want to say that he was also no Christian, baptized or not! Nazism, however, as a movement and institution is certainly not the outgrowth of Christianity. It may not be the necessary and inevitable outgrowth of atheism either. It does reflect, though, what can happen when we make idols of race and man.

DEBATES and LINKS

BH:

There is a lot out on apologetics recently. We have Lee Strobel and his books and Faith Under Fire, Answers in Genesis, Answers.org, Josh McDowell continues to churn things out. Philip Johnson is hot after evolution. Charles Colson weighs in with How Now Shall We Live. William Lane Craig seems ready to rumble.

JH:

I am familiar with all the material you mention plus a great deal more. Again, I have no illusions about persuading each other. Also, I have no idea if you have ever heard arguments from the "other side" or perhaps more aptly put, the correct arguments. Not just those from pulp skeptics (such as Mckinnsey) that usually make their way to Christian pages. You mention AIG. (Rhetorical question here) Why are they afraid to link to evolution sites that discuss the same material and yet many evolution sites (such as talkorigins) will link to them? Why won't McDowell link to the criticism of his apologetics on the secular web? Anyway, I would hope to know what you think or interpret some of these things.

BH:

Sure, I do read some of the "other side" material, but that has not been my main focus by any means. I have no idea other than what you just told me how or why or what these sites link. I shall take your word for it, but don't know why. Probably because they are entrenched and clinging to the absurd.

JH

I missed making a comment here. What are some of the absurd things that some of these sites claim in the name of Christianity. Just how are they entrenched?

BH

..."entrenched and absurd," that was a bit-too-subtle humor-"sarcasm"-borrowed from YOUR comments. Nevertheless, some of the End-Times sites, for example, I cannot support and are absurd.

JH

I don't see a lot of End-Timers (like Missler, Shambach, or Impe) divesting their investments, living in poverty, and waiting.

BH

Yes, Christians are hurt by poor reps, I am sometimes irritated, often angered by them. When our ideal is to be perfect even as God is perfect, too many fall way too short, myself included. That is maybe easier to understand than those who nevertheless pretend to not have fallen short! That is true hypocrisy.

Atheism is not best represented by Howard Stern either.

And now we have Pat Robertson to contend with...we now have an evangelical FATWA.

JH

Why do you get irritated or angered by them?

By the way, you can keep Pat Robertson...Just War Theory, anybody?

BH

And now we can add Robertson's pronouncement on Pennsylvania...I am irritated and angered because of their condemning tone and speaking for Christianity if not for God...You have watched his TV show? It is a ratings game there, sensationalism gets press attention.

JH

Believe it or not, I do catch the 700 club occasionally, just to see what ol' Pat comes up with. I really like Firesign Theater, which did some excellent parodies on modern culture, including religion. Some of these religious shows are like good parodies of themselves.

I am not a fan of hypocrisy no matter who is it. I really do not care for Stern, but don't recall him ever overtly touting atheism.

BH

I have him on the radio sometimes when I drive in to church. Sometimes he gets off onto that subject, he is pretty militant. "When you are dead you are dead, trust me on this." Great quote. Actually anybody that says "trust me on this", I probably won't.

JH

But don't most ministers, by default, say, "trust me on this" every week? I guess (without doing too much attacking your stock-in-trade) that that is one part of religion that is so abhorrent to me: ministers, priests, pastors, that are given so much trust by their followers that those followers just leave their brains at that church door. When I listen to D. James Kennedy's propaganda about our founding fathers, it really makes me ill, as does Robertson, Falwell, Dobson, Barton, and others that just will say anything to support an ideology. The problem is that believers will accept this hook, line, and sinker...and then propagate it. It's very hard to stop a lie...especially one from the pulpit.

BH

Yes, I suppose "we" do though, using myself as the example, I never ask anyone to "just take my word for it" or "do this or that, think or this because I say so and I have a doctorate and am ordained." I lay my "case" or "sermon" out, anchor it in the Word and ask them to look and see if this is not so.

Do you think they (Dobson, Kennedy, mentioned above) believe and know they are lying, for example, about the founding fathers? I am not sure what Kennedy might have said, but (for the sake of argument) what if he thought what he was saying was true? What if he had reason to believe that?

JH

I think their information is so second source that they just accept it as true. They never even try to research the real source and just rely upon reconstructionist literature for their material. When called upon to source or affirm what they are saying, they obfuscate and defer.

BH:

That is still different than lying.

JH

Bearing false witness or deliberate omission of pertinent facts to make a points would be lying in my book.

(Regarding nobody wanting to debate Till)..A bit of hyperbole perhaps, but mainstream apologists have all but passed, some with very lame excuses. William Lane Craig will not debate him because of his "Policy" of not debating people without a Ph.D. Yet Craig has debated people without the degree. Debating is not so much as who wins, but who has the best evidence, better supporting evidence, or present a coherent case to support the resolution.

Did you know that every time Robertson, Falwell, Dobson, Phelps, et al. open their mouth an atheist is born? It's a fact. They have done more for the atheistic, Freethought, and Humanist community than we ever could. For this I thank them from the bottom of my unbelieving heart!

BH:

After reading your comments I tried to find a website for Craig, there is one, but no way to email questions to him. I was going to ask why he won't debate Till. I also tried to find a website for Strobel and couldn't find one that would let me email questions. By the way, have you found that Faith Under Fire TV program? In Chicago it comes on from 9-10, where Strobel MC's several mini debates between various adversaries to Christian faith.

JH:

I would surmise that they don't want to be bothered trying to answer questions about their writings or defend their positions in an uncontrolled venue.

I have watched a bit of Faith Under Fire. The title is so misleading, and the format is one that I really don't care for it. Strobel won't answer his own critics, such as Earl Doherty, so I don't think much of his program, and needless to say, his books. Same old stuff, wrapped differently. The show did contact Farrell Till, and they wouldn't agree to his terms about editing of comments. Several others of us contacted them as well and got no response.

I have not seen Strobel's program on the listings in the last several months.

BH

He is off air. But you can buy all his DVD's if you want.

JH

I'll pass.

Summary of debates and Links:

JH

I think more healthy discussions like this are needed. What is disappointing in the modern computer age is the juxtaposition between the openness of the secular community to invite religious apologists in or link to their sites and the reluctance of Christian apologetic sites to do the same. Many simply will not link to atheist or

other secular sites to let their subscribers read the arguments themselves. If they are, as they say, open to dialog, why do don't they provide links to sites that are critical of their claims as most secular sites do. One must assume they don't want the curtain pulled back.

Too often Christian apologists simply ignore history or try to revise it. This does nothing for, as Brad so aptly put it, a more open and honest dialogue and debate.

BH

In many ways, John has opened my eyes to what is happening in this area. I am chagrined about how some Christians and Christian apologists have opted to "defend the faith." There is a need for more open and honest dialogue and debate.

INERRANCY and the BIBLE

JH

It is an interesting statement Brad makes about the Bible. He sees it as a complex compilation of various genre, authors; reflecting cultures and motives but still inerrant and inspired. How could a book with this history possibly be inerrant? Do I take the Bible literally? Well, in a sense and only as argument to those who take the Bible literally when it fits the occasion and then argues for the metaphorical and poetical when it does not. I agree that it is a complex compilation of various genre, authors, reflection cultures and motives (motives?) and, I believe it was written by people inspired to create a history of their culture and their relationship with their gods. I get confused though: How can something be inerrant and then not take it literally? Our shared values may stem from very different sources, but they still arrive at the end result of: do kind things, love one another, be responsible, and respect mother earth. In this analysis, Christianity and atheism are really no different. I am reminded of Raphael's painting, "School of Athens." In that painting, Plato is pointing up, Aristotle is pointing down. They couldn't solve it and I don't believe we can either as long as we let superstition and myth guide us rather than reason and reality.

One of the first questions I have is, do you subscribe to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (see appendix) or some similar doctrine? Do you consider yourself an inerrantist? A fundamentalist?

BH:

I do subscribe to it- but like any "theologian" I want disclaimers and qualifications! Vocabulary and terminology of course will be very important in all this correspondence. Words like infallible, inerrant, inspired, have a range of meanings. My own denomination emphasizes "authority" and does not subscribe to inerrancy as generally defined. I am no doubt among the more conservative in my denomination. However, interestingly, when I was at Western Conservative Baptist in Portland for my doctoral studies, I was considered too liberal for them. It depends on your vantage point I guess.

JH:

I guess it's the disclaimers and qualifications that become the rub. If you can make the Bible mean what you want it to mean, then anything is possible, even a corruption of the intent. Could you define what you mean by "authority"?

BH:

Disclaimers- regarding the vocabulary of the Chicago statement.

I think one can make any document mean what you want if one tortures it enough. I endeavor to understand what the original writers said, what their intent was in writing what they did. So context is hugely important. By "authority" I mean that the Scriptures are what I want to govern my life and should govern the lives of Christians because they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Granted not everything can be settled by an appeal to Scripture, but that is where I start. What the Pope or Dobson or Bush says I must do does not carry the same kind of spiritual authority as the Bible. I know you will have comment on this...but I want to keep it a bit dialogical and not try to anticipate everything you might say!

JH

It's nice to know that you think independently of Dobson, Bush and the Pope.

But the Bible isn't just any document according to believers. It is the inspired word of an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient (0-0-0 or triple aught) deity. Why should one need disclaimers and qualifications?

BH

I love the ring of "triple aught deity", but what is that exactly? Like the Bond license to kill?

These "disclaimers and qualifications" have to do with how people misinterpret inerrancy, and the problems that arise when folks use the same vocabulary with different meanings. You are right; I need none in regards to God.

JH

It does have a nice ring to it, doesn't it? And, it can be applied equally by atheist and Christian alike! I am an equal opportunity sloganeer! Instead of writing omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient all the time, it's just easier to do the triple-aught, 0-0-0, or omnimax in reference to God's character. And yes, I realize that we are talking about ohs and zeros and they are not the same.

If you need no disclaimers or qualifications in regards to God, and if the Bible is God's work, it needs no disclaimers or qualifications either. Right? Isn't this a contradiction of your earlier statement that you want them?

One thing that I have seen throughout our discussion is your use of disclaimers and qualifications. I'll try to try to point them out as they arise.

BH

I do appreciate your pointing out all my "disclaimers and qualifications."

I do see that you love the word "contradiction." It occurs a number of times in your writings. It seems that anything that is not immediately clear might be labeled contradiction. Sometimes just more explanation is called for. It is the bane and blessing of this form of dialogue that months go by between interactions. Neither of us can say everything in type all at once. So as the questions come up, the subject is developed.

JH

The three laws of thought are the Principle of Identity, the Principle of Contradiction, and the Principle of the Excluded Middle. The Principle of Contradiction asserts that no statement can be both true and false. If two statements are made about the same event and contradict each other, they both cannot be true. More "explanations" don't solve the principle, it just obfuscates the issue.

Would you prefer that I used the word, inconsistent? Unaffirming? Not in harmony? Opposing accounts?

BH

Thanks for the definition of Contradiction. Only "three laws of thought"? By the way, are these Laws absolute? Where do they come from?

You and I are both "modernists." If I were a true postmodernist, I would reject the rules of thought, but we both think logically- or try to, which makes this dialogue possible. What I am saying is that these are NOT contradictions, but apparent contradictions. You are free of course to choose your own vocabulary, but I insert the word "apparent" before the word "contradiction." Apparent inconsistency is even better. If I say "I met one woman today", is there a contradiction to say later "I met several women today"? No. I in fact did meet one...and more. If I added "only one woman" then there is a contradiction.

JH

Opps, sorry. Irving Copi, Introduction to Logic, fifth edition. You should get a copy.

You don't discern the difference between an apparent contradiction and a defined contradiction. This is why I listed the definition. If we can agree on the definition, then we can deal with contradictions as they appear by that definition. If you're going to insist that the definition violates the rules then, you can, certainly eliminate any contradiction. But that's cheating, or at least hedging the bet. We can also, by convention, not use the term contradiction and use inconsistency. If accounts are inconsistent, but not truly contradictory, I don't see how that helps trying to maintain the Bible as being inerrant. Inconsistencies are just as damaging as contradictions.

Here is one contradiction from above:

You stated, God does not create evil, however God says he does (45:7) I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things. Both statements cannot be true.

Your example of meeting a woman is kind of strange and really more of a tautology than a contradiction. Since both statements could be true, this is a principle if identity.

A contradictory statement would be like this:

P:1 X was killed in a digging potatoes.

P:2 X was killed in a boating accident.

Therefore a P~P situation exist making this a contradictory statement. It cannot be both true and false.

Your statement could be proved to be inconsistent, but even inconsistencies should not be appearing in an inerrant document. That would make it ambiguous and open to interpretations. We wouldn't want that, now would we?

BH

Yes, for true inconsistencies. But they are more apparent than real. I think you are trying to fit the Bible into a preconceived paradigm of what it is. "It should not have inconsistencies....it should be easier to understand..." etc. A document of this length and scope dealing with the vast amount of material that it does has to always be examined contextually.

Again, as we move through our dialogue on the Bible, we will prod this more. But as for the Bible since it is "...God's work, it needs no disclaimers or qualifications either. Right?" I am saying that parts are hard to understand, that genre plays into it, that translations of the Bible are not the Bible, etc. Disclaimers and qualifications? Or are they in fact clarifications and explanations?

JH

How could God's holy message to his creation not be clear, concise, and easy to understand, free from ambiguity, equivocation, or errors?

You're not moving the goal post by changing the disclaimers and qualifications to clarifications and explanations are you?

Here's a challenge for you: Can you find any contradictions in the Book or Mormon or the Qu'ran?

BH

Not moving the goal posts, just defining where they are.

It seems you set up standards of what something "ought to be" and then cry foul when that something is not what you think it ought to be. Why should it be clear and concise and easy to understand to you? It was written thousands of years ago in a foreign language in a context of a worldview and idiom we are still learning about. It was written by some forty writers ranging from philosopher-kings to shepherd/prophets and fishermen, and spans about 1500 years. It deals with civil law and moral law and is full of poetry and proverb and apocalyptic and it flows out of Asia, Europe and Africa...It would be like saying "mathematics should be clear and easy...." It is at one level, but it gets complicated the higher you go.

There are contradictions in these two other books. Rather than spend a lot of time here, one example in the Book of Mormon would be the devastation created when changing from the original 1830 version to later editions...these are substantial changes, not at all like translation improvements. So, can both be right? And neither do the Lamanites have any semetic DNA....

The Qu'ran has its own long list of "apparent" internal contradictions, such as who was the first Muslim or can angels cause anyone to die. Apparent external contradictions also exist, like Alexander the Great was a devout Muslim and lived to an old age...

Each of these faiths has its own list of answers that attempt to resolve these apparent contradictions. All I can say is that the investigator needs to evaluate these resolutions.

Hey, I'll move the goal posts to wherever the ball is! What game are we playing, first of all?

JH

I rest my case. But will add that I can take any contradiction you find in any other religious text and using your own argumentation prove it non contradictory. That does not extinguish the contradiction. It just defers it to religiousese.

Do you consider 2 Kings 18:17 "inspired by the Holy Spirit"? If so, why; if not, why not?

Claims of inspiration or not; the question is, is it true? If it is true, it doesn't need to be inspired. Nothing needs inspiration except a falsehood or a mistake. Moby Dick is an inspired work, but nobody thinks it's really a true story.

BH

The concepts of inspiration, authority and inerrancy are all interwoven and have huge overlap. But basically as I see it, it begins with Inspiration. Literally it means "breathed out by God." It happens in many ways, as I have talked about before: voice and written, didactic and lyric, all the various genres and means by which it gets communicated. All Scripture is a product of God's creative action and so is a true revelation of His mind and message. That being so it is authoritative. Some have tried to argue that Scriptures are infallible but not necessarily inerrant. I just don't find that distinction in the Scriptures themselves. Sometimes they would say "the Scripture is factually true and authoritative in all matters crucially relevant to Christian faith and practice but not in peripheral matters like history or science." However, if there are real incontrovertible errors here and there, then of course suspicion is aroused as to the rest and authority declines. I would agree with you that if something is true, it doesn't need to appeal to "Inspiration", and if it is not true, then no appeal to inspiration will pull that fat out of that fire. Inspiration of Scripture goes beyond just historical verification of true and false propositions to moral teachings, precepts, commands, our reason for being, purpose in life, heaven and hell, etc. and the revelation of the very personality of God.

As for this II Kings 18 passage, I am stumped. You must have raised it because of some dispute over Assyrians and the names mentioned there. So, go ahead, let the other shoe drop... !

JH

Let the other shoe drop? Oh, death where is thy sting! You seem to be a bit paranoid here, Brad! Why is that?

BH

Just having fun, light touch you know. I also respect your scholarship and breadth of knowledge and therefore know that your questions and statements have clout behind them.

JH

I know you have a great sense of humor! You are also much practiced.

Men can be inspired to write things that can be very creative without gods. The human mind can create gods, other worlds, outer worlds and inner worlds. So how do we know which parts of the Bible are breathed by man and those that are breathed by God? Thus the II Kings passage. It was not exactly picked at random; it was picked because it is a completely ordinary statement, as you point out, involving the Assyrians. There is nothing inspired, supernatural, or out of the ordinary about this statement. It may be true; it may be false. But the point is that there is absolutely nothing in this verse that appears to be inspired. If were we to read the same phrase in any history book we would not think that some deity inspired that history book.

You stated, "Inspiration of Scripture goes beyond just historical verification of true and false propositions to moral teachings, precepts, commands, our reason for being, purpose in life, heaven and hell, etc. and the revelation of the very personality of God," but fail to explain what that means. If it goes beyond all of these things then what does it get to eventually?

BH

It gets to what I said, "...to moral teachings, precepts, commands, our reason for being..." etc. The scriptures as a whole are "inspired" or God breathed, so I would not say "some are, some aren't." However, not all parts are equally useful to me right now. Some of the long genealogies are tedious, but necessary to establish the author's point.

JH

You're still not telling me what IT gets too eventually if IT goes beyond the moral teachings and etc. Does it get to the mind of God? The secrets to the Universe? If so, then how is that different from any other religion? Don't they all reach for moral teachings, commands, and the big one: why are we here (reason for being)?

BH

Are we tracking with each other here? IT goes beyond "true and false propositions." What IT gets to are "moral teachings, precepts, commands, our reason for being, purpose in life, heaven and hell, etc. and the revelation of the very personality of God" I don't know else to say it...it gets to our relationship with God.

JH

Maybe we're not tracking well here. But none the less, how is this any different than what other holy writs get to? Don't they all provide moral teaching, precepts, and commands to get to the relationship with the Godhead?

BH

Surely you are not suggesting that "all religions are fundamentally the same"- are you? They all make very different truth claims. Grant for arguments sake (for the moment) that there is a general core of common morality, however the basis and motivation for it, how one acquires it and what it means are very different. Basically I would say that other religions "get to the relationship with the Godhead" through striving, works, sacrifice, etc. Jesus is unique in that he claims to bring God in himself into our world. The Christian view that the standard is God's holy perfection and none of us can save ourselves is unique salvation is only "by grace."

JH

Yes, they are all fundamentally the same. I agree that the basis and motivations may be different, but there are all very much alike. Krishna is the savior of the world. Mohammad is the messenger of God and etc. In many ways your comments support my suggestion. You just want to make Jesus a special case, and I am glad to hear you assert that Jesus claims to bring God in himself into our world. Now, prove the claim. Just because Krishna claims to be the savior of the world doesn't make it so.

Salvation is only "by Grace? I thought it was only by "Works." No wait, it's only by "Faith." No, it's only by "Righteousness" Doh!

BH

Doh??? Context, context, context. A look at James' development of "works" and Paul's development of "grace" will show that they are in harmony, as works both spring from and validate faith.

Anyway, yes, I am what you would call an inerrantist, meaning by that, first of all, that God did get written what he intended to through human agency. The various translations and versions cannot claim this. And yes, I know, where are these original inerrant autographa, right? This is only to say that all of our work and exegesis and historical/critical analysis of scripture seeks to more precisely find what the authors and Author originally wrote and intended. I will not develop this further right now. You have read all this before, I am just outlining for you where I am. Many people however will take this talk of "inerrant" and make it mean some things it does not.

JH

And if that work and exegesis and historical/critical analysis produces a different outcome, do you, or would you accept it? If not, why not?

BH

Of course I would like to think so. The same question reverses itself. If the most "elegant" answer as to why and how the universe exists is because of a Creator, would you be willing to with that?

JH

The most elegant may not be the right one.

So where are these original inerrant autographa? How do you know they were inerrant as well?

BH

I understand that elegant may not be right. "Elegant" is just a word often used that means it is the simplest explanation that fits all the facts. It is Ockham's razor idea that we don't need to multiply causes beyond that which accounts for the phenomenon.

In a way I am surprised you bring this up now that we have been at it for what, a year and half? I had always assumed that you understood that when I spoke of inspiration and inerrancy and the like I was referring to these original documents. There is no doubt that translations have errors, nobody will try to defend their inerrancy except maybe some King James Only fanatics. And I know you know the answer to this. We don't have them. So, you ask, if you don't have them, "...how do you know they were inerrant as well?"

JH

Well....?

BH

Thought you might say that.... "inerrant" is a tough one to prove...but more on levels of proof later. In terms of accuracy though, we do know pretty well what the originals said. If all we had was one old manuscript, we wouldn't know for sure if it had been properly translated and transmitted. If we had two that agreed, the level of certainty goes up. If we had ten, then up more, etc. But we have some 5,000 Greek manuscripts, some very very old. And when they are compared, we find only about 400 words in doubt- mostly spellings, and none touching on essential doctrines.

JH

No, I believe, to the objective observer, inerrancy is exceedingly easy to prove. You don't have any original autographs so you cannot possibly know what they said. No New Testament writing is dated any earlier than the second century and that one fragment called P52 from the mid-second century is as big as your thumbnail and has five verses from John on it. I would also like to call your attention to this ominous fact: The complete text of a Dead Sea Scroll, dating from ca.100B.C.E. differs from the Masoretic text by a large number of differences, some insignificant (spelling) and some very significant variants. Other texts with notable differences between these two versions are 1 and 2 Samuel, Jeremiah, and Exodus.

I assume you have these books in your library and will let you do a further investigation.

In a nutshell without the original autographs, we simply don't know what may have been written.

BH

"No New Testament writing is dated any earlier than the second century..." I assume you mean extant copies. They are all dated in the first century.

JH

Yes, extant copies. We have no originals or any copies dated any earlier than the second century. The operative words here are, "no originals." We have nothing to compare later copies with to assess verity.

BH

To review a bit, the doctrine of inerrancy is basically this, that when all the facts become known, they will demonstrate that the Bible in its original autographs and correctly interpreted is entirely true and never false in all it affirms, whether relative to doctrine or ethics or the social, physical or life sciences." (P. D. Feinberg, s.v. "inerrancy, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology)

JH

Boy, is this a dodge! I have read some interesting statements regarding inerrancy, but, Brad, I have to tell you this is one of the most circular, evasive, and self-affirming statements I have seen. It is completely void of substance. What would your reaction be if I were to do this:

"When all the facts become known, they will demonstrate that the Bible in its original autographs and correctly interpreted is entirely false and always false in all it says, whether relative to doctrine or ethics or the social, physical or life sciences." (FJ Till, the Skeptical Review.) In short, Mr. Feinberg's opinion is worthless.

BH

I would say "let the facts begin!"

Inerrancy applies to the autographa, not to copies or translations of Scripture. We realize that the transmission process has allowed errors to creep in. This is not an appeal to a "Bible which no one has ever seen or can see." Except for a few disputed words and phrases, none of which touch on major issues, we have a very high degree of certainty of what the original text said.

JH

But you have no copies of the originals to compare. As we say in the world of pocket billiards, you got to go with what brought you here. This is just pure speculation of what you want the originals to affirm that is not in the transmitted editions. Again, highly circular.

BH

We do have more than enough early documents to know what was written, with few exceptions.

Inerrancy is taught by the Bible itself. That is circular of course. But if the Bible did NOT teach its own inerrancy/authority, then we could stop right there. Same with Jesus. Jesus used the Hebrew Scriptures and he quotes from almost all of them, indicating his trust of them. Circular, yes, but if he had said something like "Hosea was wrong about such and such..." then we could also stop right there.

JH

OK, lets stop right here. Jesus clearly says Moses is wrong concerning divorce and he was clearly wrong about who was with David when he received the shewbread and who the high priest was. I am glad to hear you admit inerrancy is a circular argument.

BH

Still stopped there. Where did Jesus say Moses was wrong exactly? You can't be thinking of Matthew 5, for example, "and it was said, 'whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce of dismissal.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife except for the cause of unchastity makes her commit adultery..." (vs. 31-32)? This whole section is about law and true righteousness. Every time Jesus sets up a statement of law (from Moses), he then answers it with "But I say to you..." Each time Jesus goes beyond law and to the heart. Don't just not commit adultery, but do not lust. Don't just not murder, but don't hate, etc. In regards to divorce, he says in effect, when you do that, don't forget that you make her commit adultery. Later he says that Moses allowed this for the hardness of their hearts (Matthew 19:7ff). He does not in fact countermand this but goes deeper to intent.

Matthew 12:3 and I Samuel 21:1 are not in contradiction, not even in apparent contradiction!!!! Jesus implies David was with his companions. Samuel has Ahimelech saying "you came alone." David replies, in verse 2 that "I have directed the young men to a certain place..."- so they were nearby. What's so hard to understand that he then gave them the bread he got from the temple?

As for Jesus was wrong about who was high priest...what are you talking about here? Where did Jesus name the high priest? Perhaps you are referring to Luke naming the high priests in 3:2 "in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas..."? If this is the text you have in mind, two things can be noted. Most commentators that even deal with this indicate that Annas was the former High Priest, but that he still exercised some judicial authority. Secondly, what time span does this indicate? That John the Baptist spent the time of his ministry under these two high priests, a period of about four years.

JH

You are using an old apologist dodge here: Simply declare there is not a contradiction, but they are compatible or even compliment each other and move on.

Mosaic Law clearly states a writ of divorce may be issued...no conditions. Jesus clearly said, No divorce is allowed. He then amends this to state, except for in cases of fornication. If this isn't countermanding Mosaic Law, I don't know what is.

Concerning the shewbread:

1Sam 21:1 Then came David to Nob to Ahimelech the priest: and Ahimelech was afraid at the meeting of David, and said unto him, Why art thou alone, and no man with thee? 2And David said unto Ahimelech the priest, The king hath commanded me a business, and hath said unto me, Let no man know any thing of the business whereabout I send thee, and what I have commanded thee: and I have appointed my servants to such and such a place.

Mat 12:3 3 But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him;

Why would Ahimelech iterate that David is alone with NO man with him and even David admits that he had nobody with him because he told them to stay somewhere else? Yet Mark (not Matthew) is clear that David

had men with him because the priest also gave bread to the men, which were with him. Indeed, if no man were to know anything of the kings business, why would David break this command and take his men to the high priest with him to conduct the kings, business?

Please notice that the priest in Sam. is Ahimelech. You looked up the shewbread incident in Matthew where the priest's name isn't mentioned.

Here's Mark version: (MK 2:26): How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?

Here, Mark, has the priest as Abiathar. Please don't quibble that Ahimelech's son, Abiathar was the high priest; that would make no sense at all and Abiathar is never called a High Priest, or that "in the days" means both were present, but the various writers just somehow forgot to mention it.

BH

The Samuel passage does not name Ahimelech as the High *Priest.*

Back to inerrancy follows from the doctrine of God (who would not speak falsely). Thirdly, that reliability of scriptures is supported by evidences from archeology. Fourthly, it is supported by textual criticism. Fifthly, it is supported by prophecy. Sixthly, it is supported or not contradicted by science. Certainly all six statements are disputed by those who disagree with inerrancy. As I look over our hundred pages of prose (so far) I see that these six major points are those of our contention.

JH

First, Ahimelech is referred to as the priest.

Second, you don't know that God cannot speak falsely.

Third, some of the scriptures can be evinced by archeology. Some is disproved conclusively.

Fourth, textual criticism doesn't support inerrancy.

Fifth, there is no biblical prophecy that cannot be conclusively proved.

Sixthly, what part of the Bible is supported by science that was not contemporary knowledge.

BH

Again we come to the level of proof you demand. At your standard, I agree, that biblical prophecy cannot be conclusively proved. I have added a table of prophecies in the appendix. You have yet to "disprove conclusively" something in the Bible from archeology.

Textual criticism and inerrancy: Textual criticism supports accuracy of transmission and preservation. As I am arguing for inspiration of the autographa, we must know what is in them. Textual Criticism demonstrates that we do in fact know (except for a few minor disputes still out there), that is how it supports inerrancy.

Science: why can't it also be part of contemporary knowledge? The Bible speaks of precision movements in the heavens, or the stability of species. Archeology is also a science, and as you say, "some scriptures can be evinced by archeology." The Big Bang theory compares well to a point-in-time-creation; history is also partly

science, at least the science of doing history...and the Bible touches on innumerable historically verifiable points. Things like that.

You might be surprised how much I agree with you regarding Biblical Prophecy. From a faith vantage point looking back, I do see numerous and amazing fulfillment. But if I were to look at the original "prophecies" with skeptical eyes, very few of the 1817 prophecies can be shown to be evidence of biblical inspiration. First, many are in fact ambiguous. "He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor..." (Luke 4:18ff). Luke says Jesus says "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." OK, it might have been, but anybody could have claimed "I am anointed to preach to the poor" and referenced Is. 61:2.

Other prophecies could be retrofitted, could be mind you! This idea was made popular by the Passover Plot (Hugh Shonfield). In this book, Jesus knows the messianic prophecies and sets out to consciously fulfill them. And indeed, this seems to be what Matthew says "...in order that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled" (cf 12:17; 13:14, 26:54). He knows the Messiah is expected to ride on a donkey so he finds one to ride on.

Yet other Old Testament scriptures were seen to fit Jesus only after the fact. There had been no or little application to the Messiah beforehand.

Even if we were to dismiss the vague and the anticipated, there are many other specific prophecies that are indeed evidence of God's activity (assuming that mere mortals cannot know the future...Johnny Carson as Carnac nothwithstanding); the Virgin Birth (yeah yeah, I know, you don't believe it right?), that the ancestry would be through Judah and David, the Holy Spirit would "rest" on him, for example. But beyond that, we have very detailed descriptions of his suffering and death in Is. 53, which was viewed as a messianic prophecy before Jesus' time. Other references are the piercing of the hands and side and the gambling for his tunic (Ps. 22:16, Zech 12:10; Ps. 22:18).

Other prophecies are nonmessianic, such as Daniel's prediction of the succession of the world powers (2:17ff), or Isaiah naming the King of Persia (Cyrus) some 150 years ahead of time. The destruction of Tyre was prophesied by Ezekiel (26:3ff). It is often argued that these cannot be fore-tellings, they must be late additions to the text. There is no textual evidence for that kind of assertion.

So I will not argue with some that prophecy proves biblical Inspiration, but that some prophecies are evidence for it.

JH

Ah, the suffering servant of Isa. 53. Could this not be a reference to Israel as a nation, suffering under the oppression of its enemies? If not, why not?

Since Tyre was never destroyed this one's a non-starter.

No textual evidence for the assertion that Daniel or Isaiah contain later additions?

The entire book of Daniel is a later work and Deutero-Isaiah (chapter 40-66) was not composed until the time of Cyrus. The prophecy of Cyrus is no prophecy at all, but a description or the fall of Jerusalem and the return of the Jews.

But you say there is no textual evidence.

First, Isaiah:.

"Only chapters 1-39 can be assigned to Isaiah's time (c. 700 BCE). It is generally accepted that chapters 40-66 come from the time of Cyrus of Persia (539 BCE) and Later as shown by the differences in historical background, literary style, and theological emphases." May and Metzger---The Oxford Annotated Bible

This view is supported by numerous commentaries, such as the:

The New Bible Commentary: Revisited----Guthrie, Motyer, Stibbs, Wiseman, eds

The Interpreters One Volume Commentary, Laymon, ed.

New American Bible

Eerdmans Bible Dictionary

Daniel

"The author was a pious Jew living under the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes (167-164 BCE) May and Metzger--- The Oxford Annotated Bible

"The Book of Daniel is one of the few books of the Bible that can be dated with precision." Metzger and Coogan---Oxford Companion to the Bible.

This is supported by the commentaries listed above also.

Further study reveals the vast majority of mainstream scholars hold this opinion. It is because of the textual evidence and other external evidence(s) that has led them to this conclusion. Only the most ardent fundamentalists still hold to the, circa 600 BCE dating of Daniel and the early dating Second Isaiah. For no other reason I might add, but to uphold inerrancy.

Elsewhere in this dialog, you commend me for using Metzger as a Scholarly source. I hope that still stands now that he disagrees with your assessment of these two books.

Interestingly, your plaint that, "There is no textual evidence for that kind of assertion,"

is exactly how conservative commentary writers put this. Commentator Richard O. Lawrence uses those exact words, but, as usual, this causal dismissal of mainstream scholarship is unsupported. In other words, they make a sweeping generalization supporting inerrancy, erect straw men, but never address the real issues found by objective observers. We simply cannot dismiss this as causally as Lawrence and other would hope.

BH

This can quickly become a battle of scholars and references. "Mainstream" is not synonymous with "right." I can still disagree with Metzger from time to time, as I will with most scholars. I would not presume to think that the scholars you have cited and therefore you respect agree with you all the time. Is there a scholar that is always right? Conservative scholars hardly "casually dismiss" this. What you are calling mainstream is not monolithic. Much of their analysis is based on certain principles of form-critical analysis and redaction criticism that is contested by a another smaller but vigorous school of scholarship. This might be represented by Trinity Evangelical Seminary (Western, Dallas, to name a few).

JH

Well, here's the problem. Your point would be valid if I made references to skeptical scholars or atheist

sources. But I am not. I am appealing to Christian Scholars. These are your scholars! I could certainly understand your point if I had cited Martin, Drange, or Kurtz. But I am citing scholars from your side of the aisle. If your going to makes appeal to "smaller but more vigorous schools of scholarship, then I have to ask, are these more apt to uphold inerrancy for the sake of inerrancy, or are they really open to change? I would say that they are so conservative that they would argue that YOM means a 24 hour day, there is nothing metaphorical, and if the Bible says Solomon had 40,000 stable, then Solomon had 40,000 stables, etc, etc, ad nauseam. In the respect, I would say that you are cherry-picking. I am just pointing out that highly respected scholars, such as Metzger, (hardly a conservative) is more trustworthy and a far better source than someone at a ultra conservative seminary that probably as some sort of "articles of faith" that must be adhered to.

Hey, they do! Here's a few of their 12 articles:

Trinity International University Statement of Faith

1. We believe the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired Word of God, without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of men and the Divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life.

9. We believe that only those who are, thus, members of the true Church shall be eligible for membership in the local church.

How could an objective scholar ever adhere to such statements? In any case, this is your problem of scholarship, and represents a larger issue that Christians have: How could these scholars have such divergent views on the same book? One says that Isaiah is one author, only one author and never will be convinced that it had more than one author, while the other says, based upon the research and evidence we have concluded that Isaiah had more than one author.

Further, what possible harm could befall any one from accepting the multiple authorship of Isaiah? This is akin to argument concerning Moses authoring the Pentateuch. The only ones who would still argue that point are the most conservative fundamentalists.

BH

The early church adhered to a unified Isaiah, as did Jewish teaching of that time. Only we few "conservative fundamentalists" are left to up hold the truth...and being so few we must be wrong. And of course Jesus cites Isaiah often and offers no distinction.

So the scholarship represented by the "Trinity School" shall we say is invalid because of their articles of faith. That would also invalidate Tubingen. Though I cannot find "articles of faith" - they are there nonetheless. Baur and others there upheld Hegelian philosophy, naturalistic causes alone assumed capable of explaining Christian faith. So no wonder The Tubingen scholars came to these interpretations!

JH:

The early church believed in many things that were false. They certainly didn't have the benefit of objective scholarship, research, linguistics, or other works that showed a divergence from orthodox thinking.

BH

The real attack on the unified-Isaiah came from the German scholars starting in the 18th century. They thought they detected stylistic differences between 1-39 and 40-55; then others found more differences in 56-66, and before it was over, Isaiah was totally fragmented. The working assumption was that Prophecy

could not have any predictive element, and so anything that seemed predictive was postdated. They also "detect" theological differences moving from an emphasis on divine majesty to God's eternality, from God as exalted to God as the sole god.

JH

Scholarship is an attack? Scholarship is the objective study of a discipline, letting the evidence prove the theory with out preconceived notions or dogma interfering. The work of the Tübingen scholars has been up held time after time again. W. C. Van Manen and F. C. Baur among others are the early explorers of historical and radical criticism, venturing "towards a real knowledge of Christian history." (Manen)

BH

No way can Tubingen upheld like that. I would say most of the old liberal approach, e.g. JEPD and such has been hotly disputed. You are coming close to saying that attacks under the guise of scholarship do not occur. "No true scholar would ever attack..."

Here is why I take Isaiah to be substantially and overwhelmingly (yes, there may be glosses...) of a single author.

- there are few references to Babylon and exile in 40-66. Odd, if this was post-exilic.

- there are instances in the early section where the writer also projects into the future.

- many other prophets also predict, eg. Micah 5:2, Ezekiel 26:26ff. One would have to post-date all these to be consistent.

- there is nothing to suggest that 40-66 was not also written in Palestine.

- arguments from literary style are in general very weak and subjective. The Gaf-Wellhausen theory is really not in vogue as it once was.

- The literary critique falls on its own sword. One must first of all derive a solid grasp of the style of the writer and this can only be done by analyzing the corpus of writing ascribed to him. You can only reject writing as "not his" after that is done. However Graff Wellhausen et al examine the work of the author then deny parts of it as belonging to that author.

- there is very close verbal agreement between "Volume I and V II". R.K Harrison, "even the mechanics of construction of the book exhibit unexpected parallels..." I have put some of those below.

- theological differences are more apparent than real. Ideas are developed along the way.

- certain sections of Vol II don't fit the exilic period either, as they mention the stronghold of Zion (40:9) and cities of Judah that are still standing. The walls of Jerusalem are still up (62:6).

- vol. I also has sections that could be constructed to mean the exile already has taken place, like 1:7-9; 5:13 and 14:1-4.

- the two volumes are in fact very similar in style and vocabulary; compare: 40:5 and 1:20; 43:13: 14:27 and a bunch more. Both volumes have a duplication of words as a style of writing.

- Much of volume 2 resembles Micah, which is what, 7-8th century?

- Is. 44:9, 25 and 57:5 seems to be referring to Caananite idolatry, not Babylonian.

....and so forth.

It would seem that, at the end of day, their findings are driven primarily by a desire to uphold certain naturalistic presuppositions.

Verbal Parallels between Is 1-39 and 40-66

1.20-----40.5, 58.14

11.9-----65.25

11.12----56.8

14.27----43.13

19.25, 29.23----45.11, 60.21

34.8------61.2, 63.4

35.10----51.11n)

JH:

I could list all the evidence why Isaiah is of a multiple authorship. In fact many of the reasons you list are the very reasons modern scholarship has rejected a singular authorship of Isaiah. Verses 1-39 describe events relating to the Northern Kingdom of Israel being taken in by the Assyrian Empires (8:5-8) circa 700 BCE and the victory over the Assyrians is described in chapters 36-37. Verses 40-66 (Deutro-Isaiah) originate from and describe events during the time of Cyrus (c. 540 BCE) and before the fall of Babylon in 539 to the armies of Cyrus of Persia. 40-55 describes the exiled nation of Israel in Babylon, the rise of Cyrus, fall of Babylon and the return of the exiles. It would take some pretty fancy explaining to solve the 160 years difference or how Isaiah live for some 200 years to write about two different and distinct historical eras.

BH

That is why it is called PROPHECY!- It describes the future! "Modern scholarship"- I would also add "some" to that.

Historicity and the Gospel Writers: Now, to our Gospel writers, you call them anonymous, that we have no idea who they were, or if they were eye witnesses or not. Actually, they are not all that anonymous and we do know something about them. Luke does not claim to be an eyewitness.

Yes, the suffering servant indeed can be Israel...to a point. Even a number of Jewish sources indicate that it refers to the Messiah (The Baylonian Talmud. "The Messiah --what is his name?...The Rabbis say, The Leper Scholar, as it is said, `surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: *yet we did esteem him a leper,* smitten of God and afflicted...*'" (Sanhedrin 98b).*

JH

OK. The suffering servant can be Israel. I would even suggest this is referring to creative redemption from God himself who sees his nation suffering from their sins during the Babylonian captivity or moreover

blaming them for their captivity due to disobedience to him! Many verses in Isaiah point to this. The only reason Christians want to apply this to Jesus is that Luke, in strip-mining the Hebrew Scriptures for his Gospel Jesus (erroneously) applied these to Jesus in creating his Christology. The suffering servant is Israel, suffering under the domination of their captivity, being beaten, cast down upon, oppressed, and judged. But after all this suffering, and eventual death of the nation in captivity, God will return them to be stronger nation than ever before, prosperous, righteous, and enduring. This is borne out by Chapter 54 that relates the future of Israel for generation to come. Not all of this is prophecy, but (as you put it so aptly) metaphorical and poetic. Just because Isaiah is considered a prophet doesn't mean that every word he speaks is a prophecy.

I'd be willing to bet a sizeable sum equal to that of a deep dish pizza that if you sat down with one of your parishioners, who may not have ever read Isa. 51-54, or ever heard the popular prophecy explanations, they would have absolutely no inclination to believe that this related to some events some 600 years to the future or was about Jesus...unless you told them.

BH

Midrash Ruth Rabbah: "Another explanation (of Ruth ii.14): -- He is speaking of king Messiah; `Come hither,' draw near to the throne; `and eat of the bread,' that is, the bread of the kingdom; `and dip thy morsel in the vinegar,' this refers to his chastisements, as it is said,* `But he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities'"*

*Targum Jonathan: "*Behold my servant *Messiah* shall prosper; he shall be high and increase and be exceedingly strong...*"*

Zohar: "`He was wounded for our transgressions*,' etc....There is in the Garden of Eden a palace called the Palace of the Sons of Sickness; this palace the Messiah then enters, and summons every sickness, every pain, and every chastisement of Israel; they all come and rest upon him. And were it not that he had thus lightened them off Israel and taken them upon himself, there had been no man able to bear Israel's chastisements for the transgression of the law: and this is that which is written,* `Surely our sicknesses he hath carried.*'"*

Rabbi Moses Maimonides: "What is the manner of Messiah's advent....there shall rise up one of whom none have known before, and signs and wonders which they shall see performed by him will be the proofs of his true origin; for the Almighty, where he declares to us his mind upon this matter, says, `Behold a man whose name is the Branch, and he shall branch forth out of his place' (Zech. 6:12). And Isaiah speaks similarly of the time when he shall appear, without father or mother or family being known, He came up as a sucker before him, and as a root out of dry earth, etc*....in the words of Isaiah, when describing the manner in which kings will harken to him,* At him kings will shut their mouth; for that which had not been told them have they seen, and that which they had not heard they have perceived." *(From the Letter to the South (Yemen), quoted in The Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters, Ktav Publishing House, 1969, Volume 2, pages 374-5)*

JH

I am surprised that you used these sources and would encourage others to actually read these selections. These are over 700 years old (respectively, ca. 8th century C.E., ca. 1st century C.E., traditionally ascribed to 1st century C.E.-more likely 13th century C.E. Spanish work; ca. 12th century C.E. Spain), not one mentions Jesus specifically or anything more specific than Isaiah and are simply Jewish interpretations, midrash, and rabbinic views, that did not have the benefit of objective analysis or the historical/critical method to render an objective opinion. Indeed, in most cases they are as vague as the Isaiah chapter itself and show that the Jews were still waiting for the messiah.

I am also sure that you probably would not agree with much else in these writings. Why didn't you find a Hebrew/Jewish source from 600 BCE to 1 BCE that specifically says that Isaiah was talking about events that would happen from the 1BCE to 30 C.E. including names, dates, and places?

I also think one would be hard pressed to find an orthodox Jew that would agree with you. They still think the messiah is yet to come.

Remember, Rabbi Akiba (ca. 50 C.E.--135 C.E.) thought Bar Kokhba was the promised messiah; until he was killed by the Romans. Oppps.

BH

These Jewish sources are quoted only to show that there is an historic strain of interpretation that connects Is. 53 to the messiah. There are of course many Messianic Jews who do think Jesus is the Messiah.

But a careful reading of the chapter has a number of points that cannot be Israel:

1. The servant of Isaiah 53 is an innocent and guiltless sufferer. Israel is never described as sinless.

2. The prophet said: "It pleased the LORD to bruise him."

3. The person mentioned in this passage suffers silently and willingly- hardly typical of the Israelites.

4. The person described in Isaiah 53 suffers, dies, and rises again to atone *for his people's sins. This "asha" is a sin offering and refers to a spotless sacrificial lamb. This is NOT Israel!*

6. Isaiah himself speaks here ad says the Sufferer was punished for teh transgression of my people*," according to verse 8. My people would be Isaiah's people or Israel. Israel cannot suffer for Israel.*

7. The figure of Isaiah 53 dies and is buried according to verses 8 and 9. The people of Israel have never died as a whole.

This is just a brief review of that chapter. The best interpretation is that it is predictive, from Isaiah himself, and referring to the Messiah and not Israel.

JH

You are certainly fighting to keep this as a relevant prophecy. Here are a few problems with this:

God, in Isaiah, directly refers to the nation of Israel as his son, his servant (see Isa 49:3 below). The suffering servant is a song made up of four separate songs high in imagery and metaphor. Isaiah never is specific enough to remotely think this is referring to some event 700 years to the future and no other OT prophet points to Isaiah and affirms the suffering servant. Jesus never refers to Isaiah and says, "I am the suffering servant predicted by Isaiah."

Specifically, in Isaiah, we find:

In 19:25, God talks of Israel as his inheritance.

In 45:15 God is called the savior of Israel. Not some future messiah

In 49:18 Israel is compared to a bride. If a nation can be compared to a bride, certainly a nation can be considered dead and afforded the rites thereof.

And most importantly in 49:3 God acknowledges that Israel is his Servant!

"You are my servant*, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." (Emphasis added)*

BH

Just reiterating...it can be Israel to a point...my effort is to show that it cannot be limited *to Israel alone for the reasons cited above.*

JH

This couldn't be a reference to Jesus because:

(All verses NIV. I am also not affirming that I actually believe that Jesus existed per the biblical accounts in the discussion below.)

Isa 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Jesus was not despised and rejected by men until the last few hours of his life when some rejected him. He was not a man of sorrows but lifted people up continually. He was followed by masses everywhere, and was very popular among the common people. He was welcomed a hero in his triumph entry into Jerusalem. Hardly the treatment of a man that was despised or rejected.

Isa 53:4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

Jesus is never depicted as being stricken, smitten, or afflicted by God.

BH

Matthew 8:17, for example, applies this to Jesus. Evidently the thrust of the Isaiah passage is referring to the period of arrest and abandonment, not his entire life. It is unfair to say "look, he was popular here and there so this is cannot be him."

JH

Isa 53:7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

Jesus was not silent and did open his mouth during his gospel trial. In some cases he spoke very forcefully. In John, (18:1ff) Jesus gives a spirited defense. In addition, each Gospel records his last words, which except that Mark, and Matthews are completely different than the others.

Isa 53:10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering...

Although Jesus may have suffered for a few hours during his execution, he certainly did was not crushed or

suffered during most of his life as recorded in the gospels.

BH

Perhaps the Passion of Christ shows the crushing in a new vivid way. "During most of his life" is not asserted, though there was the attempted stoning, the Pharisees despising him, his illegitimacy, etc.

JH

Isa 53:10 (cont.) ...he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

How could Jesus see his offspring and how could his days be prolonged? (Rhetorical question) He died childless and at a rather young age.

Please don't try to argue that Isaiah was talking about spiritual offspring or spiritual days. There is no indication once so ever that this would be the case. To state otherwise would be absurd and would corrupt these verses beyond recognition. For example I could simply say, OK then, he was spiritually oppressed, died spiritually, stricken spiritually, and was the spiritual suffering servant, and etc. ad nauseam.

BH:

OK, moving on. I think more argument here will just us more laps around the course.

I am not sure why you say Tyre was never destroyed. It has been conquered and ruled over by a succession of nations. To conquer is to destroy. The Greeks and the Persians, Romans and Arabs all had their boot on Tyre. The prophecy speaks of many nations involved in this, and so it has been.

JH

If we read Ezekiel, he is very clear that Tyre will not just be destroyed: it will exist no more. The prophecy also tells us who will destroy Tyre, and while is does say many nations will be involved, it doesn't name any other nation except Babylon, and Babylon is the only one is assigned the task and we are given the details of that siege wwhich failed.

First, though, the prophecy says that Tyre will be no more:

Ezekiel 26:19 "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When I make you a desolate city, like cities no longer inhabited, and when I bring the ocean depths over you and its vast waters cover you, 20 then I will bring you down with those who go down to the pit, to the people of long ago. I will make you dwell in the earth below, as in ancient ruins, with those who go down to the pit, and you will not return or take your place in the land of the living. 21 I will bring you to a horrible end and you will be no more. You will be sought, but you will never again be found, declares the Sovereign LORD." *(Emphasis added)*

This says, unequivocally, that Tyre will not be just conquered or destroyed, but will be no more. Not exist, kaput, nothing. "Never found again."

Yet Tyre has continues to exist to this day.

Ezekiel then tells us who will be the agent of Tyre's destruction:

Ezekiel 26:7 "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: From the north I am going to bring against Tyre

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, king of kings, with horses and chariots, with horsemen and a great army.

Ezekiel 29:18 "Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon drove his army in a hard campaign against Tyre; every head was rubbed bare and every shoulder made raw."

And the result of that campaign:

Ezekiel 29:18 Yet he and his army got no reward from the campaign he led against Tyre.

As a result of that God decided to give Nebuchadnezzar Egypt:

Ezekiel 29:19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will carry off its wealth. He will loot and plunder the land as pay for his army. 20 I have given him Egypt as a reward for his efforts because he and his army did it for me, declares the Sovereign LORD.

There is no reference in any of these verses that Tyre was ever made a bare rock or never to be found again.

Ezekiel also says that Egypt will be under the thumb 29: 11" No foot of man or animal will pass through it; no one will live there for forty years. 12 I will make the land of Egypt desolate among devastated lands, and her cities will lie desolate forty years among ruined cities. And I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries."

Can you name any period of history since Ezekiel's time, (ca 600 BCE) where Egypt was devoid of any living person or animals for forty years? Can you name any period of history since Ezekiel's time where Cairo has been desolate for forty years? Can you name any period of history since Ezekiel's time where the Egyptian people were scattered among the nations?

BH:

*Oracles are hard, aren't they? Certainly "mainland" Tyre was utterly destroyed and even scrapped bare by Alexander. "They will destroys the walls of Tyre"- They...so Neb and his army had a major role but not the only one. It is the mainland envisioned here (26:8 NASB). "Never be found again...*YOU *will be built no more...." In a quick perusal of the history of Tyre, I see that it also suffered an earthquake and some kind of plague. It was a fishing village for a while, and so the nets are spread over it. Again, what does this really mean? Both mainland and island were eventually destroyed, pretty much ending the Persian Empire. Others came and build on it, like Crusaders...is this* Tyre *per se being rebuilt? If Seattle is built over old Chief Selth's fishing village, is it rebuilt, or something else entirely?*

But, sure, John, I do see your points about this. Aligning biblical prophecy with EXACTLY a verifiable historic fulfillment is never quite doable. We are not sure here there about what the prophecy said, what was meant, what was spiritual, what is still future; and history doesn't always give us exact indisputable details either. I have tended to shy away from " see, prophecy proves the bible" because of this. However when taken, like Google Earth, and back up a bit and big picture looked at, it does amaze me how these ancient prophecies were fulfilled.

Anyone reading our emails will be numbed reading all this, wondering why we contest this so hotly. What is at stake is pretty clear. If there are in fact predictive prophecies, then that lends credence to the supernatural, to God at work in history. It is critical to the naturalist to disprove and to discount this. This same issue can be fought over all the prophets. The naturalist will post date them, making prediction only past-tense reference.

JH

Elsewhere you insist that "the Bible is a rich mix of various genres, of history, and narrative. Poetry, Gospel, lament, philosophy and an odd genre of Apocalypse metaphors..." In the case of YOM, you insist this is a metaphor and should not be taken literally. But here you seem determined to make this as literal as you can to make it fit the Christology you want it to. In this respect, this is classic case of prooftexting. You're shooting an arrow and then drawing a bullseye around it, so in effect you can never miss. In addition, you're trying to shift the burden; it is not up to skeptics to disprove, but for the believer to prove these things really happed exactly as predicted. If you going to assert these prophecies are true then it is up to you to prove that the writer of Isaiah or any other prophecy was referring to the Jesus of the Gospels, no one else and was specific in doing so.

Here's the difficulty:

Jesus of Nazareth is never mentioned by name, linage, or association.

There is no mention of when the prophecy will take place.

There is no mention of where this prophecy will take place.

There is no mention of a messiah.

There is no mention of anything remotely relating to Jesus' life, ministry, or any person involved with him.

In short, this "prophecy" is anything but a prophecy. It is relating to the Babylonian captivity and the struggle therein.

Prophecy advocates need some rules instead of just asserting that this or that is so. To meet this end, I suggest the following:

1. Is the prophecy timely? Does it predict something that has already happen or something that the author knows will happen?

2. Does it accuracy describe the events it purports to prophesize?

3. Is it void of ambiguity? Is it worded sufficiently that it can only mean one thing and not be interpreted differently?

4. Is it void of poetic, epic imagery and metaphorical language? Is it specific?

5. Is the writer asserting a prediction to be fulfilled by forcing the prediction into their writing to make if fulfilled?

6. Is the prophecy something that is likely to happen anyway?

If we use a reasonable criteria to assess prophecy, it will become readily apparent that prophecy arguments fail in every case, in every way, back then as they do today.

OK, let's move on...or back. The writers are anonymous. Jerry Falwell's Liberty Commentary on the NT: "The Gospels are Anonymous"; Bruce Metzger The Oxford annotated Bible: "The author(s) is anonymous"; Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels (Mcknight) : The Gospels authors are anonymous.

Something cannot be "not that anonymous." Either something is anonymous or we know the authorship. All we really know about them is in the appeal to tradition.

BH

Glad you added Metzger...Falwell, may be not the best scholar. It is a temptation to parse each other words and force a wooden specificity on them...does anonymous mean we know nothing about them? Or does it mean we do in fact know something about them?

JH

What!?? Jerry not the best scholar?? Yes, anonymous means we know nothing about who they were. When a poem is listed as anonymous, it means we have no idea who the author is. We can speculate, but that is meaningless without evidence to make a discovery. We can make certain assumptions about the author, but that does not identify the author.

BH

Let's just take Luke as an example, and maybe the hardest one in some ways, since he is not named as the author per se. I am drawing from several sources of scholarship, and, yes, conservative scholars (The Jesus Seminar people I consider liberal wakos...:)). The names, places, descriptions in the book do in fact accurately reflect what we know of the land and politics at that time. He is precise and careful and detailed. The earliest witnesses to Luke as author belong to the end of the 2nd century, but it so fully in agreement and from so many different sources, that this tradition of Luke as author clearly already had a long history before this. The Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus, Clement, Origin, et. al. all state Luke as author. Justin (AD 150) makes a lot of use of Luke. If there had been various possibilities, such as one of the Apostles, as author, it is curious that no other tradition exists for an alternate author. What governed the choice of Luke, a gentile, and one self-avowedly not an eyewitness? If I were manipulating the canon, I would have superimposed a real Apostle.

JH

Again the tradition argument. Liberal wakos? Hummmm.

Herman Melville was precise, careful and detailed. That doesn't make Moby Dick true. Out of your above paragraph, I garnered this:

Luke wasn't the author, per se (disclaimer)

The church fathers you mention never met the author.

No other tradition exists (except the Christian tradition).

Luke was not an eyewitness.

If you were at the Council of Nicea, you would have insisted that a real Apostle be used to name the Gospel (which one? Just curious)

BH

Do you think Melville intended his readers to think it was true? Good fiction should also be historically accurate. "Luke is not NAMED as author per se..." - my quote, so no disclaimer. Would you say that Luke is

in the genre of Melville?

JH

That's not my point. My point is that good authors make their stories as real to life as they can; throw some real people and places in and you've got a pretty good believable story. It doesn't make them true. In his early live, Melville was a cabin boy who sailed the South Seas, and then joined the Navy. He was shipwrecked among the Typee cannibals and was rescued in true dramatic fashion. These exploits led him (indeed inspired him) to write the adventures in Typee *and* Omoo. *Some writers, such as Melville create or base their characters on real people so that they become real to people who may actually think they are real or may have been alive. Sherlock Holmes is a good example. You can do an informal survey...Put a list together of real and fictional character and then ask your congregation to identify which are which.*

BH

That would be fun. I have done that with Bible-proverbs and cultural slogans, like "God helps those who help themselves" to see if they could distinguish them. The results were not good! So there is no hope in ever discerning a writer of history from a good writer of fiction?

JH

I would assert that most of your congregation has never read the Bible, cover to cover even once, and if I was the labeling sort would call them salad-bar Christians...they pick and choose what the like and ignore what they don't.

The hope in discerning a writer of history from fiction is in the evidence and collaborative sources.

BH

The internal testimony of the book is coherent and consistent with Luke-as-author. He tends to describe medical issues differently than the others. The many "we" passages indicate he was a fellow traveler with Paul. Paul refers to Luke in three of his letters. It simply would not do to write falsehoods to churches that would know better. They know who Paul was with and when.

JH

Don't you think the church fathers that named Luke, Luke, thought the same way? We have the "WE" passages; we have Paul's reference to Luke...I guess it must be Luke!!!

BH

If you are suggesting retro-fitting here, meaning that some anonymous "gospel" was embraced by the Church Fathers and later named Luke...where is the evidence for that?

JH

I am just using your statement. Where is your evidence that Luke wrote Luke? When do you think Luke was composed? Where?

How would the churches know better? They were so far apart, and simply out of communication with each other. You make it sound like in the late first C. there was the vast organization of Christian churches all teaching the same thing. This simply is not true.

BH

The communication between churches and indeed throughout the Roman empire was actually pretty good, given roads and various kinds and forms of formal and informal postal systems.

OK, a bit more on Luke, then alas, we must move on. The earliest witnesses to this being Luke are from the 2nd Century- I think you know this, that is why you are prodding me down this path. That is late, and also as you know, I don't like "late." However, and here it comes, it is in total agreement as to the author and has much earlier roots if it is to have this unity at this time (e.g. the Muratorian Canon). The "we" passages of Acts also reinforce it. If the church were to assign a name, in all probability it would be an Apostle, not a gentile. I might add that the writings show a keen and specific interest in things medical which corresponds to Luke being a physician.

Certainly there was enough correspondence among the churches, especially the Apostles to raise alarms about some nefarious book masquerading under a false name.

JH

Still from the second century. In other words, constructed 70 to 100 years or more after the supposed events. It doesn't matter if you don't like late if it is indeed last. I am not sure what you are referring to as being in total agreement, since you have no original autographs, What is in total agreement? You have no original autograph to make that kind of statement let alone insist on some sort of earlier roots that simply are not defined. The Muratorain Canon is dated circa 170-200 C.E. well over 100 years after Luke was supposed to have been first composed. That's quite a difference. If, as below you argue that Luke was written around 60 C.E. (against all modern scholarship I might add) then that pushes back the Muratorian Canon even further away from its source.

I can find nothing in Luke that shows a keen or specific interest in anything medical that was not common knowledge at the time. Indeed, if a physician had written any of this, one would certainly expect more specific medical knowledge being expressed...especially when relating the healing miracles. Yet there are none.

BH

I would argue that he wrote it before AD 70, probably around 60 AD. I am with John A.T. Robinson on this (Redating the New Testament). The prophecies he uses regarding Jerusalem and lack of any reference to its fall would support this early date.

JH

Then where do you place Mark?

Your sources:

The Muratorian Canon dates to the late second century

Origen....182 to 232.

Irenaeus...b. circa 125

Clement....b. circa 150, d. circa 215.

Why doesn't anybody mention Luke until the middle of the second century? If it was so popular, certainly

someone must have known about it a lot earlier.

BH

Mark is probably earlier yet. If Paul died around 62AD, then Acts predates that, and Luke predates that. These sources, to appear then, have earlier antecedents. Did Irenaeus invent it, or is he commenting on something that came before? The fact that he does make reference implies an earlier source.

JH

We don't know when Paul died. There is no possible way that Luke could predate Mark. Too much is borrowed from Mark and Matthew to make that possible; and even 'Luke' (1:1) declares that what he has written for his patron, Theophilus, has been written by many before him. He is just writing them again:

Luke 1

1Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, 2Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; 3It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus....

More importantly, 'Luke' is writing them for his patron. This can hardly be considered any kind of objective description of the events if Luke is coloring them to suit Theophilus.

BH

Your honor, I object to the statement, "...for his patron" and "coloring...to suit Theophilus." This supposes evidence not submitted.

JH

Overruled. The evidence comes from a statement from your witness.

BH

So, to reiterate, or is it just "iterate"... the three points I am trying to make:

The historical reliable of the book of Mormon, including its witnesses, is not just feeble, it is refuted.

JH

Mormons don't think so. I was told by one that he knew it was the truth.

BH

The Gospel writers, or witnesses if you will, are well attested and early. They are not anonymous.

JH:

Not for at least 90 years after they supposed to have penned their "observations." They certainly are anonymous by the very definition and as you admitted above, certainly not witnesses to the event they wrote about. You cannot point to one extant manuscript that was truly authored by who the church fathers attributed

them to.

BH

Not true. I would assert the opposite, that they are written by whom the Fathers have ascribed. You say "as you admitted above, certainly not witnesses to the event they wrote about.."- I reread what I wrote and can't find that admission. By "the event" are you referring to the death and resurrection? Or did you mean to make plural, "events"? If I implied that, say Matthew and Mark were not eye witnesses, I retract that.

JH

Your admission that I am referring to is the agreement as to what anonymous means. That should be events...plural. So Mark and Matthew whoever they were, were NOT eyewitnesses...correct?

Were Luke and Matthew eyewitness to the birth of Jesus? If not, how did they get their information to write such an accurate and truthful account?

BH

OK, eyewitnesses to what events? Eyewitnesses to Jesus' miracles, to his life and teaching, and to his resurrection appearances. The sources for their birth-narrative information cannot be many: perhaps most likely from Mary.

Modern day martyrs do give up their lives for secrets, true and false, and not just modern day. This would be true for the whole history of mankind. What is unique about these writers and the Eleven (remaining) apostles, is that they, according to Church tradition, gave up their lives believing it was true. Therein is the difference from the martyrs who have died for a false secret that you mention. They did not know it was false, but believed it to be true. If the Resurrection were false, a hoax, lie, or deception, would this "conspiracy", because it would be a conspiracy, to promulgate a risen Jesus, not only endure but endure through martyrdom? I am sure I would not give my life for what I knew to be a lie. They at least believed it to be true, which would mean that they did not steal the body.

JH

There were no eyewitnesses. NONE. Was Luke there when Jesus was born, walked on the water, entered Jerusalem? Was Luke there when Jesus was born and baptized; at the sermon-on-the mount or flew around with Satan? Was he there and personally observed the miracles, or at the last supper? Was Luke at the trial and crucifixion? When Jesus said his last words was Luke there? No. He wasn't. Neither was Matthew, Mark, or John.

Islam martyrs give up their lives everyday for believing the Qur'an is true and they will be rewarded in Heaven. They don't know it's false (?) either. This is another McDowell type of argument and quite baseless. It's one thing to believe something to be true; quite another to know it's true.

Again, you appeal to tradition. Stop that! Atheist tradition says people do lots of things that are silly, stupid, and incomprehensible. They follow would-be saviors, kooks, quacks and lunatics; drink spiked cool-aid, throw themselves on grenades, and a whole lot of other messy things for what they "know" is true.

You have no evidence that these writers and remaining apostles (except maybe James) gave up their lives for their beliefs. Only the argument you have is from tradition.

As for rest of your statement...I submit the following: David Koresh, Jim Jones, Heavens Gate. They all

believed IT to be true.

I don't maintain they stole the body. I simply do not have any evidence that any of these events took place.

BH

If the tradition were contrary, you would cite it. Tradition is cited only to show harmony and continuity.

"They all believed IT to be true..." - my point exactly. Koresh and Jones, had they believed it to be false, are not likely to have done the same. Had there been no resurrection, the disciples would KNOW this to be false.

Yes you do have some evidence, the Gospels. It is just that you want other evidence. Don't say you have none.

JH

Right. They believed it to be true. They didn't know it was true. There is no external evidence to support the Gospels. Even Clement said there were no records...and he didn't need them to believe anyway.

BH

Historicity, Authenticity, and External Sources: How Much Is Enough?

No external evidence that even supports it? A bit of overstatement. Tactius makes reference to Jesus, and there are several early 2nd century writers who mention these events. Not early enough? And again, the descriptions of times, places, titles, customs, Roman presence, all fit that time. That is support, least.

An appeal to tradition is only to reference that the tradition helps to date the development of some event. A single tradition as opposed to several would help reinforce what actually happened.

JH

Tactius (56-120 CE) was not writing from an eyewitness view, but by information provided to him and the reference is vague and provides very little information. Annals, book 15 Chapter 44 was written about 115 CE. We don't know where Tactius got his information of an event some 75 years before, but we can be assured that it is not first hand

BH

But let me work on the earlier question of historicity. How do we know anything that happened in the ancient past? There is better manuscript evidence for the New Testament than for many of ancient writings. There is a 1400 year gap between the life of Sophocles and the earliest extant writings, same for Aristotle. Five hundred years for Homer's Iliad, and these have only a few manuscripts at that. There are more and better sources supporting the NT than these writers.

JH

I'll have to check on this. I don't think you're correct about the gaps here. Where did you get this information from?

The problem is, Sophocles and Aristotle didn't claim to be the son of God, die, and be resurrected. This is an extraordinary claim and demands extraordinary evidence.

If it was proven tomorrow that Sophocles didn't write what is attributed to him, so what? It wouldn't make one bit of difference. He didn't claim to raise the dead, be born of a virgin, or to be the messiah of his people.

There are no more and better sources supporting the NT. You're beginning to sound like Strobel.

BH

Thanks! Was I enumerating all possible supportive sources for the New Testament? So, you would assert that is better textual support for, say, the Illiad?

JH

I don't know, were you? Better textual support than what? The NT? There is no external textual support for either the NT or Iliad. (Nice trap, though)

BH

Dang. Anyway, what is the level of historical attestation required to suppose that events occurred more or less as described? Is history knowable at all? We have only indirect access to past events, records, reconstruction of records, therefore the historical past is not verifiable in the strictest sense. If we raise the level of skepticism high enough, history becomes only a statement of the current historian's viewpoint (who must select facts, arrange them, interpret them).

Years ago there was some doubt about Pontius Pilate. Then the "Pilate Inscriptions" were found in Caesarea...this is a form of textual support, is it not? I have already mentioned Tacitus, who mentions Christians named after Christus in his Annals. Suetonius who was chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian also mentions Chrestus and certain events attested in Acts. We have Josephus also, writing Antiquities in the 90's and he mentions James the brother of Jesus. Thallus writing in about 52 is quoted about the darkness after the crucifixion. Pliny the Younger (112) describes early Christian worship as it is described in the NT. The Talmud talks about the death of Yeshu (hard to know the dates of this though). Then there are numerous 2nd century and beyond historians that discuss various aspects of Christianity. These later ones aside, the earlier ones confirm what the NT says about Jesus being from Nazareth, his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, that his disciples believed he was resurrected, that he did miracles and some of the basic virtues of the Way. The question is where these writers got their material and why it is consistent with each other and with the NT.

But I think there is an assumption here about the Gospel writers as eye-witnesses to at some of the events and that is because they were close to the events and converted, they cannot be reliable. But they were there and it happened to them. It would be like going to court over a murder case and in the trial the attorney says in effect, "other than the four eye witnesses the case is weak."

JH

I don't like to raise my voice, but, THEY WEREN'T EYE WITNESSESS!!! And THEY WEREN'T THERE WHEN THESE THINGS WERE SUPPOSE TO HAVE HAPPENED. It's impossible to believe that they were and nothing you say can make them eyewitnesses, because, like Luke, they admit they are just relating what they were told by someone else.

BH

As long as we are shouting here, let's see. Peter and others saw him walk on the water. They were eyewitnesses to the multiplication of the bread. They were eye witnesses of the resurrection appearances.

JH:

Where did Peter write his observations of this miracle? In his letters? Where are the accounts of the eyewitnesses to the multiplication of the bread or resurrection appearances? Who were these eyewitnesses and where can we read, in their own words, about these events?

Again, Luke 1:1

1Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, 2Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; 3It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus....

Luke asserts that many before him have declared these things, yet names no one or any source. Luke claims these sources were eyewitnesses, but we have no reason to accept this since he names no one. Luke even goes as far as saying that "they" delivered this story from others who were eyewitnesses. You now have second-second hand admissions. Luke makes no mention that he was an eyewitness. Luke does claim he has a perfect understanding, yet we certainly have no reason to believe him or how he may have understood what he may have been told, by whom or when or where.

In other words, most excellent Theophilus, I am going to tell you a story that someone told somebody else, who told me, and you can trust me that what I tell you is true.

I've already dealt with Tacitus so I'll move on to your other sources.

Suetonius, a Roman, (69-122 CE) writing in 120 CE does make a reference to Chrestus, but not Jesus. In a chapter about Claudius (41-54 CE) who expelled Jews from Rome there is a reference to the influence of Chrestus. Was Chrestus in Rome?

Pliny the younger, a Roman, (61-113 CE) Pliny was the governor of Bithynia. In 112CE he asked Trajan about prosecuting who were honoring Christ. All this tell us is what we already know. There were Christians, in 112 worshiping Christ. No mention of Jesus.

BH

So who would this "Chrestus" be if not Christ- the title given to Jesus, some other Jew who stirred them up and got them expelled from Jerusalem?

JH

Thallus a pagan, whose writing dates are unknown. According to Scholar Richard Carrier: "We know next to nothing about Thallus or his works. We don't even know if he wrote only one book or several. The only information we have about him, even his name, comes entirely from Christian apologetic sources beginning in the late 2nd century..." "As for what Thallus wrote about, we are told by Eusebius, quoting Julius Africanus, that Thallus recorded Syrian history just as Castor did, which is consistent with other remarks by Tertullian placing Thallus among historians of Eastern events, and with several authors who cite Thallus on details of Assyrian history (Theophilus, Lactantius, George Syncellus) and with another who possibly cites him as an expert on Lydian affairs (Malalas). But Thallus is also listed among those who recorded Greek and Roman history, especially the deeds of Saturn in Italy (Tertullian, Lactantius, Minucius Felix). To confuse matters further, the late forger of a work in the name of Justin Martyr claims Thallus among those who mentioned Moses and the antiquity of the Jews in the context of Athenian history! This last can be dismissed, however, since the forged text is almost a word-for-word adulteration of a quote from Julius Africanus, which we have

more reliably preserved in the works of Eusebius, which merely lists Thallus, with Castor, as a reliable historian of Syrian affairs and nothing more."

There are no extant works of Thallus.

NOW, let's talk about some prominent writers, that traveled the empire, were articulate, and respected, and where we should find mention of Jesus. (Compiled from various sources.)

Seneca a Roman, (4 BCE-65 CE) Rome's greatest writer on ethics. Nothing of Jesus.

Pliney the Elder a Roman, (23-79CE) wrote on natural history recording earthquakes, eclipses and other phenomenon. Nothing of Jesus.

Pilate (in Jerusalem 23-36CE) no extant writing. Unusual for a man who somehow didn't think it was important to document all of these occurrences happening right under his nose. Maybe the early Christians destroyed any writings from Pilate since he was an eyewitness and they didn't like what he eyewitnessed.

Quintilian (39-95CE) Instituio Oratio: 12 books on ethics and morals. Nothing of Jesus.

Epictetus (55-135CE) Moralist. Wrote about the "Brotherhood of Man" and the virtues of helping the poor. Nothing of Jesus.

Martial a Roman (38-103CE) Wrote epic poetry and the people of the empire. Nothing of Jesus.

Juvenal a Roman (55-127CE) Satirical poet. Wrote about injustice and tragedy. Nothing of Jesus.

Plutarch a Greek (46-119CE) Wrote on morals and ethics. Nothing of Jesus.

Plilo-Judaeus Greek Jew. (15-50CE) Had relatives living in Jerusalem. Wrote on Jewish history and religion including some very gospel like theology such as God and his word are one, God as a spirit, the trinity, virgin birth and being saved, never mentions Jesus, even thought he was a contemporary of Jesus. Nothing about Jesus.

Now, lets look at those that should have been eyewitnesses:

Simon (who is called Peter) No writings

Andrew No writings

James son of Zebedee, No writings

John son of Zebedee No writings

Philip No writings

Bartholomew No writings

Thomas No writings

Matthew No writings

James No writings

Simon the Zealot No writings

Judas Iscariot (deceased)

Matthias No writings.

Doesn't it strike you as a bit absurd that not one of these men, the ones closest to the actual events ever wrote one word about Jesus? Or that Jesus never wrote one sentence himself? Not only that, there is nothing to indicate that they ever commissioned someone to write their story. Luke is written for Theophilus. Matthew makes no mention of whom he's writing for or that he is indeed the disciple. Mark says nothing and John says nothing about authorship, but the polished Greek that John uses certainly isn't that of an itinerant fisherman from Galilee.

Paul. Ah, Paul. Here is someone, who should have been in or around Jerusalem at the time that seems to know absolutely nothing about a historical Jesus or even cares. But this is another story.

I have heard it said "...for many years doubters disputed the New Testament accounts concerning Pontius Pilate. No hard artifact evidence existed confirming his existence and position..." This is terribly distorted. No serious scholar ever doubted the existence of Pilate as a governor of Judea even if the Roman records are scanty. His exploits recorded by Josephus (The Jewish War 2.175-177; War 2:169 ff; or Antiquities 18.60-62) seem to have enough bona fide information, as does Tacitus. What is in dispute is the character of Pilate as portrayed in the gospels vs. his real character or why the NT authors used him instead of another governor (procurator). Why would we assume that Rome would keep such detail notes on a minor procurator in a backwater province of a huge empire? This position is simply not tenable.

BH

Mother Mary, where is her recording of these events, right? And Zachariah, he should have written something, and especially John the Baptist. The Centurion at the cross, I'd love to see his diary. Why isn't there just more written? Perhaps Jewish fishermen were not into writing. Perhaps Greek and Roman philosophers and poets were not interested in what was then still an obscure Jew.

Given the thrust of your argument, one could conclude that not much of anything happened in and around Jerusalem, yet suddenly, Christianity seems to burst out of the gates. Guess these guys just missed the Big Story.

The Christian claim is not that skeptics do not accept that Pilate was governor but that skeptics reject the claim that Pilate tried Jesus as described in the Gospels. But this discussion of the character of Pilate can be laborious, is this where we really want to go? He is a complex figure to be sure, as other secular writings also show. I am also glad that you count Josephus and Tacitus as trustworthy sources, as Josephus also mentions James and Jesus.

JH:

That's not what the statement "No hard artifact evidence existed confirming his existence and position" means. Skeptic's question the claim that Pilate tried Jesus as described in the Gospels because the character of Pilate in the Gospels vs. his real character are very different. I didn't say Josephus and Tacitus were trustworthy sources. Do you think they are trustworthy sources?

BHTrustworthy enough, as you cited them above, they seem to have bona fide information in their writings. Where do we know about the "real" character of Pilate?

JH

*Then do you accept the miracles as recorded by Josephus such as a heifer giving birth to a lamb? (*Wars 5-3 (292*). Would you like me to point out the numerous errors in his writings such as apparently thinking that Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar's son (*(Antiquities, *10:11.4)? Josephus gives a good description of Pilate's character whether or not this is accurate, it is in some opposition to the Pilate of the gospels.*

Using the same argument, where is the evidence for the existence of Jesus? The lack of any objective historical evidence or hard artifact is embarrassing for believers. (Tu Quoque, I know, but it was fun.)

BH

Yes, tu quoque...it is kind of like saying my position may be bad but should be accepted because it is not as bad as my opponents. You have probably read the G.A. Wells book entitled something like Did Jesus Ever Exist. I admit I have not, but I understand it is popular with the Atheist group, maybe not, I really don't know. I believe he was not a historian at all, and that much of what he wrote has been refuted- but then again refuted by whose standards? Michael Grant, a non Christian historian has covered some of this. See <