

My Story: Why I Left Christianity

By Tom Brower

I trace the beginnings of my spiritual journey to a time when, as a young teen, I began to take interest in the great questions in life and was frequently distracted by a desire to understand how I fit into the big picture. Living near the beach, I often took advantage of the opportunity to sit and contemplate on the shores of Huntington Beach, California. I felt a palpable sense of peace and belonging at the ocean and I often would retreat there for solace. My answers to life's great questions remained ill defined at this point in my life, but my own native religion was nature-centered and non-theistic.

In my later teen years, however, I came under the influence of several enthusiastic Christian friends. At first, I was very resistant to the Gospel message and to some of the content of the Bible. But over time, my attraction to the welcoming fellowship, the high moral standards, the reassuring divine promises, and the ready supply of answers to my deepest questions, overcame my misgivings. I embrace Jesus as Lord and Saviour, in standard evangelical Christian style, and embarked on what became a 20-year sojourn.

From the beginning, my experience of Christianity was focused around an intense interest in experiencing personal communion with God, understanding the Bible, and living a life of service. Over the years, this resulted in much time spent in private prayer and worship, contemplative retreats into mountain or desert, two college degrees focused on Biblical studies, and ministry pursuits that included an associate pastorate, home bible study fellowships, hospital visitation, street witnessing, feeding the poor in Mexico, and soup kitchen work.

Christianity was always an uncomfortable fit however. Unseen by even my closest Christian friends was a fierce inner struggle to make sense of the full Biblical message and to live a life of integrity consistent with that message. Gradually, serious misgivings about the Bible mounted. Rather than alleviate my doubts, the more I learned about the Bible, the more I encountered intractable problems on every hand. Tension and struggle eventually reached such an extreme that I knew something had to give, yet I felt trapped. Certainly, I told myself, something was wrong with me or my apprehension of the faith. I thought by definition nothing could be wrong with Christianity or the Bible itself.

A watershed moment arrived one day when a close Christian friend of mine casually suggested that all one had to do was place any stumbling stone on the shelf and just continue along the path trusting that, in the end, God would take care of everything, including any doubts. The advice was a well-intentioned bit of standard Christian counsel; the timing however was all-significant. My immediate response was to ask what should be done if those stumbling stones became so numerous and heavy that the shelf were to break. The comment was lost on my friend, but it was a self-revelatory moment. It finally occurred to me that all the tension I felt was due to my being at that breaking point. Cognitive dissonance simply overwhelmed me and I could no longer take refuge in pious evasion. I felt literally suffocated under the weight of so many flimsy rationalizations for Biblical problems. I had to act, so at that moment I decided that I would rethink everything, that none of my assumptions would be off-limits, and that I would follow the truth wherever it took me.

The process was nothing short of traumatic. Not to mention lonely. I came to understand firsthand why several of my seminary friends had experienced nervous breakdowns while struggling through the same process. But in the end, I re-emerged wiser and with new focus, and a sense of peace that I had not known for a long time. I was also no longer a Christian.

Through it all I see myself as having come full circle. Once again my religion is nature-centered and non-theistic. Rather than relying on an invisible, imaginary deity, I now try to live life to the fullest, here and now, and to awaken to all the wonders that surround me.

I've moved on from Christianity because, in balance, I no longer find it credible or attractive. Decades of intensive study have led me to conclude that the Bible shows every sign of having originated in the minds of errant mortals, not divine inspiration. As such, it, like all other human works, is a mix of good, bad and ugly. What follows is a sampling of the evidence that convinced me.

1) Because old sacred texts cannot evolve, religions that rely on them keep the people that live by them stuck in the mindset of the times they were written. This creates the dual problem of perpetuating primitive or even barbaric thinking, and impeding progress. Over the last 2000 years, Christianity has been guilty of both offenses.

The issue of slavery offers an excellent example. Ownership of one human being by another is, of course, the abhorrent essence of slavery. In Leviticus 25:44-46 God grants his people permission to purchase and own slaves, and to enslave them for life:

“Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life...”

Slaves could also be obtained during wartime. In this passage, God lumps people right together with livestock, no distinctions, just all part of the plunder of war:

Deut. 20:14 - “As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies.”

If sanctioning slavery weren't bad enough God also approved brutal treatment of slaves, pronouncing that a master could beat his slave within an inch of his/her life and, as long as the slave didn't die, the master would suffer no penalty. The divine justification for this cruel ruling: The slave is the master's property!

Exodus 21:20-21 - “Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property.”

There it is: Divine sanction of the essence of slavery, right from the mouth of God - or so one must believe if the Bible is accepted as divinely inspired infallible Scripture.

Slavery advocates in our own country used Old Testament passages such as these to defend their practices during the debates that raged in the 18th and 19th centuries. Every civilized human being now recognizes that slavery is an abomination, but this considerable moral progress was made in spite of the Bible, which condones the practice, and not because of it.

2) Accepting the Bible as inerrant, inspired revelation from God also requires one to approve of the barbarisms which ancient Israel committed against their neighbors—including the massacre of men, women, children and nursing babies—at the explicit mandate of God: “Thus says the Lord of Hosts: ... attack Amalek...kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child....” (1Samuel 15: 2-3). As it turned out, God was angry with Saul, the King of Israel, and stripped him of his kingship because he didn’t carry out this command completely enough, failing to kill off the king of the Amalekites and the best of their herds.

The enormity of this crime needs to be felt to be appreciated. Imagine this blood-soaked scene: thousands of babies and small children hacked to death with sharp swords, and mothers running in terror clinging to their little ones only to be run down and mercilessly slaughtered. The elderly, the sick and the pregnant similarly shown no mercy. Unfortunately the Amalekites were not a one-time special case as the Israelites went on numerous genocidal rampages at God’s command. See Deut. 20: 16-17 where God demands the slaughter of several other tribes: “...do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you.”

Seen in historical context, the ancient Israelites were acting like the other nations of the time period in killing for their war god(s). The Moabite stone, for example, contains an inscription in which the Moabite king Mesha (see 2 Kings 3) told of victories that he had won through his god Chemosh who "saved me from all the kings and let me see my desire upon my adversaries." Later in the inscription, Mesha said this about a victory his forces had won over Israel: "But Chemosh drove him [the king of Israel] out before me." This statement has a very Old Testament feel to it, only this time it’s Israel’s enemies claiming victory through their god. In another example, pavement slabs in the temple of Urta at Nimrud contain an inscription by the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II in which he described the massacre of 600 warriors and 3,000 captives he had taken in battle "at the command of the great gods."

No matter what kind of rationalization is used by the believer, the chilling fact must be faced that belief in the Bible as infallible Scripture compels the justification of genocide, of saying that these ancient atrocities were right and moral because God commanded them. There is no middle ground here: It’s a choice between standing by this ancient war-god, even to the point of defending his commands to massacre babies, or surrender belief in the Bible as God’s word.

3) The law purportedly delivered to Moses by God bears an uncanny resemblance to other Mesopotamian law codes, such as the Code of Hammurabi, the Law of Eshnunna, and the law of Ur-Nammu. All of these other law codes derive from the Old Babylonian empire or the Sumerians and predated the law of Moses by many centuries. Not surprisingly many (but not all) of these laws appear primitive or barbaric by modern standards. But the point being made here is that, once again, when compared to the background culture of the day, supposed revelations from God start to look all too human, and derived from the thought of the time period, not the mind of an omniscient creator. Here are a few of the many similarities which indicate not only the same laws but the same principles upon which laws were based:

-- Body parts were to be cut off for certain crimes.

-- A raped virgin was to be given as a wife to the rapist.

-- Restitution/penalty was based on the social status of the victim. Lives of slaves are compensated for with money whereas it was life for life with other victims.

- Trial by ordeal was prescribed to determine the guilt or innocence of a woman accused of adultery. The husband pays no penalty if wife proven innocent.
- A false accuser was to suffer the penalty that his charges would have brought on the accused. E.g. if the false accuser charged another with murder, the false accuser dies.
- A conflict involving the loss of borrowed or deposited goods is settled by taking an oath before god.
- Rules were defined for selling family members or self into servitude, as well as time limits for letting servants go free. The Code of Hammurabi stipulated freedom after three years, the Mosaic law after six.
- Death was the punishment for a couple caught in adultery.
- Eye for eye, tooth for tooth principle of justice, articulated using these exact same body parts.
- Nearly identical statements are made about responsibility for an ox which gores someone to death, and the greater responsibility of an owner of an animal with a violent reputation.
- Nearly identical statements are made stating that an animal caretaker is not responsible for the death of an animal killed by a wild animal but was required to bring the remains to the owner.

Even what might appear to be highly enlightened aspects of the Mosaic law are also found to be in step with the thinking of the time. Yes, the law of Moses encourages compassion for the orphan, the widow and the poor. But a very similar social justice concern is found in the Law of Ur-Nammu: The orphan was not to be delivered up to the rich man; the widow was not to be delivered up to the mighty man; the man of one shekel was not to be delivered up to the man of one mina. So also with the Mosaic practice of canceling all debts every seventh year, and the year of Jubilee in which sold land was returned to its previous owners. For centuries prior to the Mosaic law it had been the practice in Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period for kings to proclaim an act of justice at the beginning of their reigns or at intervals of seven or more years thereafter. Like the law of Moses these edicts called for the forgiveness of debts and the reversion of land holdings to their original owners.

4) Hell: The ancient Jews believed that the spirits of everyone who had ever lived - including all of their saints - were in the cold, dark and dreary underworld of Sheol. The Old Testament knows nothing of a fiery underworld place of never-ending afterlife torment. This idea, largely inspired by the Greek concept of Hades, grew in popularity during the great cultural intermixing that occurred in the intertestamental period. Active volcanoes, spewing molten lava and smoke from the depths of the earth, were thought by the ancients to lend credence to this notion. Not surprisingly, intertestamental Jewish theologians adopted this idea of hellfire.

So did Jesus and the apostolic writers. But as a result this mere accident of history still saddles us today, some 2,000 years later, with the idea of a divine torture chamber, perhaps the most abhorrent, sadistic concept ever conceived. It's one thing if Hitler, Pol Pot or Saddam Hussein engaged in acts of mass torture, but the Creator of the universe?

The concept of Hell is actually so toxic and archaic that few modern-day Christians truly believe it. Most believers, out of necessity, employ various kinds of coping mechanisms in an attempt to live a consistent Christian life with Hell as part of their belief system. These coping mechanisms typically take the form of

avoidance—the concept of Hell is simply put out of mind—or re-definition—Hell is watered down to be a metaphor for more palatable concepts like separation from God, or annihilation.

5) Anthropomorphic deity: Egocentrism is a hallmark feature of immaturity. Mankind in its childhood supposed itself and its world to be the literal center of the universe. All heavenly bodies were thought to revolve around the earth. The sun existed to give light to the day, the stars and moon, light at night (Genesis 1). Every tribe thought that its central place was the center of the world; not surprisingly, the Jews asserted this honor for Jerusalem. Cut from the same cloth is the notion that the ultimate mystery of the universe and source of all being is a person just like us. Aristotle hit the nail on the head long ago: "Men create gods after their own image...." Just as mankind has outgrown the notion of an earth-centered universe, the time is long overdue to put off the childish notion of a great parent in the sky.

6) The denigration of women—seen both in overt statements, such as "it is a shame for a woman to speak in church," and in the complete lockout of women from any significant leadership positions ("A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.")—is clear testimony to bias on the part of the Bible's all-male authors. Human bias of this sort is inconsistent with the idea of divinely inspired scripture, but is exactly what one would expect from male religious leaders in the ancient world. On this score even Mao was a vast improvement: "Women hold up half the sky," he said. Holding half of the race down, leaving undeveloped half of our talent, is a crime against humanity for which Christianity is guilty.

7) The concept of sacrificing something important to the gods or spirits is found in religions around the world. Usually, the more important the god or the request, the more important the sacrifice had to be. The most important thing which could be sacrificed was, usually, a human being. Typically, the person was sacrificed for the sake of the welfare of the entire community — to appease an angry god who had cursed the tribe, to plea for better crops, to ensure success in a coming battle, etc. Because such needs were universal, human sacrifice was quite commonplace among ancient peoples (e.g., Aztecs, Mayans, Incas, early Greeks & Romans, Vikings, some Middle Eastern tribes, early Chinese & Japanese).

Unfortunately Christianity, through its central idea of the sacrificial death of Christ for the sins of the world, perpetuates this dreadful concept. Unadorned by its social acceptance, developed theology and other trappings, Christianity at its core is a primitive religion based on appeasing an angry, invisible deity through human sacrifice: "Since we have now been justified by his [Christ's] blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him" (Romans 5:9).

8) Degrading divine-human relationship: Mirroring the authoritarian political structures of the time, Judeo-Christian patterns of worship/prayer follow from a primitive view of God as despot to be placated, appeased and flattered. The similar master-slave depiction of the divine-human relationship, featured prominently in the Bible, is equally degrading and outmoded.

9) In Christianity, this earth is a temporary stage that God will soon destroy, this life a brief passageway to a life without end, in a world beyond death. Believers are encouraged by scripture to see themselves as strangers or aliens in this life, to live out their time here as foreigners, to view their citizenship as being in heaven, and to not love anything in this world, which is under the power of Satan. These sentiments may have made life more bearable to the downtrodden Jews of the first century who despaired of life under foreign domination, and who despised a world wracked with war, famine and injustice, where life was often short and brutish. But this emphasis upon the afterlife and the denigration of life in this world is wrong and perverse in its effects.

At its very least, it prevents the full participation in and embracing of life in this world with all of its joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures. There is also the tendency to create a mindset that discourages improving life here and now. Sure the Bible exhorts one to help a neighbor in need, but there is no injunction to correct structural evil because this world is considered beyond hope. From a strictly biblical point of view, working for the long-term betterment of mankind would make as much sense as trying to establish a social program aboard the sinking Titanic. The only true hope in Christianity involves escape from this doomed world, as from a sinking ship, and resides in a salvation process wherein one is placed on God's salvage list for those to be spared when the current world is incinerated.

This belief also tends to inhibit the progress of science and the natural curiosity that motivates it. Consider this revealing quote from St. Ambrose (a 4th century church father): "To discuss the nature and position of the earth does not help us in our hope of the life to come." St. Ambrose was not at all unique or unusual in his sentiments—biblical theology directly breeds this kind of value system. Christians who hold to different priorities only come to do so when they begin to think independently and/or come in contact with non-Christian influences.

10) Christianity demands an extreme, unrealistic ethic. In large part this is due to the emergency-mode nature of the NT outlook; that is, one must live as if the world were coming to an end at any moment: "What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away." (1Cor. 7:29-31)

This sense of emergency created by an impending apocalypse is further intensified by the high stakes involved: the threat of being sentenced to eternal torment and losing everlasting bliss. If the choices made in this lifetime really do determine an eternity of either torment or bliss, then saving oneself and as many others as possible isn't just the pre-eminent concern, it is life's only concern. Nothing else makes any rational sense. If taken seriously, this perspective renders any kind of normal life impossible, and promotes crippling anxiety and guilt.

The extreme nature of the NT ethic can also be seen in Jesus' unqualified prohibition against divorce found in the earliest written of the four Gospels, Mark (10: 11-12), as well as in Luke 16:17. This simply does not work in the real world—and everyone knows it. The fact that exceptions for unfaithfulness (Mat. 5:32) or abandonment (1Cor. 7:15) had to be added later by apostolic writers reveals the untenable nature of Jesus' blanket proscription. Witness also the Catholic Church and its annulment practice, or most Protestant pastors who, through theological artifice, attempt to stretch the stated divorce exceptions to deal with life's inevitable tough cases.

11) Biblical inerrancy: the concept, at its base, arises as a salve for our existential angst, an answer to that human longing for a voice of certainty in an uncertain world. But certainty in this world is neither possible nor desirable: not possible because life in this world, if it is anything, is ever-changing and unpredictable; not desirable because the adventure of living is in great measure the challenge of forging a meaningful life in an ever-changing world where the end result of one's efforts cannot be known. Those who seek the certainty of inerrant revelation are demanding a guarantee on life which doesn't exist and short-changing the life that they have been given. Those who think that Christianity has supplied them with certainty have been deceived, and are therefore worse off than before.

Judeo-Christian patterns of worship/prayer follow from a primitive view of God as despot to be placated, appeased and flattered.

12) Revealed religion—that is, religion built upon revelation from God—carries within it a terrible, built-in danger. Followers of revealed religion understandably believe that they possess the final, ultimate truth of God, which inevitably leads to the imposition of that truth on others, justified by the belief that they are acting according to divine mandate. To compound the problem, the New Testament commonly refers to unbelievers in the most disdainful manner—“wicked evil doers,” “unholy,” “of the darkness,” “lawless,” “sinners,” “of the devil,” “under the wrath of God,” “damned,” bound for hell, and “dead,” just to name a few. The result is a truly dangerous mix which has the potential to go far beyond mere judgmental attitudes, intolerance and divisiveness, though those things are certainly bad enough. One could easily predict that a revealed religion of this nature would inevitably lead to all manner of horrors: everything from witch hunts to wars and inquisitions. History has more than borne out this prediction.

In modern times, this same unholy cocktail of incendiary ideas—inherited in part from Christian theology—currently drives much of the religion-inspired terrorism and the us-versus-them religious violence that sweeps our world. “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” (Blaise Pascal) “Man is a Religious Animal. He is the only Religious Animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion -- several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself and cuts his throat if his theology isn't straight.” (Mark Twain)

In addition, revealed religion and intellectual freedom are mutually exclusive. If one accepts the concept of revelation, that once-for-all truth has been delivered to humanity by the Creator of the universe, what a person can and cannot reasonably explore is severely restricted. If revelation makes it clear, for example, that there is a destiny of heaven or hell awaiting every person, can one reasonably consider otherwise? If God weighs in, the debate ends and the limits of inquiry are defined. Certain concepts are simply out of bounds; the idea of heresy is born. Thus Christianity narrows the range of human thought and behavior, corralling both mind and life, creating unfree conformists to a supposedly divine dictate.

13) Faith is a trusting commitment not substantiated by evidence or reasoned proof. To make the ultimate life commitment required by the Christian salvation experience, without reasoned consideration of the issues and ramifications, is foolhardy and dangerous. This is the means by which millions become trapped within absurd cults, sometimes with lethal consequences. What may start with an admonition to “just let your heart guide you” may end with a final taste of funny Kool-Aid.

14) The New Testament's claim that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled many Old Testament messianic prophecies doesn't withstand scrutiny. Virtually every example of fulfilled prophecy exhibits abuse of the original Old Testament context or the facts.

Matthew's 14-generation scheme in Mt.1 (“Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah” (1:17)), whereby he attempts to show how Jesus is the grand culmination of Old Testament salvation history, is a classic example. It's a force fit: he left out a handful of generations in order to make it work.

Mt.2:18—the New Testament writer contends that Herod's decree to kill the male children at Bethlehem fulfilled a prophecy of Jeremiah (31:15) which refers to “Rachel weeping for her children.” Jeremiah however is addressing the problem of Jewish dispersion caused by Babylonian captivity. The “children” referred to are the Jewish people, the descendants of Rachel, who were relocated to Babylon. They were not the victims of a massacre. Far from it, for they, as Jeremiah stated, would “...come back from the land of the enemy (Jer.31:17).” Jer.31:15 has everything to do with the Babylonian captivity and nothing to do

with Herod killing children at Bethlehem. Only by doing violence to this passage can Mt.2:18 assert prophetic fulfillment.

Mt.21:4-5—here the New Testament writer commits two fouls in first misinterpreting Zech.9:9 and then manipulating the Jesus story in order to match his misunderstanding. He mistook the obvious parallelism of the Old Testament passage to mean that both a donkey and a foal were being ridden at the same time, instead of the donkey and foal being parallel references to the same animal (perhaps the most common of all Hebrew literary devices). Then he, unlike either of the other two gospel writers who retold this story, portrays Jesus stunt-riding on both animals simultaneously. At best this is an embarrassment; it certainly isn't divinely inspired predictive prophecy.

In historical context, the New Testament writers were employing the same technique used by their contemporaries at Qumran (the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls) who likewise wrested numerous Old Testament passages from their context in order to use them as prophetic credentials for their leader, the one they called the "Teacher of Righteousness."

15) In a religious environment where predictions about the end of the world were very common, Jesus fit right in. He explicitly and repeatedly promised to return to his contemporary generation, an event which he said would usher in the end of the world and the final judgment:

"For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Mat. 16:27-28)

"At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." (Luke 21:27-33)

See also Mat. 10:23; 23:33-36; 24:30-34; 26:64; Mark 9:1; 13:26-31; 14:62; Luke 9:26-7; 18:6-8; John 21:20-3.

When Jesus warned his contemporaries about the coming judgment he was talking about a cataclysmic event, an imminent, apocalyptic inbreaking of God that would hit them, his immediate hearers. The Gospel writers summarized his message as "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (Mat. 4:17; Mark 1:15) a reference to the impending end of the age when God overturns the forces of evil and restores his rule (the "kingdom of heaven") over a rebellious world. In short, Jesus was a doomsday prophet analogous to the kind found on modern street-corners holding a sign with "The End of the World is Near."

The New Testament writers frequently repeated this belief in Jesus' promised return, that the end of the world was imminent, and that they were the terminal generation. In fact this theme is so prominent that no coherent understanding of the New Testament is possible without its recognition. See Rom. 13:11-2; 16:20; 1Cor. 1:7-8; 7:29-31; 10:11; 15:51f; Phil. 1:6, 10; 4:5; 1Thes. 1:9-10; 2:19; 4:13-7; 5:23; Heb. 1:1-2; 9:26; 10:36-7; Jas. 5:8-9; 1Pet. 1:4-7, 13, 20; 2:12; 4:7, 12-13; 1John 2:18; Rev 1:1-3; 3:10-11; 22:6, 10-12, 20.

When first generation believers began to die before this promised coming, the apostolic leaders sought to shore up the faithful as Paul attempted to do with his explanations in 1 Thes. 4:13-17 and 1 Corinthians 15: 51-2. In these passages he clearly indicates that not all of the believers then living would die but that some would be alive at Jesus' coming:

"Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thes. 4:13-17)

"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." (1 Corinthians 15: 51-2)

However when the first generation of believers had completely died off, the church faced a thorny problem with opponents who used the failure of this grand promise to mock the faith. 2 Peter, likely the latest of the New Testament books, explicitly addresses this crisis:

"Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." (2 Peter 3:3-4)

But, sadly, rather than face a difficult truth squarely, the author of 2 Peter still clings to the notion of living in the "last days" and proceeds to try and rescue the situation by resort to theological spin doctoring (2 Peter 3:5-18). These efforts at damage control remind one of what religious groups throughout the ages have done when prophecy fails. Rather than learn the lesson that failure attempts to teach and rethink basic assumptions, the sacrosanct is shielded from all true reappraisal and the prophecy is salvaged through the use of spiritual fulfillment notions or other creative theological recasting. The truth is sometimes painful: Jesus was a failed doomsday prophet.

16) Airbrushing Jesus:

On three occasions the earliest Gospel, Mark, records that Jesus became angry, 1:40-45, 3:1-6 and 10:13-16. When Matthew and Luke adapted these stories from Mark (roughly half of Mark's material was used by Matthew and Luke), in each case they sanitized the text by removing all reference to Jesus' anger. (See Mt. 8:1-4; 19:13-15; Lk. 5:12-16; 18:15-17) Apparently anger wasn't thought to be a suitable emotion for the Son of God to display. In the first of these cases, Mk. 1:40-45, Jesus inexplicably appears to get angry with a leper due to how he asked him for healing. This appeared so unseemly to later handlers of the NT text that some changed the wording so that it read Jesus felt compassion toward the leper rather than anger. Most translations, like the King James version, contain the "compassion" reading because it is obviously more palatable, but the oldest and best texts read "anger", and this is reflected in some newer translations (e.g. NIV).

The makeover Jesus underwent is clearly on display when comparing the earlier Gospels - Mark, Matthew and Luke - to the latest Gospel, John. Apparently realizing that a lot of hellfire and brimstone talk wasn't the best way to market Jesus, John sanitized most of this from the text and significantly ramped up the love talk which, of course, is how the Gospel of John has come to be known as the love Gospel. Jesus actually speaks very sparingly about love in the earlier three Gospels, a grand total of about 19 verses between them. By comparison over 220 verses depict Jesus the firebrand preacher speaking of hell, condemnation or judgment. (In fact, Jesus speaks more about hell than everyone else in the Bible combined.) So there's roughly an 11 to 1 ratio of judgment talk to love talk in the first three Gospels, whereas love outweighs judgment in John roughly 60/40 - quite a radical shift! And quite an extreme makeover.

As described in #15 above, the early church had a real problem on its hands due to the failure of Jesus' promise to return during the lifetime of his contemporaries, a problem which cut right to the heart of his reputation, and by extension the integrity of the gospel message. This of course couldn't be allowed to stand. Paul was already starting to address this issue mid-century as believers began to die off, and the author of 2Peter had a full-blown crisis to deal with by century's end. Coming toward the end of the century the Gospel of John was written against the backdrop of this crisis. Not surprisingly, John repeated none of these statements about the impending apocalypse and the return of Jesus which would usher in the end of the world. His makeover now complete, the fiery, volatile, doomsday prophet had now been transformed into the kinder, gentler Jesus of popular imagination.

17) New Testament miracles: These were very superstitious times wherein people believed that miraculous events occurred routinely. Humankind was only beginning to mature out of its childhood at this stage in history and was prone to using supernatural explanations for any process in nature that was not understood, which means just about everything. Gods, angels, demons, fairies, spirits, etc. were a means of labeling the inscrutable. This method was applied to anything from sickness to comets, lightning to volcanoes, bird flight to sunsets, rainbows to windstorms.

The miraculous was also frequently used to adorn momentous occurrences and revered individuals. The writings of both Jewish and Roman historians during this time period attest to this practice. Suetonius, a Roman historian, claimed that the Roman Senate witnessed Augustus Caesar ascend into heaven. Both Suetonius and Tacitus, another Roman historian, assert that the emperor Vespasian healed a blind man by putting saliva on his eyes, and a crippled man by touching him—miraculous events which purportedly were witnessed by many people. Josephus, a Jewish historian, claimed that during the time of the First Jewish War (66-70 CE) a heifer being led to the temple altar gave birth to a lamb, that the temple gate, which took some 20 men to open and close, opened of its own accord one night, and that chariots and soldiers were seen in the clouds around Jerusalem. He further states that the latter miracle was seen by too many people to doubt it.

Evidence from within the New Testament, and from the extra-biblical Jesus tales that followed, reveal a myth-making process that began with the earliest apologists (the Gospel writers) trying to make the case for Jesus as Messiah. As the New Testament repeatedly affirms, the "Jews seek [miraculous] signs"—and that is exactly what the New Testament writers attempted to provide. So some 30 to 60 years after the death of Jesus they gathered the circulating miracle stories about Jesus and compiled them into the four Gospels. Yet close inspection of the parallel miracle stories they wrote reveals evidence of growth and accretion. Just like the proverbial fish story, the miracle story has a tendency over time to become more miraculous. The non-canonical stories that followed grew ever more fantastic and attempted to fill in the gaps left by the New Testament accounts, such as miracle stories from Jesus' childhood. Many of these stories were considered by early Christians to be as divinely inspired as any of the books of the Bible in

our present canon. They were read at church services as regularly as we read from the Gospels in today's services. Despite the fact that the church eventually chose to distance itself from these later stories, they form a continuous line of tradition with the officially sanctioned tales.

That the miracles of Jesus are non-historical myths would explain why no contemporary writers ever mentioned Jesus or his miracles which supposedly attracted multitudes and put Judea into such an uproar. It also accounts for how raising Lazarus from the dead neither caught the attention of at least one historian nor that of the other three Gospel writers.

There is a very great difference between accepting assertions about impossible events made by a few people in superstitious times two thousand years ago, with no corroborating evidence, and accepting the results of modern experiments repeated hundreds of thousands of times under rigorous controls, always with the same results.

18) Virtually every major aspect of New Testament theology and the story of Jesus can be found "off-the-shelf" in the religious milieu of the day. This reality belies the claim that Christianity is based upon divine revelation, and reveals the all too human basis of Christian belief.

The early Christians behaved like every other group in every other era -- they adopted and adapted ideas from the culture around them. What Paul and the other early biblical writers had wasn't on their tables, it was in their heads. What they had were the same general notions of divinity, cosmology and humanity, and how those things worked together, that everyone had in their time. They knew how gods worked, so when they wrote about Jesus, they made sure he worked like a god. Not only did Jesus do the same miracles the earlier pagan gods did, but the gospel stories of his miracles are told using the old pagan formula of an aretology, listing the miracles and great deeds of the god. Jesus is depicted as the son of god who suffered, died, and was reborn. But he wasn't the first son of god who suffered, died, and was reborn. He brought salvation, but he wasn't the first god to do that either. His mother was a virgin; he wasn't the first god there either. It's the same with miracles, baptism, the Eucharist, heaven, hell, prophecy, and eternal life; the list goes on and on. The pagans had them all, and generations before Jesus.

Like Osiris, Dionysus, Attis, Mithras and many others, Jesus was a god, shaped like a man, walking, talking, eating, but still having magic god powers. Like the other pagan god-men, Jesus was a subordinate god, son of the great universal god, miraculously conceived in a mortal woman, living for a while on earth rather than in heaven, helping people. Jesus was not a xerox copy of one particular pagan god. Jesus was new in the same way the first Honda Accord was a new car. But the Accord wasn't the first car. The Accord was a new arrangement of old ideas, some new, but mostly old. So was Jesus.

19) The Resurrection: Five reasons why rational people cannot believe the New Testament accounts: (1) Resurrected savior-gods were commonplace in the pagan religions that flourished before, during, and after the time Jesus of Nazareth lived; (2) Typical of very superstitious times, residents of 1st century Palestine were prone to believe resurrection stories (see, for example, Mt.14:1; 27:52-3); (3) The claim that a dead man was restored to life is an extremely extraordinary claim (to say the least!) that requires extremely extraordinary proof; (4) The only biblical proof in support of the resurrection claim is hearsay in nature; and (5) The NT accounts of the resurrection are both contradictory and incredible.

20) Biblical source material: 2 Peter 2:20-1 states that "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Evidence from the New Testament, however, tells a different story. The writers of 2 Peter and Jude were guilty of serious errors

that reveal the all too human, very fallible nature of their enterprise. Both Peter and Jude placed heavy theological weight upon an intertestamental tale about angels during the time of Noah who had intercourse with women resulting in evil, giant offspring (2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6 – I did my Master's Thesis on this topic and the connection between 2 Pet 2:4/Jude 6 and the intertestamental sinful imprisoned angels tradition is incontrovertible). To aid in combating enemies of the church, Peter and Jude both used this tale as a key, authoritative example of divine judgment against wrongdoers. It is plain by their usage of it that, in their estimation, these sinful angels were as historic and authentic, and the insights gleaned as revelatory as, say, the story of Israel in the wilderness. The chief intertestamental source of this tale, I Enoch, was quoted as inspired, holy writ by Jude (Jude 14-5). Jude also mistakenly believed that the ancient, antediluvian Enoch actually wrote I Enoch (Jude 14). Peter, an apostolic leader, conferred the ultimate seal of approval by incorporating almost all of Jude's letter into his second epistle.

These problems cannot be dismissed as incidental or unimportant; they strike at the heart of Christianity's credibility. Regarding I Enoch, it is plain that Jude didn't understand the true nature of the very source materials upon which he so heavily relied. He naively placed his full trust in this very contrived, highly fanciful writing which scholars universally agree was produced in the two centuries preceding the time of Jesus. Most modern-day Christians, if they only knew, would be horrified to read I Enoch and to realize that this was the type of material from which the New Testament writers derived their theology and inspiration. Peter, a leading apostolic writer, is thus found engaging in fundamental theological reasoning about God and his character from a tradition which is so grossly mythological, a story which is so obviously fictional, that his reliability on spiritual matters must be seriously questioned.

Thankfully, examples such as this one exist wherein the sincere seeker of truth can sweep back the curtain of mystery that surrounds the production of the New Testament and gain a behind-the-scenes look at how the New Testament writers worked and from what sources their ideas actually derive. If, when we are able to put them to the test, the apostolic writers are found to be untrustworthy, why should they be trusted on matters that cannot be so readily scrutinized critically?

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