

THAT'S A GREAT QUESTION

WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOUR FAITH IS CHALLENGED



G L E N N
P E A R S O N

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T H A T ' S A G R E A T Q U E S T I O N

2.1 IF THAT WEREN'T ENOUGH EVIDENCE ...

So far we have looked exclusively at Jesus' own statements and actions about himself and the reactions of those who knew him, both friends and enemies. Now, let's briefly look at what other New Testament writers said about Jesus. What additional information can we gather?

- The gospel of John begins with this statement about Jesus: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Verse 14 of this same chapter says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," plainly identifying Jesus as "the Word." So the writer of John clearly states that Jesus was God.
- In John 20:28, the infamous "Doubting Thomas" declares Jesus "my Lord and my God" after beholding the evidence of his physical resurrection. Rather than correcting Thomas' exuberant exclamation, Jesus acknowledges it and accepts Thomas' worship. Jesus' strict Old Testament upbringing would have forced him to correct Thomas if he mistakenly called Jesus "God."
- The apostle Paul refers to Jesus as "our great God and Savior" (Titus 2:13).
- According to Colossians 2:9, also written by the apostle Paul, "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Notice he doesn't say he was a great guy, or even that he was somehow divine. He says "all the fullness of Deity" dwells in him.

4.1 MORE FILTER FOLLIES

In 1980, George H. Smith published a book in the Skeptic's Bookshelf series titled *Atheism: The Case Against God*. Now I ask you, since the stated objective of his book is to build a case against God, what type of presuppositions do you think Smith brought to the writing of his book? His treatment of one particular contradiction in the Gospels reveals, I believe, more about his mind-set than it does about the presumed problem with the stories.

The author hypothesizes that the gospel accounts hint that Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker evolved after his death. In other words, Jesus had no miraculous powers, but his followers attributed them to him after he died. Almost all skeptical writers share this view. Most biblical scholars agree that the gospel of Mark was written first, followed by Matthew and then Luke. Smith perceives a progression in these three writings. He invites us to compare the three versions of mass healings early in Jesus' ministry:

THAT EVENING AFTER SUNSET THE PEOPLE BROUGHT TO JESUS ALL THE SICK AND DEMON-POSSESSED. THE WHOLE TOWN GATHERED AT THE DOOR, AND JESUS HEALED MANY WHO HAD VARIOUS DISEASES. HE ALSO DROVE OUT MANY DEMONS. (MARK 1:32-34)

WHEN EVENING CAME, MANY WHO WERE DEMON-POSSESSED WERE BROUGHT TO HIM, AND HE DROVE OUT THE SPIRITS WITH A WORD AND HEALED ALL THE SICK. (MATT. 8:16)

WHEN THE SUN WAS SETTING, THE PEOPLE BROUGHT TO JESUS ALL WHO HAD VARIOUS KINDS OF SICKNESS, AND LAYING HIS HANDS ON EACH ONE, HE HEALED THEM. (LUKE 4:40)

A casual reading of these three accounts reveals that they are very similar with no material differences. All three writers communicate that there were many sick and demon-possessed people who came to Jesus. Furthermore, he didn't fail to heal any he intended to make well. However, Smith detects a progression in the three accounts from the less miraculous to the more miraculous. In Mark's account (probably the oldest), *all* were brought to Jesus and *many* were healed. In Matthew's story (probably the second oldest), *many* were brought and *all* were healed. And in Luke's version (the last to be written), *all* were brought and *each one* was healed. Smith concludes, "The miracle keeps getting better all the time."¹

Now, forgive me for taking issue with this argument, but I think Smith assumes word precision beyond the authors' intentions. His argument rests entirely in the perceived difference between the words *all* and *many*. Mark and Luke state that "all" the sick were brought to Jesus. Does that mean every single last person? Mark also states that "the whole town gathered at the door." Is it possible that there was one person who didn't go to see Jesus? Did Matthew, Mark, or Luke have testimony from an eyewitness who actually walked the town taking a census of the entire population to determine if "all" the sick really went? If they didn't have access to that level of authentication, should they have refrained from using the word *all*?

Let's suppose for a moment that just one ill person from the town failed to make the pilgrimage to see Jesus. Would this make the statement that "all" the sick were brought to him untrue? Technically, yes, but in the context of these stories, this distinction is immaterial. Mark and Luke are obviously using the term *all* as a broad statement indicating that virtually everyone went to see him, not in a scientific or statistical manner (as in 100 percent). Their use of the term in this context was not intended to mean that if even one person didn't go, they couldn't use the term *all*. Smith sees significance in the fact that "all" came according to Mark but that only "many" were healed.

Allow me to describe a parallel situation, and you tell me if Smith's argument holds. Let's say I belong to a cycling club that meets every Saturday morning for a forty-mile ride. There is a pool of about fifty people in the group, and about twenty-five to thirty ride on any given Saturday, depending on schedules, the weather, etc. One day, there is a tremendous buzz on our Internet list-server. Lance Armstrong, all-time Tour de France champion, is actually coming to our club and is going to ride with us! (Don't ask me why he would ride with a bunch of duffers, but humor me. It makes for a good illustration.) After the ride, I describe the event like this in a letter to a friend: "Lance Armstrong came to our cycling club last week. *Everybody* went on that ride and, let me tell you, there were many happy riders that day!"

Now, what if just one person in the club didn't make it because he was sick? Does that make my statement about "everybody" riding incorrect? As above, technically it does, but in reality, this "inaccuracy" has no impact. Does that fact that I said there were "many" happy riders that day imply that some were not happy? If I were reading this account with the same type of filter that Smith is using to read the Gospels, it could. He assigns more significance to these words than common sense would allow.

5.1 WHICH IS MORE RELIABLE: THE THEORY OR THE EVIDENCE?

Even as we were going through my college religion class session that dealt with what Jesus thought of himself I felt it was a bit lacking in intellectual honesty. But there was a subsequent lecture that even outstripped this one. It had to do with Jesus' response before the high priest of Israel during one of his trials.

As I said earlier, the prevailing view held by most scholars—skeptics and Bible advocates alike—is that, of the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., the first three), Mark was written first and Matthew and Luke were written later. Mark tends to be very direct and to the point in his writing. He wrote primarily for a Roman mind-set, and his book is very macho and *Braveheart*-like. He doesn't include a lot of poetry and has few parables. The key word to describe the gospel of Mark is *action*.

There are many examples where Mark's version of the same story is more Spartan than those of the other two synoptic writers. One instance is where Peter declares Jesus to be the Christ (see Mark 8:27–30; cf. Matt. 16:13–16; Luke 9:18–21).

Since most Bible experts agree that Mark probably wrote first and that the other two writers were familiar with the oldest of the Gospels, it is even possible that Matthew and/or Luke had Mark's gospel in front of them as they wrote. I don't have a problem with this theory. However, the skeptics take a next step, and this is where I hop off. They claim that since Mark is "simpler" in how it records the events in Jesus' life, since the other two add details missing from Mark, and since Mark is the oldest, this means that Mark's gospel must be more reliable than the later ones. In other words, in a dispute over wording or details, Mark should "trump" Matthew and Luke. Furthermore, as we saw in the case of George Smith who imputed great significance to the difference between the words *many* and *all*, skeptics contend that some of the details that Matthew and Luke add were injected to make Jesus look more divine. This additional information, therefore, is not authentic, or at least not *as* authentic (whatever that means).

Bible advocates reject that model. We believe there is adequate evidence that all three Synoptic Gospels (and also the gospel of John for that matter) are divinely inspired and, therefore, completely reliable. But for the sake of argument, let's accept this theory for now. To restate it, Mark is older and more "reliable" than either Matthew or Luke, and the latter two writers have a tendency to embellish details of Jesus' life to make him look more supernatural than he does in the more accurate Mark.

Unfortunately for the skeptics, there is a story that glaringly contradicts their theory. That is the account of Jesus before the high priest during his trial. A comparison of the three gospel accounts shows that this particular story doesn't fit the skeptics' model. In fact, it shows precisely the opposite.

This example is a bit elaborate to follow, but I ask you to hang with me. It's worth it. Here is the question asked of Jesus by the high priest at one of the trials: "Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?'" (Mark 14:61 ESV).

Here are the answers as recorded by each writer as presented in the *English Standard Version*, which tends to be more literal and word-for-word than some other translations:

- Mark: "And Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven'" (14:62). Mark goes on to record the high priest's reaction to this incredible assertion: "And the high priest tore his garments and said, 'What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?' And they all condemned him as deserving death" (vv. 63–64).
- Matthew: "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (26:64).
- Luke: "And he said to them, 'You say that I am.' Then they said, 'What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.'" (22:70–71).

Let's look at details to see how they vary:

- In Mark, Jesus clearly answers yes in a totally unambiguous way.
- In Matthew, he says, "You have said so." Skeptics sometimes interpret this as Jesus' denial: "I didn't say so, you did."
- In Luke, Jesus answers in a way that is similar to the Matthew version. Notice too that the religious officials interpreted this as a clear affirmative. They decided they didn't need additional witnesses since they heard Jesus' "blasphemy" from his own lips.

Regardless of the possible ambiguity of Jesus' answer in Matthew and Luke, Mark records Jesus' additional statement, "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). Matthew and Luke include very similar words. This comment about the Son of Man, power and the clouds of heaven is strange. What does it mean?

It's a reference to Daniel 7:13–14, which was written hundreds of years before Jesus lived. Let's look at that passage:

IN MY VISION AT NIGHT I LOOKED, AND THERE BEFORE ME WAS ONE LIKE A SON OF MAN, COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN. HE APPROACHED THE ANCIENT OF DAYS AND WAS LED INTO HIS PRESENCE. HE WAS GIVEN AUTHORITY, GLORY AND SOVEREIGN POWER; ALL PEOPLES, NATIONS AND MEN OF EVERY LANGUAGE WORSHIPED HIM. HIS DOMINION IS AN EVERLASTING DOMINION THAT WILL NOT PASS AWAY, AND HIS KINGDOM IS ONE THAT WILL NEVER BE DESTROYED.

Notice the two major similarities between the Daniel account and the gospel versions. Both describe someone who is a son of man and the fact that this person will be coming with the clouds of heaven. Daniel's version goes on to describe the Son of Man's authority, glory, sovereign power, dominion, and everlasting kingdom.

When Jesus, who repeatedly called himself the "Son of Man," tells the high priest that the Son of Man will come with the clouds of heaven, is there any doubt that he is applying Daniel 7 to himself? Since some of the skeptics try to say that when Jesus used this title, he was not necessarily always applying it to himself, let's see whether or not those who heard Jesus that day thought he was referring to himself. What was the reaction of the high priest?

AND THE HIGH PRIEST TORE HIS GARMENTS AND SAID, "WHAT FURTHER WITNESSES DO WE NEED? YOU HAVE HEARD HIS BLASPHEMY. WHAT IS YOUR DECISION?" AND THEY ALL CONDEMNED HIM AS DESERVING DEATH. (MARK 14:63–64 ESV)

In Jewish culture, when a religious official heard what he considered to be blasphemy, he tore his garments to show his extreme distress over the way that God's name had been dishonored.² The high priest's action shows that he clearly interpreted Jesus' response as blasphemy, and the other officials concurred since they all condemned him to death.

So even if Jesus' response to the question about whether he was the Son of God could be considered a bit ambiguous in Matthew and Luke, Jesus' reference to the Son of Man passage in Daniel was a clear assertion of his divinity, a fact demonstrated by the response of the high priest and the others. How can anyone who understands the Daniel 7 context of the phrase "son of man" and reads the account of Jesus before the high priest come to any conclusion other than that Jesus was claiming divinity? Apparently, the skeptics can, but it requires viewing the text through the Filter of Antisupernaturalism.

ANOTHER PROBLEM FOR THE SKEPTICS

Beyond the fact that this story in context leaves no doubt that Jesus considered himself to be more than a mortal person, it also presents another problem for the critics. Remember, the theory is that the relatively simpler Mark was

written first and was elaborated on by Matthew and Luke who wrote later. Go back and read Jesus' response to the high priest's question about whether or not he is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed:

- "I am" in Mark
- "You have said so" in Matthew
- "You say that I am" in Luke

Although all three responses are affirmative, Mark's answer is obviously the least ambiguous. This presents the skeptics with an interesting dilemma. Mark is supposed to be the *least* supernatural of the three and the others are supposed to embellish his accounts. Here we have just the opposite. How can this be? What's a skeptic to do?

Professor Jackson had a rather novel way of dealing with this challenge. He admitted that Jesus' response in Mark's account is totally unambiguous and that it is more clear than the other two, but he got around the problem by wondering out loud if possibly Mark's account was "biased." He suggested that perhaps a later scribe tampered with Mark's original text—which may have been less direct—and changed it to a clear yes.

When I heard this, I just about fell out of my chair! Here was indisputable evidence that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of the Most High, and it was being explained away because it didn't conform to the critics' theory that Mark *can't* be more specific about Jesus' supernatural nature than Matthew and Luke are. The facts don't match the theory, so rather than throw out the theory, skeptics cast doubt on the facts! This is absolutely unbelievable!

According to Dr. Bill Warren, director of the Center for New Testament Textual Studies, a mere .5 percent of the New Testament verses have serious-enough manuscript variations to cast doubt on the original wordings. Almost all Bibles indicate the major textual variations by providing the most common alternative in a footnote.³ To the best of my knowledge, there is no evidence of any material variant readings of these verses in Mark. In other words, even though there are hundreds of very old manuscripts of the gospel of Mark, there is no evidence that Jesus' clear "I am" in Mark was tampered with or that it ever read any other way.

The only thing I can conclude is that the critics have "invented" a possible problem with the text to get around a weakness in their theory. Skeptics often charge biblical literalists with trying to force-fit interpretations to accommodate their theological theories (i.e., because they believe the Bible is true, they downplay or ignore problems so they can continue to live in their dream world). I don't think literalists are the only ones open to this accusation!

7.1 THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

Here's something else to think about as you consider whether it's reasonable to settle for one good explanation. I can't possibly know *every* fact about *every* challenging passage. Neither can you. And you shouldn't have to. There are a few people who devote their entire professional careers to understanding and explaining the Bible. I don't happen to be one of them, but that doesn't mean I can't reason through some of the more difficult passages.

About twenty years ago, I realized that the weight of the entire theological world does not rest on my shoulders. What a relief! I have had countless conversations with family members, friends, and strangers over the years who espouse a variety of philosophical and theological positions: the Bahá'í faith, Judaism, skepticism, New Age philosophy, indifference, Unitarianism, and many others. And every conversation—just like every individual—is unique. In general, what is crucial to the New Ager is irrelevant to the skeptic, and vice versa. Jehovah's Witnesses usually listen to arguments based on the Bible while atheists seldom do. Although my objective should be to effectively communicate the Christian message to people of various faith (or nonfaith) backgrounds, the fact that someone may be able to throw me a tough question that I can't answer does not mean that Christianity is a failed worldview. My responsibility is to be reasonably informed about what the Bible teaches and, as I get further into the Christian faith, to learn how to

answer some of the basic issues raised by the people I meet.

Let me be careful to state that I shouldn't take the easy way out by glibly saying that answers to these challenging questions don't really matter. They do. The entire premise of *That's a Great Question* is that it is possible to believe in the reliability of the Bible while maintaining your intellectual integrity. However, I shouldn't feel that the entire Christian faith worldwide would crumble if I find a few apparently contradictory Bible verses that I can't personally explain.

So relax. As nice as it would be to always provide the "perfect" answer to every challenge to the Bible's truth, if I can find just one reasonable explanation, I can "x" that verse off the Ultimate Master List. My conclusion may or may not be what actually happened, but as long as it is sensible, I've met the threshold of Principle 2: Settle for one reasonable explanation.

8.1 THE TIME OF THE CRUCIFIXION

Let's consider one last chronology problem: At what hour was Jesus crucified? Mark reports that it was the "third" hour (15:25), while John indicates that Jesus' trial before Pilate was still going on "about the sixth" hour (19:14). According to Mark's version, a great darkness came over the land while Jesus was on the cross at the sixth hour and remained until the ninth hour (15:33). Virtually all scholars agree that Mark followed the time system then in use that began numbering the hours at sunrise (i.e., 6:00 a.m.). So Mark reports that Jesus was crucified at 9:00 a.m. and that the darkness lasted from noon until 3:00 p.m.

According to Gleason Archer, John was probably following the Roman approach, which starts the hours' numbering at midnight (like the current Western system). This meant that Jesus' trial before Pilate would be winding down early in the morning, sometime after 6:00 a.m., which would make the crucifixion at 9:00 a.m. very reasonable.⁴ Thus, John's chronology is consistent with Mark's.

Robert Stein offers another possible explanation for reconciling Mark's and John's handlings of time based on how the ancients viewed time. He points out that the day was commonly divided into four periods: 6:00 to 9:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m. to noon, noon to 3:00 p.m., and 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. The standard way of referring to time is as the third, sixth, and ninth hours with the periods in between being rounded to one of those three designations. An event that took place late in the morning might be rounded off to "the third hour" (i.e., 9:00 a.m. to noon) by one and "the sixth hour" (noon until 3:00 p.m.) by another. Notice that John describes Jesus' appearance before Pilate as being "about" the sixth hour, contributing additional fuzz.⁵ Is it any wonder that twenty-first-century minds have difficulty pinning down precise timelines?

8.2 WHO CARRIED THE CROSS?

Some have detected a contradiction between Matthew's and John's accounts of who carried the cross to the site of the crucifixion. The two versions read as follows:

- As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. (Matt. 27:32)
- Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). (John 19:17)

Did Jesus carry his own cross? According to John, yes. Did Simon from Cyrene carry the cross? According to Matthew, yes. If you think about it for four nanoseconds, you realize that the only way these two accounts could be

considered in opposition to each other would be if Matthew said something like “Simon carried the cross *but Jesus didn’t*” or if John said, “No one else *but Jesus* carried the cross.” Of course, neither account says this, so there is no evidence of a contradiction. By definition, a contradiction requires two separate statements asserting noncompatible or mutually exclusive facts.

The traditional way to harmonize these passages is to assume that Jesus carried his cross part of the way (which was typical of the Romans’ process of crucifixion) and that Simon was pressed into service somewhere along the way to help.⁶ That is a reasonable explanation. Problem solved.

8.3 OTHER MESS-UPS

There are other instances in the Bible where even the heroes were wrong about their ideas and the actions that flowed from those ideas.

1. Back in the Old Testament book of Judges, Gideon (whose faith was initially rather flimsy) put God to the test by asking him to confirm his will through a sign. God had already told Gideon that he would use him to deliver Israel from her enemies. Despite an apparently clear promise from God, Gideon asks for a confirming sign by putting a woolen fleece on the floor of a threshing room and asking God to make the fleece wet with dew but to keep the ground dry the next morning. If that happens, Gideon says, he will know that God will really save Israel through him. When God complies, Gideon audaciously asks for the sign to be repeated the next day, only in reverse: Keep the fleece dry, but make the ground wet. Despite Gideon’s rickety faith, God surprisingly complies with the requests and continues to use Gideon mightily (6:36–40). Partially because the author of Judges doesn’t include any indication that Gideon’s performance was less than stellar, many Christians over the centuries have followed Gideon’s lead and “laid out a fleece” before God to seek his guidance. Most Bible scholars consider this a sign of spiritual immaturity and would not advocate Gideon’s technique for discerning God’s will.

2. The prophet Elijah himself went into a fit of depression right after God used him in a supernatural way to defeat a group of pagan priests. When the wicked queen Jezebel “put out a contract” on Elijah’s life, the prophet ran for his life and complained to God:

I HAVE BEEN VERY ZEALOUS FOR THE LORD GOD ALMIGHTY. THE ISRAELITES HAVE REJECTED YOUR COVENANT, BROKEN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND PUT YOUR PROPHETS TO DEATH WITH THE SWORD. I AM THE ONLY ONE LEFT, AND NOW THEY ARE TRYING TO KILL ME TOO. (1 KINGS 19:10)

Despite the fact that he was a powerful prophet who could often see things no one else could, Elijah himself had his own blind spot. He failed to see that God still had seven thousand faithful prophets (v. 18).

3. The apostle Paul’s New Testament letter to the church in Galatia records an interesting spat he had with Peter. Paul describes Peter’s hypocritical behavior regarding fraternizing with non-Jewish Christians. Paul, who was never one to walk away from a good theological fistfight, publicly confronted Peter by saying, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (Gal. 2:14). So even Peter, after Jesus’ resurrection, was capable of making mistakes.

The fact that there are many examples in the Bible of godly people being wrong about their words or actions paves the way for the possibility that John the Baptist was wrong when he denied being Elijah, especially since Jesus specifically said that he was Elijah (Matt. 17:11–13).

9.1 CAN'T YOU COUNT?

Another famous alleged discrepancy surrounds Jesus' healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus outside the city of Jericho as recorded in Matthew 20:29–34, Mark 10:46–52, and Luke 18:35–43. These stories have actually spawned two points of controversy: How many blind men were healed, and did this incident happen as Jesus was entering or leaving Jericho? Matthew and Mark indicate that this event took place while Jesus and the disciples were leaving Jericho, while Luke indicates that it was as he approached the city. Furthermore, Matthew describes two blind men, while Mark and Luke mention only one. Are these irreconcilable problems?

No, but it is a tough challenge. The differences in the details seem pretty significant. I have to admit, I couldn't think up a very good answer on my own. This is one of those cases where good reference materials can help.

Harvard-trained seminary professor Gleason Archer provides a novel solution in his book *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. He suggests that the blind men first addressed Jesus as he approached the city but were unsuccessful in flagging him down. Jesus continued on to Jericho where he met with Zacchaeus and taught a parable. It was as Jesus left the city that the blind men finally got his attention and were subsequently healed. Archer also suggests that perhaps Bartimaeus was alone when Jesus entered the city and that, by the time Jesus passed his way again, Bartimaeus had been joined by a second blind beggar. Since Bartimaeus was apparently the more vocal of the two, Jesus spoke only to him even though he healed both men.⁷ So Archer's explanation deals effectively with both the question of when the incident occurred and how many blind men there were.

Orville Daniel offers an alternative explanation about when this took place. He points out that there was an old city of Jericho and a new one. Daniel suggests that Jesus may have been leaving the old city (as reported by Matthew and Mark) and entering the new city (as reported by Luke).⁸ So Jesus would have been both leaving Jericho and entering Jericho.

We now have two reasonable explanations. Have we met the criterion of Principle 2 about offering one reasonable explanation? I think so.

A BIGGER CONFLICT

Some of the examples we've looked at so far have involved relatively minor discrepancies: whether Jesus spoke from a mountain or a plain, who asked Jesus questions, etc. Now here's a pretty big one: How did Judas (the bad guy) die? According to Matthew, Judas hanged himself (27:5), but according to Luke, he "fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out" (Acts 1:18). This seems like a pretty obvious contradiction.

Skeptics love this one, and if we are honest and searching for the truth we should want a good explanation ourselves. Josh McDowell and Don Stewart point out that Matthew didn't say that Judas didn't fall, and Luke didn't say that Judas didn't hang himself. A possible reconstruction is that Judas hanged himself on a tree growing on the edge of the Valley of Hinnom, and that after his body hung there for a while, the branch from which he dangled snapped, causing his body to tumble the twenty-five to forty feet from the edge of the cliff, mangling it on the rocks or on other trees, with the gory result that Luke describes.⁹

9.2 THE AMAZING MORPHING PARABLE

Now let's look at a fresh example of how a scholar, who I believe is also blinded by his filters, develops an outlandish theory that disintegrates once we scrutinize the details. This one comes from Bishop John Shelby Spong's national best seller *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. I guess with a title like that, it's not too hard to detect his view of the Bible. Spong speculates that perhaps the writer John got a bit carried away and turned one of Jesus' stories that was clearly

intended to be a parable, the account of the rich man and Lazarus, into a literal resurrection account of Jesus' friend Lazarus. "One must ... wonder ... whether the Johannine narrative about the raising of Lazarus (John 11:43) was anything more than this author's meditation on the parable of Lazarus and the rich man that Luke alone of the Synoptic Gospels records" (Luke 16:20ff).¹⁰

This is an interesting theory. First, let's read both stories, and then we will look at similarities and differences.

NOW A MAN NAMED LAZARUS WAS SICK. HE WAS FROM BETHANY, THE VILLAGE OF MARY AND HER SISTER MARTHA. THIS MARY, WHOSE BROTHER LAZARUS NOW LAY SICK, WAS THE SAME ONE WHO Poured PERFUME ON THE LORD AND WIPED HIS FEET WITH HER HAIR. SO THE SISTERS SENT WORD TO JESUS, "LORD, THE ONE YOU LOVE IS SICK."

WHEN HE HEARD THIS, JESUS SAID, "THIS SICKNESS WILL NOT END IN DEATH. NO, IT IS FOR GOD'S GLORY SO THAT GOD'S SON MAY BE GLORIFIED THROUGH IT." JESUS LOVED MARTHA AND HER SISTER AND LAZARUS. YET WHEN HE HEARD THAT LAZARUS WAS SICK, HE STAYED WHERE HE WAS TWO MORE DAYS.

THEN HE SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES, "LET US GO BACK TO JUDEA." ...

ON HIS ARRIVAL, JESUS FOUND THAT LAZARUS HAD ALREADY BEEN IN THE TOMB FOR FOUR DAYS. BETHANY WAS LESS THAN TWO MILES FROM JERUSALEM, AND MANY JEWS HAD COME TO MARTHA AND MARY TO COMFORT THEM IN THE LOSS OF THEIR BROTHER. WHEN MARTHA HEARD THAT JESUS WAS COMING, SHE WENT OUT TO MEET HIM, BUT MARY STAYED AT HOME.

"LORD," MARTHA SAID TO JESUS, "IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED. BUT I KNOW THAT EVEN NOW GOD WILL GIVE YOU WHATEVER YOU ASK."

JESUS SAID TO HER, "YOUR BROTHER WILL RISE AGAIN."

MARTHA ANSWERED, "I KNOW HE WILL RISE AGAIN IN THE RESURRECTION AT THE LAST DAY."

JESUS SAID TO HER, "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL LIVE, EVEN THOUGH HE DIES; AND WHOEVER LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE. DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?"

"YES, LORD," SHE TOLD HIM, "I BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, WHO WAS TO COME INTO THE WORLD."

AND AFTER SHE HAD SAID THIS, SHE WENT BACK AND CALLED HER SISTER MARY ASIDE. "THE TEACHER IS HERE," SHE SAID, "AND IS ASKING FOR YOU." WHEN MARY HEARD THIS, SHE GOT UP QUICKLY AND WENT TO HIM. NOW JESUS HAD NOT YET ENTERED THE VILLAGE, BUT WAS STILL AT THE PLACE WHERE MARTHA HAD MET HIM. WHEN THE JEWS WHO HAD BEEN WITH MARY IN THE HOUSE, COMFORTING HER, NOTICED HOW QUICKLY SHE GOT UP AND WENT OUT, THEY FOLLOWED HER, SUPPOSING SHE WAS GOING TO THE TOMB TO MOURN THERE.

WHEN MARY REACHED THE PLACE WHERE JESUS WAS AND SAW HIM, SHE FELL AT HIS FEET AND SAID, "LORD, IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE, MY BROTHER WOULD NOT HAVE DIED."

WHEN JESUS SAW HER WEEPING, AND THE JEWS WHO HAD COME ALONG WITH HER ALSO WEEPING, HE WAS DEEPLY MOVED IN SPIRIT AND TROUBLED. "WHERE HAVE YOU LAID HIM?" HE ASKED.

"COME AND SEE, LORD," THEY REPLIED.

JESUS WEPT.

THEN THE JEWS SAID, "SEE HOW HE LOVED HIM!"

BUT SOME OF THEM SAID, "COULD NOT HE WHO OPENED THE EYES OF THE BLIND MAN HAVE KEPT THIS MAN FROM DYING?"

JESUS, ONCE MORE DEEPLY MOVED, CAME TO THE TOMB. IT WAS A CAVE WITH A STONE LAID ACROSS THE ENTRANCE. "TAKE AWAY THE STONE," HE SAID.

"BUT, LORD," SAID MARTHA, THE SISTER OF THE DEAD MAN, "BY THIS TIME THERE IS A BAD ODOR, FOR HE HAS BEEN THERE FOUR DAYS."

THEN JESUS SAID, "DID I NOT TELL YOU THAT IF YOU BELIEVED, YOU WOULD SEE THE GLORY OF GOD?"

SO THEY TOOK AWAY THE STONE. THEN JESUS LOOKED UP AND SAID, "FATHER, I THANK YOU THAT YOU HAVE HEARD ME. I KNEW THAT YOU ALWAYS HEAR ME, BUT I SAID THIS FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE PEOPLE STANDING HERE, THAT THEY MAY BELIEVE THAT YOU SENT ME."

WHEN HE HAD SAID THIS, JESUS CALLED IN A LOUD VOICE, "LAZARUS, COME OUT!" THE DEAD MAN CAME OUT, HIS HANDS AND FEET WRAPPED WITH STRIPS OF LINEN, AND A CLOTH AROUND HIS FACE.

JESUS SAID TO THEM, "TAKE OFF THE GRAVE CLOTHES AND LET HIM GO."

THEREFORE MANY OF THE JEWS WHO HAD COME TO VISIT MARY, AND HAD SEEN WHAT JESUS DID, PUT THEIR FAITH IN HIM. (JOHN 11:1-7, 17-45)

Now let's read the parable upon which Spong speculates this account is based.

THERE WAS A RICH MAN WHO WAS DRESSED IN PURPLE AND FINE LINEN AND LIVED IN LUXURY EVERY DAY. AT HIS GATE WAS LAID A BEGGAR NAMED LAZARUS, COVERED WITH SORES AND LONGING TO EAT WHAT FELL FROM THE RICH MAN'S TABLE. EVEN THE DOGS CAME AND LICKED HIS SORES.

THE TIME CAME WHEN THE BEGGAR DIED AND THE ANGELS CARRIED HIM TO ABRAHAM'S SIDE. THE RICH MAN ALSO DIED AND WAS BURIED. IN HELL, WHERE HE WAS IN TORMENT, HE LOOKED UP AND SAW ABRAHAM FAR AWAY, WITH LAZARUS BY HIS SIDE. SO HE CALLED TO HIM, "FATHER ABRAHAM, HAVE PITY ON ME AND SEND LAZARUS TO DIP THE TIP OF HIS FINGER IN WATER AND COOL MY TONGUE, BECAUSE I AM IN AGONY IN THIS FIRE."

BUT ABRAHAM REPLIED, "SON, REMEMBER THAT IN YOUR LIFETIME YOU RECEIVED YOUR GOOD THINGS, WHILE LAZARUS RECEIVED BAD THINGS, BUT NOW HE IS COMFORTED HERE AND YOU ARE IN AGONY. AND BESIDES ALL THIS, BETWEEN US AND YOU A GREAT CHASM HAS BEEN FIXED, SO THAT THOSE WHO WANT TO GO FROM HERE TO YOU CANNOT, NOR CAN ANYONE CROSS OVER FROM THERE TO US."

HE ANSWERED, "THEN I BEG YOU, FATHER, SEND LAZARUS TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE, FOR I HAVE FIVE BROTHERS. LET HIM WARN THEM, SO THAT THEY WILL NOT ALSO COME TO THIS PLACE OF TORMENT."

ABRAHAM REPLIED, "THEY HAVE MOSES AND THE PROPHETS; LET THEM LISTEN TO THEM."

"NO, FATHER ABRAHAM," HE SAID, "BUT IF SOMEONE FROM THE DEAD GOES TO THEM, THEY WILL REPENT."

HE SAID TO HIM, "IF THEY DO NOT LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS, THEY WILL NOT BE CONVINCED EVEN IF SOMEONE RISES FROM THE DEAD." (LUKE 16:19-31)

Let's start by looking at the similarities. I observe three:

1. Both stories are in the Bible.
2. Both have a character named Lazarus.
3. In both accounts, the character named Lazarus dies.

That's about it. I can't find any others.

Now, let's look at the differences:

1. One is told as a parable, the other presented as historical account. After the historical "set-up" (Luke 16:19-23), the parable appears to be just that: a parable with few historical details. It consists mostly of dialogue between Abraham and the rich man. By way of contrast, John's historical account has many details that suggest eyewitness reporting:

- The comment about Jesus' love for the three siblings (John 11:5)
- The geographical observation that Jerusalem and Bethany are less than two miles apart (v. 18)
- The details of the crowds who had gathered for Lazarus' funeral (vv. 17-20)
- The rather extended conversations Jesus had with Martha and Mary (vv. 21-32)

- The fact that the writer specifically placed these conversations outside the village (v. 30)
- The detailed reaction of the Jews who were with Mary upon seeing her leave to talk with Jesus: When they “noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there” (v. 31)
- The fact that Mary fell at Jesus’ feet when she reached the place where he was (v. 32)
- Jesus’ compassion and tears upon seeing the weeping of Mary and the others (vv. 33–35)
- The detailed description of Lazarus emerging from the tomb: “The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face” (v. 44)

These specifics point to an eyewitness author with no hint that it is anything other than what it purports to be: an account of an actual historical event.

2. In the parable, Lazarus was a beggar who apparently spent his days at the rich man’s gate. In the historical account, he appears to have had some degree of financial means.

- John’s Lazarus lived in a village with his sisters Mary and Martha. Mary is the one who poured perfume on Jesus and wiped it with her hair as reported in Mark 14. The disciples considered her action extravagant since the perfume “could have been sold for a year’s wages and the money given to the poor” (v. 5). It is possible or even likely that this was her perfume. If that is the case, Lazarus and his family were far from destitute.
- Luke reports that it was Mary who “opened her home” to Jesus and it was Martha who was distracted with all the preparations of feeding a relatively large group (10:38–42). They had both a sufficiently large home and the financial means to host a good-sized party. So once again, there are clear indications that this was a relatively well-to-do family.
- The conclusion? The Lazarus written about in John does not appear to be a destitute beggar as was the Lazarus of the parable.

3. In the parable, Lazarus does *not* come back to life. It was talked about it, and the rich man asks for it to take place, *but it doesn’t happen*. In the historical account, Lazarus does return from the dead. This is a crucial difference! Spong tries to turn a nonresurrection of a poor man into the resurrection of a relatively wealthy man and say they are the same. I’d say he’s taking some pretty big liberties with the text!

Is it possible that John’s story is a literalization of Luke’s parable? Yes, it’s possible. It’s also possible that Jesus was the offspring of the alien Gabriel and Mary, or that Jesus was a girl and Mary was one of the first feminists in history. Is it likely? I don’t think so. I don’t see how Spong can even seriously suggest that these stories are in any way related unless he is absolutely committed to a primarily fictitious Bible. To allow for his wildly speculative interpretation is to remove any semblance of factual content. Historical reliability becomes meaningless, and virtually any outlandish interpretation is permissible. Spong follows in the grand and distorted tradition of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*:

“WHEN I USE A WORD,” HUMPTY DUMPTY SAID, IN A RATHER SCORNFUL TONE, “IT MEANS JUST WHAT I CHOOSE IT TO MEAN—NEITHER MORE NOR LESS.”

“THE QUESTION IS,” SAID ALICE, “WHETHER YOU CAN MAKE WORDS MEAN SO MANY DIFFERENT THINGS.”

“THE QUESTION IS,” SAID HUMPTY DUMPTY, “WHICH IS TO BE MASTER—THAT’S ALL.”¹¹

Apparently for both Mr. Dumpty and Rev. Spong, the facts are whatever they claim them to be.

So study details for clues. Even though there are two accounts of people named Lazarus dying in the Gospels, a study of the details demonstrates that these stories have virtually nothing else in common, and any attempt to link them is just wishful thinking.

9.3 “THROW THE BUMS OUT”

Another “skeptics’ favorite” is the timing of Jesus’ ejection of the money changers from the Jewish temple. It is recorded at the beginning of John’s gospel and the end of the three Synoptics. When did it happen, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry or the end? Admittedly, reconciling the timelines from John’s gospel with those of the Synoptics is one of the greatest challenges of dealing with harmonizing the gospel accounts.

When it comes to the cleansing of the temple, Bible advocates have two possible resolutions:

1. Jesus cleansed the temple only one time, but John placed it at the beginning of his gospel “for theological reasons—to show that God’s judgment was operative through the Messiah from the outset of his ministry” as the *NIV Study Bible* says.¹² Twenty-first-century readers tend to expect precisely chronological accounts of events. This was not as important in first-century Israel, as we have already discussed.
2. This is another case of similar but not the same. There may have been two cleansings and John chose to record only the first one and the other writers chose to record only the second. John includes details omitted by the others, specifically the fact that Jesus made a whip out of cords and drove away sheep and cattle. Also, although they are not compelling proof for two events, different words are attributed to Jesus in the Synoptics than in John.

“IT IS WRITTEN,” HE SAID TO THEM, “‘MY HOUSE WILL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER,’ BUT YOU ARE MAKING IT A ‘DEN OF ROBBERS.’” (MATT. 21:13)

TO THOSE WHO SOLD DOVES HE SAID, “GET THESE OUT OF HERE! HOW DARE YOU TURN MY FATHER’S HOUSE INTO A MARKET!” (JOHN 2:16)

These details allow for either one or two events. If there was a single cleansing, Jesus would have said these things sequentially as part of the same event. If there were two cleansings, he could have easily used different words in each instance.

Are these explanations reasonable? In my book they are. Which explanation is correct? I don’t know.

9.4 A BANQUET AND A FEAST

An example of two similar parables that some skeptics claim are variations on the same story is the case of the so-called parable of the great banquet as recorded in Luke and the parable of the marriage feast as told by Matthew. Luke presents this parable relatively early in Jesus’ ministry while he is a guest at a Pharisee’s banquet. The dinner starts with some controversy as Jesus heals a man even though it is the Sabbath. Remember, the Pharisees considered Jesus’ healing as “work,” which was forbidden on the holy day. Jesus responds with a parable that teaches not to seek places of honor at a banquet. Then he follows with the parable of the great banquet:

A CERTAIN MAN WAS PREPARING A GREAT BANQUET AND INVITED MANY GUESTS. AT THE TIME OF THE BANQUET HE SENT HIS SERVANT TO TELL THOSE WHO HAD BEEN INVITED, “COME, FOR EVERYTHING IS NOW READY.”

BUT THEY ALL ALIKE BEGAN TO MAKE EXCUSES. THE FIRST SAID, “I HAVE JUST BOUGHT A FIELD, AND I MUST GO AND SEE IT. PLEASE EXCUSE ME.”

ANOTHER SAID, “I HAVE JUST BOUGHT FIVE YOKE OF OXEN, AND I’M ON MY WAY TO TRY THEM OUT. PLEASE EXCUSE ME.”

STILL ANOTHER SAID, “I JUST GOT MARRIED, SO I CAN’T COME.”

THE SERVANT CAME BACK AND REPORTED THIS TO HIS MASTER. THEN THE OWNER OF THE HOUSE BECAME

ANGRY AND ORDERED HIS SERVANT, "GO OUT QUICKLY INTO THE STREETS AND ALLEYS OF THE TOWN AND BRING IN THE POOR, THE CRIPPLED, THE BLIND AND THE LAME."

"SIR," THE SERVANT SAID, "WHAT YOU ORDERED HAS BEEN DONE, BUT THERE IS STILL ROOM."

THEN THE MASTER TOLD HIS SERVANT, "GO OUT TO THE ROADS AND COUNTRY LANES AND MAKE THEM COME IN, SO THAT MY HOUSE WILL BE FULL. I TELL YOU, NOT ONE OF THOSE MEN WHO WERE INVITED WILL GET A TASTE OF MY BANQUET." (14:16-24)

Matthew records a similar-sounding parable in a completely different context. He places this story during the last week of Jesus' ministry in the midst of several contentious interchanges between Jesus and the religious leaders:

JESUS SPOKE TO THEM AGAIN IN PARABLES, SAYING: "THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A KING WHO PREPARED A WEDDING BANQUET FOR HIS SON. HE SENT HIS SERVANTS TO THOSE WHO HAD BEEN INVITED TO THE BANQUET TO TELL THEM TO COME, BUT THEY REFUSED TO COME.

"THEN HE SENT SOME MORE SERVANTS AND SAID, 'TELL THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN INVITED THAT I HAVE PREPARED MY DINNER: MY OXEN AND FATTENED CATTLE HAVE BEEN BUTCHERED, AND EVERYTHING IS READY. COME TO THE WEDDING BANQUET.'

"BUT THEY PAID NO ATTENTION AND WENT OFF—ONE TO HIS FIELD, ANOTHER TO HIS BUSINESS. THE REST SEIZED HIS SERVANTS, MISTREATED THEM AND KILLED THEM. THE KING WAS ENRAGED. HE SENT HIS ARMY AND DESTROYED THOSE MURDERERS AND BURNED THEIR CITY.

"THEN HE SAID TO HIS SERVANTS, 'THE WEDDING BANQUET IS READY, BUT THOSE I INVITED DID NOT DESERVE TO COME. GO TO THE STREET CORNERS AND INVITE TO THE BANQUET ANYONE YOU FIND.' SO THE SERVANTS WENT OUT INTO THE STREETS AND GATHERED ALL THE PEOPLE THEY COULD FIND, BOTH GOOD AND BAD, AND THE WEDDING HALL WAS FILLED WITH GUESTS.

"BUT WHEN THE KING CAME IN TO SEE THE GUESTS, HE NOTICED A MAN THERE WHO WAS NOT WEARING WEDDING CLOTHES. 'FRIEND,' HE ASKED, 'HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE WITHOUT WEDDING CLOTHES?' THE MAN WAS SPEECHLESS.

"THEN THE KING TOLD THE ATTENDANTS, 'TIE HIM HAND AND FOOT, AND THROW HIM OUTSIDE, INTO THE DARKNESS, WHERE THERE WILL BE WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH.'

"FOR MANY ARE INVITED, BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN." (22:1-14)

Many skeptics consider these as variations of the same story. Connick claims that Matthew turns Luke's somewhat simpler parable into a marriage feast for the king's son and then adds the "independent" parable of the wedding garment. According to Connick, Matthew may have done this to correct the impression created by Luke's account that salvation is easy.¹³

That these are separate stories, however, is obvious from a close examination of the significant differences.

	<i>LUKE 14</i>	<i>MATTHEW 22</i>
Who threw the party?	"a certain man"	"a king"
What was the nature of the event?	"a great banquet"	"a wedding banquet for his son"
How many servants were sent to announce the start of the event?	One	Several
How many excuses were offered and what was their nature?	Three specific excuses	Two more general excuses
How did the guests who refused to attend treat the servants?	No description	They seized and murdered the servants which prompted the king to send his army to destroy the murderers and burn their city
How were the guests described?	"the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame"	"all the people they could find, both good and bad."

The biggest difference, of course, is that Matthew adds the chilling conclusion of the ejection of the inappropriately dressed guest.

Despite the similarities, these are clearly two different stories told in two different settings. Connick and other skeptics start with the assumption that gospel stories are somewhat garbled versions of events that occurred decades before the writers committed them to writing. In this case, they arbitrarily decide that these two parables evolved from a single tradition.

But a more straightforward explanation is that they really were two different parables that make different points. There is no law of the universe that states that, once someone tells a story about a banquet, he can never use a banquet again as an illustration that makes a different point.

As I've already mentioned, Jesus' public ministry lasted about three years. It's unreasonable to assume that, in all that time, he never included similar story elements in another setting. Some of the parables that appear in different contexts or with some variations may be accounts of totally separate speeches that he delivered days or even months apart.

10.1 "POOR" OR "POOR IN SPIRIT"

The impact of the language gap is that some apparent contradictions may be offshoots of translation challenges. Remember that Jesus spoke Aramaic and the New Testament is written in Greek. Right away, translation issues were a factor even before Jesus' words were committed to writing. In addition, contextual or cultural understandings of words can compound the problem. Let's look at one of the beatitudes (or statement of blessing) that appears in both Matthew and Luke to see what I mean. Matthew's version of this beatitude reads,

- "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3),

while Luke's reads:

- "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20).

Luke seems to be addressing economic poverty, while Matthew describes a spiritual poverty. Which is it?

In the Old Testament, the term *poor* refers both to someone's economic status and, metaphorically, to his spiritual attitude. Here are three examples from the psalms:

YET I AM POOR AND NEEDY;
MAY THE LORD THINK OF ME.
YOU ARE MY HELP AND MY DELIVERER;
O MY GOD, DO NOT DELAY. (40:17)

HEAR, O LORD, AND ANSWER ME,
FOR I AM POOR AND NEEDY. (86:1)

FOR I AM POOR AND NEEDY,
AND MY HEART IS WOUNDED WITHIN ME. (109:22)

Israel's greatest king, David, composed all three of these psalms. We don't know at what stage of his life these psalms were written, but if it were while he was king, he was certainly not impoverished materially. The context reveals that he was experiencing serious distress, bound by "troubles without number," overtaken by his sins (Ps. 40:12), with people who sought to take his life and desired his ruin (v. 14), attacked by arrogant people (86:14), surrounded by words of hatred, and attacked without cause (109:3). David clearly describes his inner condition of turmoil and brokenness and his desire to do God's will.¹⁴

So, let's get back to the Sermon on the Mount. Robert Stein believes that Jesus used the term *poor* without specifically mentioning the overtones of spiritual poverty. His listeners would have understood this. If Stein is correct, Luke's version would be a more word-for-word rendering, while Matthew, who understood that the word translated "poor" carried overtones of spiritual poverty, elaborates by translating Jesus' Aramaic phrase as "poor in spirit."¹⁵ So Matthew includes a bit of interpretive commentary to help the reader catch the sense of the original word.

10.2 "WHAT, WERE YOU BORN IN A BARN?"

Another problem probably caused by linguistic confusion concerns whether Jesus was born in a house (as possibly implied in Matthew 2:11) or in a stable as suggested in Luke 2. Paul Copan argues that, contrary to the romanticized Christmas tradition, Jesus was not born in a stable. Luke 2:7 states that Mary placed Jesus in a manger "because there was no room for them in the inn." According to Copan, there are several reasons why the translation "inn" can be misleading:

- There would not have been any "inns" in a backwoods town like Bethlehem.
- There are two different words translated "inn" in the New Testament. The word in the Luke 2:7 birth story is the same one used in Luke 22:11, which describes the guest room in a private home (as opposed to a "commercial" inn) where Jesus and the disciples celebrated the Last Supper. The other word is used in Luke 10:34 to describe where the beaten man in the good Samaritan parable was taken.
- The reason Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem for the census is that Joseph's family was from that city, meaning he would probably still have relatives there. Accordingly, the family would have readily accommodated the pregnant Mary for the birth of her child, and even if the "guest room" (or "inn") were occupied, they would have housed her in the main living area, to which animal sheds were often attached (hence the feeding manger).

According to Copan, there is no contradiction between Luke's account of the "inn" or "guest room," and the fact

that the Magi visited Jesus in the “house.”¹⁶ We must also remember that their visit may have been well after Jesus’ birth in which case the “house” they visited was not necessarily the place where he was actually born.

10.3 OF DONKEYS AND COLTS

One last example of a problem caused by a linguistic challenge comes from my college religion class and deals with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Matthew records the event as follows:

AS THEY APPROACHED JERUSALEM AND CAME TO BETHPHAGE ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES, JESUS SENT TWO DISCIPLES, SAYING TO THEM, “GO TO THE VILLAGE AHEAD OF YOU, AND AT ONCE YOU WILL FIND A DONKEY TIED THERE, WITH HER COLT BY HER. UNTIE THEM AND BRING THEM TO ME. IF ANYONE SAYS ANYTHING TO YOU, TELL HIM THAT THE LORD NEEDS THEM, AND HE WILL SEND THEM RIGHT AWAY.”

THIS TOOK PLACE TO FULFILL WHAT WAS SPOKEN THROUGH THE PROPHET:

“SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION,
‘SEE, YOUR KING COMES TO YOU,
GENTLE AND RIDING ON A DONKEY,
ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A DONKEY.’”

THE DISCIPLES WENT AND DID AS JESUS HAD INSTRUCTED THEM. THEY BROUGHT THE DONKEY AND THE COLT, PLACED THEIR CLOAKS ON THEM, AND JESUS SAT ON THEM. A VERY LARGE CROWD SPREAD THEIR CLOAKS ON THE ROAD, WHILE OTHERS CUT BRANCHES FROM THE TREES AND SPREAD THEM ON THE ROAD. (21:1–8)

Mark’s version is very similar to Matthew’s with one exception appearing toward the end of the account: “When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it” (Mark 11:7). Luke’s version is also very similar.

Professor Jackson (from the chapter on the Filter of Antisupernaturalism) made a big deal about Matthew’s description. In the case of the donkey and colt, Dr. Jackson observed that Matthew reports that Jesus sat on “them,” meaning that he somehow awkwardly rode on the two animals simultaneously. Apparently, according to my professor, this dual-riding experience would have strengthened Jesus’ Messianic claims. With all due respect, Dr. Jackson worked a bit too hard to interpret the pronoun “they.” Read Matthew 21:7 again: “They [the disciples] brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.” As the *NIV Study Bible* simply clarifies in a footnote, “He sat on the cloaks,”¹⁷ not some odd combination of the donkey and the colt as my professor suggested.

There is more than one way to address this problem, however, and even Bible advocates differ about how to best solve some difficulties. Walter Kaiser and the other authors of *Hard Sayings of the Bible* disagree with the *NIV Study Bible* footnote and, instead, discuss Matthew’s clear linkage back to the prophet Zechariah as seen in Matthew 21:4–5.¹⁸

Kaiser suggests two possible explanations:

- Matthew mentions the donkey even though she wasn’t there because, obviously, the colt had a donkey for its mother. By including the reference to the donkey, Matthew reinforces the prophetic linkage back to Zechariah.
- Since the foal was young enough not to have been ridden, the donkey may still have been there with it, perhaps to allow it to continue nursing. If Mark and Luke knew that the donkey was there, it apparently didn’t matter much to them. Matthew included this detail because of his interest in Jewish prophecy, even if it made his story read a bit more awkwardly.¹⁹

In the case of the donkey ride, I have provided three possible reconciliations. According to Principle 2, all we need is one reasonable explanation in order to consider the challenge tamed.

10.4 ARE WE TO BE RUDE FOR JESUS?

Another of Jesus' instructions that grates on the twenty-first-century ear was delivered to his seventy disciples before he sent them on a preaching and healing mission: "Do not greet anyone on the road," he says (Luke 10:4). Doesn't this seem strange? Is the "meek and mild" Jesus of Sunday school suggesting that the disciples rudely ignore the people they meet along the way? That doesn't seem to be a particularly good way to win friends and influence people for Jesus.

The confusion comes from our definition of "greet" which is considerably different from that of first-century Jewish culture. Our sense of greeting is to walk by someone and glibly ask, "How ya doin'?" as if we really cared. "Great" is the expected response. That's about as far as the greeting goes. Not so in Jesus' day.

Barbara Bowen provides invaluable insights into ancient Palestinian culture. Even today, when a peasant from the Bible Lands meets an acquaintance,

HE RUSHES UP TO HIM AND FALLS ON HIS NECK AND KISSES HIM ON BOTH CHEEKS, AS THE FATHER OF THE PRODIGAL SON DID. THEN THEY EACH LAY THE RIGHT HAND OVER THE HEART, THEN ON THEIR LIPS, AND THEN SLOWLY RAISE IT TO THE FOREHEAD; AND AFTER THAT CLASP EACH OTHER'S HANDS....

TIME IS OF NO IMPORTANCE TO THESE VILLAGERS AND YOU NEVER SAW ONE HURRY. THEY FREQUENTLY STAND BY THE HOUR REPEATING OVER AND OVER THE SAME WORDS, SUCH AS "IS THERE PEACE WITH THEE? IS THERE PEACE WITH THY HOUSE?"²⁰

Jesus' point is that his followers shouldn't forget the urgency of their mission because of lengthy and distracting social customs. So, this incident can also be deleted from the problem list.

R E A D E R S ' G U I D E

INTRODUCTION

1. Which would you say better describes your source of inspiration, a dictionary or a Bible?
2. Were you raised to basically believe the Bible or to question its authority? Or was it basically irrelevant to you and your family?
3. Do you see academia and faith as inherently in opposition to each other, or are they compatible?
4. If you had to “grade” Christianity in terms of its net contribution to society, what letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F) would you give it, and why?
5. What were one or two of the most important values your parents instilled in you? To what extent did you adopt their value system? How big a role do these values play in your life today?
6. To what extent was religion at the center of your family life growing up? Do you wish it had played a smaller or bigger part?
7. What is your source for religious or spiritual insights: Your parents? Your friends? Your church? The Bible? Your professors? Books? The Internet? Other sources?

1. FILTERS

1. How do you react when a conference speaker announces some kind of group exercise or “experiment”?
2. Have you ever thought about how filters color the opinions of columnists and commentators? Name some recent examples where public figures such as media personalities were accused of inappropriate filtering.
3. Try an experiment. For the next five minutes write down *every sound* you hear. How many different noises did you hear? Would you normally have noticed all of them if you hadn’t done this little experiment? What does this tell you about the way you filter your environment for physical elements?
4. Read a newspaper column written by someone with whom you frequently disagree. Try to identify some of the presuppositions behind the column. Now read it again and pretend you really agree with the writer’s point of view. Did you detect any additional filters? What does this exercise teach about filters?
5. Which of your mental filters are helpful? Which ones might inappropriately limit your thought process?
6. Think of a time when you fell victim to the Pygmalion effect or a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why did you get tripped up? After you discovered your error, did you take any steps to minimize the likelihood of it happening again?

2. JESUS UNFILTERED

1. How important do you think it is to figure out who Jesus is?
2. Before you read this chapter, how would you have described Jesus (e.g., the Son of God, a great teacher, a political revolutionary, etc.)? Did the material in this chapter modify your view at all? How would you describe him now?
3. Of the many aspects of Jesus' nature, which one or two seem the most impressive to you?
4. Have you ever thought about the fact that, as Matthew reports, Jesus allowed people to worship him? How do you feel about this insight?
5. Have you ever met someone (e.g., a friend, teacher, or family member) who did what C. S. Lewis said we *can't* do—treat Jesus as “just” a great teacher? Do you agree with C. S. Lewis? Have you ever considered Jesus “just” a great teacher?
6. Which of the five filters listed in the last chapter would you say has had the biggest impact on your view of Jesus?

3. FILTERS THAT ADD

1. Why do you think books like *The Da Vinci Code* became such runaway best sellers?
2. How do you react when someone tells you that he or she belongs to a religious group that has received new messages from God?
3. To what extent do you think organized religion has suppressed information they don't want others to know?
4. Do you know anyone who drifts toward conspiracy-theory thinking? How does that person react when someone fails to buy into his or her worldview?
5. Why do you think the apostle Paul made such a huge point about the content of someone's preaching?

4. FILTERS THAT SUBTRACT — ATHEISM

1. How do you react to people who claim to be atheists? Do they intimidate you? Do you respect them for their bold intellectual commitment? Do you pity them because of their spiritual blindness?
2. Do you think it is possible for someone truly to be an atheist, that is, to really *know* that there is no God?
3. How well do you think NYU psychology professor Paul Vitz supports his theory that the atheists he studied had projected their dysfunctional relationships with their fathers onto God?
4. Comment on the following statement by professor Vitz:

SINCE BOTH BELIEVERS AND NONBELIEVERS IN GOD HAVE PSYCHOLOGICAL REASONS FOR THEIR POSITIONS, ONE IMPORTANT CONCLUSION IS THAT IN ANY DEBATE AS TO THE TRUTH OF THE EXISTENCE OF

GOD, PSYCHOLOGY SHOULD BE IRRELEVANT. A GENUINE SEARCH FOR EVIDENCE SUPPORTING, OR OPPOSING, THE EXISTENCE OF GOD SHOULD BE BASED ON THE EVIDENCE AND ARGUMENTS FOUND IN PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, SCIENCE, HISTORY, AND OTHER RELEVANT DISCIPLINES.

5. To what extent do you think atheists Bertrand Russell and George Smith allow their atheistic filters to color their reading of the Gospels?

5. FILTERS THAT SUBTRACT—ANTISUPERNATURALISM

1. Do you believe that supernatural events happen today?
2. Do you think it's possible for intelligent, well-educated people to believe in the miracles the Bible records? Why or why not?
3. Why do you suppose the Quest for the Historical Jesus has been such a passionate pursuit in Western countries over the past few hundred years?
4. Had you previously heard of the Jesus Seminar? If so, what was your opinion of their work? What is it now?
5. Have you ever had a teacher or professor who seemed to use the Filter of Antisupernaturalism? How did you react to the way they approached their material?
6. To what extent do you think people with the Filter of Antisupernaturalism are guilty of circular reasoning?

6. FILTERS THAT SUBTRACT—SELECTIVE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

1. Do you think Charles Neider was presumptuous in his revision of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*? Why or why not?
2. Comment on C. S. Lewis's observation that, if you are searching for gold, brass is more "dangerous" than clay. To what extent do you think that some of what we label "Christianity" is actually brass masquerading as gold? How does this make you feel?
3. Do you think criticism of Thomas Jefferson's approach to the Gospels is legitimate? After all, he was a brilliant man and an icon of American history.
4. To what extent does Philip Yancey's analogy of communicating with whales help you relax about philosophical and theological points you may have trouble understanding?
5. Why do you think those who filter out the more "unpleasant" aspects of God's character inevitably land on love as the transcendent value? If they don't believe in ultimate divine justice to make all wrongs right, do you think they can offer any satisfactory answer to the victims of horrendous villains?

7. PRINCIPLES 1 – 4: APPROACHING THE MATERIAL WITH THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

1. Did you ever ask God to help you understand something that was hard to figure out? How did he respond?
2. Have you ever solved a problem at work or school that you thought was impossible? What triggered your new insight? How did you feel when you suddenly “got it”?
3. Do you ever feel afraid to discuss the Christian faith because you can’t explain *everything* about the Bible? What could you do to overcome this fear?
4. How does recognition of an alleged problem’s origin help you to take it in stride?

8. PRINCIPLES 5 – 9: UNDERSTANDING THE WRITER’S PURPOSE

1. Have you ever misunderstood a point a speaker tried to make because you failed to understand why he presented his material the way he did? How did you discover your error? Once you recognized the speaker’s true purpose, how easy was it to understand what he was really trying to accomplish?
2. Have you ever had contact with a culture that is less concerned with time than ours is? What adjustments did you have to make in your expectations?
3. Can you think of instances other than religious discussions (e.g., political debates, letters to the editor, etc.) where someone presented an “argument from silence”? How easy was it to detect their logical fallacy? How did you feel when you uncovered their technique?
4. Name a time when you thought a set of instructions applied to everyone, but in reality they were for only certain people. What kind of confusion ensued?
5. Are you encouraged that even Bible heroes can at times be wrong, or does this undermine your confidence in the Bible?

9. PRINCIPLES 10 – 14: DEALING WITH DISCREPANCIES IN DETAILS

1. When you read a news story in a magazine or newspaper, how much attention do you typically pay to details? How do you react when you notice details that don’t seem to add up?
2. As you look back over this chapter, did any of the possible resolutions of conflicting details strike you as flimsy? If so, can you think of a more satisfactory explanation?
3. To what extent do you think readers of the Bible (both skeptics and Bible advocates) overlook details because they don’t fit in with their theories?
4. Explain in your own words how discrepancies in details can be positive.
5. What are some present-day situations where intermediaries speak for someone else?

10. PRINCIPLES 15 – 18: INTERPRETING THE TEXT RESPONSIBLY

1. At what point do you think a paradox becomes a contradiction?
2. What has been your experience with studying a foreign language? Have you ever had humorous experiences with translation errors?
3. Similarly, have you had any experience with people from other cultures where what is perfectly evident to them goes right over your head or vice versa?
4. Based on the study of these 18 principles, how willing are you to give the Bible the benefit of the doubt the next time you discover an apparent contradiction?

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