

WORLDVIEW & THE GOSPELS

We must take our own worldview into account as we consider the archaeological and historical evidence for the veracity of the gospels. Since the gospels report miraculous events, no amount of evidence will persuade us of their literal accuracy if our worldview predisposes us to reject out of hand any evidence for the supernatural. If we are atheistic in our outlook, we will explain all evidence for the supernatural as being misunderstood or misinterpreted. We will remain convinced that there is a natural, scientific explanation for everything, even if the explanation is still beyond our grasp. If we are agnostically or even deistically inclined we will remain skeptical of all evidence for the supernatural and will probably disdain supernatural manifestations or revelations that seem to support religious exclusiveness, intolerance or what we might deem Puritanism. On the other hand, if we are committed theists (as were the gospel writers) or pantheists, we run the risk of accepting evidence for the supernatural uncritically, or even gullibly. None of us can fully escape the influence of our presuppositions, but we do well to recognize the presence of that influence and attempt to hold it in check if we wish to give the fairest possible hearing to evidence for the supernatural.

Supernaturalism In The First-Century
The New Testament and its contemporary

writings make it undeniable that the worldview of most Mediterranean people in the first century was decidedly supernaturalistic. As Shirley Jackson Case writes in *Experience With The Supernatural In Early Christian Times*, “the sky hung low in the ancient world. Supernatural beings thronged the earth, crowding themselves uncomfortably into the society of mortals.” Indeed, Greeks schooled on Homer assumed not only the existence of gods and demons, but also that such beings could meddle in human affairs at any time. Romans who had likewise inherited a rich mythology multiplied both gods and temples throughout the empire. The eastern peoples had their own pantheons, with the exception of the Jews and Christians who, though they were supernaturalists, were strictly monotheistic.



Continued on next page

WORLDVIEW & THE GOSPELS

The general supernaturalism of the first century should not, however, tempt us to think that everyone in those days accepted reports of the supernatural uncritically. We would err if we assumed that supernaturalism was the *only* worldview of the first century, or that it was the default worldview by virtue of being the only one yet imagined. On the contrary, in that age as in our own there were articulate skeptics (particularly among the Stoics and Epicureans) who skewered gods and religions in their writings and theatrical productions. Then as now philosophers worked to undermine popular mythology. Multiple worldviews competed in the first century, and this fact assures us that reports of miracles, such as those of the resurrection of Jesus, were not swallowed indiscriminately by a gullible population.

Not only were there naturalistic, alternative worldviews in the first century, but there were also important differences in approach to the supernatural between the theistic viewpoints of different cultures. The fact that their mythology inclined Romans toward superstition, or that eastern religions inclined other peoples toward magic should not cause us to suppose that the witnesses of Christ's resurrection were either superstitious or conjurers. Far from it. In the words of Case, "For a people so thoroughly supernaturalistic in their thinking as were the Jews of Palestine at the beginning of the present era, they were singularly free from indulgence in magic and other gross displays of superstition that often marked the life of their Gentile neighbor." Had Christ died and risen in Rome, we might dismiss the gospel today as just another classical myth.

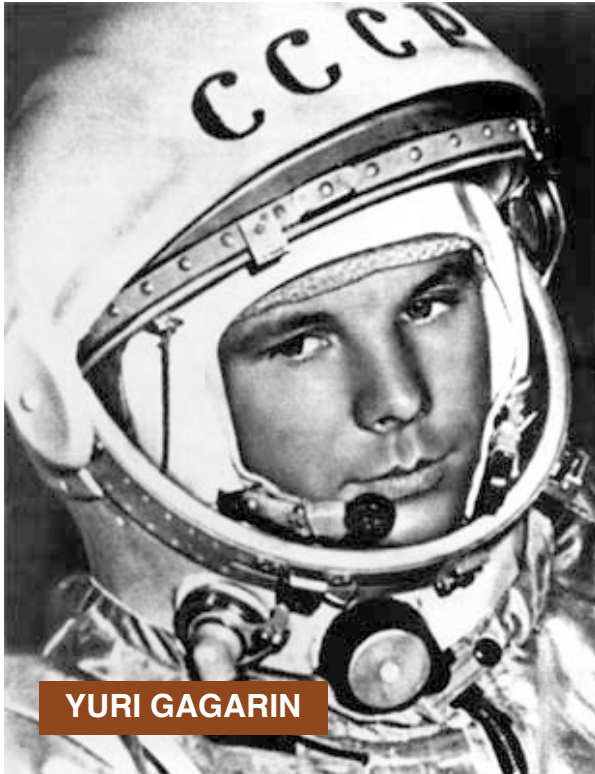
Had Christ shown Himself to Platonists or Epicureans after His resurrection, they might not have believed their own eyes and never shared the report. The fact that Christ's resurrection was reported by Jews (in spite of the fact that some of them were fishermen) should cause us to evaluate the gospel carefully, for it was witnessed by supernaturalists who were profoundly opposed to superstition and religious charlatanism.

Rationality of A Supernatural Universe

Granted that the authors of the gospels were supernaturalists and intended their reports to be understood as accounts of divine intervention, we still must ask whether supernaturalism is a tenable worldview at all. Can a story about God becoming man be *plausible*, or should we dismiss a literal interpretation of the Gospels without further ado and simply enjoy them as we might a good novel? While we may seem to swim against the current of our day by doing so, we must acknowledge that atheists are still in the extreme minority among the human race and that the vast majority of people of all walks of life, including scientists (both evolutionists and creationists) and philosophers, still consider supernaturalism a valid choice among worldviews.

Indeed, whether or not we accept the classical arguments for God's existence or trust the historical and contemporary evidences for a supernatural realm, reason forces us to admit at least the possibility of such a realm. After all, it is impossible to prove God does *not* exist. Russian cosmonaut and first man in orbit, Yuri Gagarin, is purported to have announced after his historic flight in 1961 that he was now

WORLDVIEW & THE GOSPELS



YURI GAGARIN

sure that God did not exist for he had gone further into space than any other man and found no god. If Gagarin actually made such a statement he deserves the trophy for the stupidest thing ever said! Unless a person has explored every niche in the universe *in every dimension*, he cannot be certain that God does not exist — to claim such certainty would be to claim omniscience and make himself a god.

The fact is that modern skeptics are not far from the mark: there is a rational — if not strictly scientific — explanation for everything. However, explanations for things outside of, or on the edge of, our material dimension are still beyond our grasp. The problem is that we call anything that exists in our familiar, material realm *natural*, and anything that exists outside of it *supernatural*,

and unconsciously make *supernatural* synonymous with *irrational* and *impossible*. We fail to recognize that our naturalism is actually “dimensionalism,” i.e., a refusal to accept as natural anything existing in or originating from outside of our own four dimensions of space and time. Surely this attitude can’t be politically correct! Who are we to say (and in contradiction to the findings of quantum physics, no less) that nothing can exist in any other realm but the one we inhabit in our daily routine? The skeptic’s problem is that he has not yet observed the spiritual realm sufficiently to understand it. If the spiritual realm exists, and if we eventually attain the means to observe it effectively, then angels will become no more supernatural for us than television signals that fly through the air are to us now. We will discover that spiritual entities, far from being irrational, abide by the “scientific” laws of their realm, just as our material universe abides by the laws of physics. There is a “natural” explanation for everything, but intellectual responsibility demands that we recognize nature as comprising a universe much larger than what we have thus far tamed in the test tube.

The existence of a spiritual realm beyond space and time *is* a rational possibility. If we can admit that, we can then weigh the evidence for the gospel reports without stumbling over their authors’ worldview and dismissing miracle accounts to hastily.

THE BIBLE VS. MYTHOLOGY

Roderick Graciano

Archaeology and the Battle Against the Bible

By reading current archaeological literature, one discovers that the battle *against* the veracity of the Bible still rages, and aims its disdain first at the beginning 11 chapters of Genesis. While historians and archaeologists have conceded that the Bible may contain “recoverable history” as far back in its narrative as the life of Abraham, they persist in branding Genesis chapters 1 to 11 as mythological. Of course, liberal theologians go beyond the archaeologist and historians and relegate all the supernatural events of both the Old and the New Testaments, especially the miracles and resurrection of Jesus, to the category of myth. In their most extreme exercise of *demythologizing* the scriptures, these biblical “scholars” have even arrogated to themselves the responsibility of sorting out the canonical sayings of Jesus and deciding which are authentic and which were later additions to the *Jesus myth*. In order to assess this classification of the early chapters of Genesis, along with the miracles and even some of the sayings of Jesus, as myth, we must first define our terms and then proceed to examine whether or not the attacks upon scripture as *mythological* are warranted.

What is Myth?

Myth, by *technical definition*, is sacred history. *Myth* refers especially to stories that deal with the creative acts of supernatural beings, and that explain the origins of earthly phenomena and cultural institutions. Myths of this kind are considered true by their cultural custodians who carefully distinguish them from fictional fables and tales.¹ The Bible does contain important *myth*, in this technical sense of the word. In our day, however, *myth* immediately evokes thoughts of legend and fantasy. In popular usage, *myth* means *imaginary*. Is it warranted to describe the historical narratives of the Bible as mythical in this sense?

Bible VS. Myth

History & Fable: The Two Extremes

Even the casual reader of the New Testament will observe that the canonical Gospels are written *not* in the style of myth, but in the style of history, a style that we can easily define and illustrate by contrasting it with out-and-out fable. Let’s do so by comparing some verses from Luke and a fable from the brothers Grimm. In Luke’s familiar Christmas story we read:

Luk 2.1 Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

Luk 2.2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luk 2.3 And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city.

Bible vs. Myth

Luk 2.4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,

Luk 2.5 in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

Luk 2.6 And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.

Then in the following chapter, Luke introduces the Baptist's ministry in this manner:

Luke 3:1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,

Luke 3:2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.

Luke 3:3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;

We see that Luke's narrative introductions provide dates designated by multiple factors, places designated by both their common and traditional names (e.g. "city of David, which is called Bethlehem"), and other elements conducive to verification, like the reference to an official census. Verifiable details are the marks of historical writing, but Luke goes almost to the extreme of a courtroom affidavit in his concern for historical demarcation. He intended his account to be taken as factual.²

In contrast, let's consider *Our Lady's Child*, a fable by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm (1812). It is the story of the only child of a poor wood-cutter, and begins:

Hard by a great forest dwelt a wood-cutter with his wife, who had an only child, a little girl of three years old. They were, however, so poor that they no longer had daily bread, and did not know how to get food for her.

The child is rescued from her poverty by the Virgin Mary and taken to heaven where she "ate sugar-cakes, and drank sweet milk, and her clothes were of gold, and the little angels played with her." Having reached adolescence, the Virgin entrusts the girl with 13 keys to the doors of heaven, granting her permission to look in all but the 13th door. Of course the child cannot resist the 13th door and disobediently looks inside when Mary is away:

"...once when the angels had all gone out, she thought, 'Now I am quite alone, and I could peep in. If I do it, no one will ever know.' She sought out the key, and when she had got it in her hand, she put it in the lock, and when she had put it in, she turned it round as well. Then the door sprang open, and she saw there the Trinity sitting in fire and splendour. She stayed there awhile, and looked at everything in amazement; then she touched the light a little with her finger, and her finger became quite golden. Immediately a great fear fell on her. She shut the door violently, and ran away. Her terror too would not quit her, let her do what she might, and her heart beat continually, and would not be still; the gold too stayed on her finger, and would not go away, let her rub it and wash it ever so much."

Bible vs. Myth

The Virgin Mary returned from her journey, discerned the girl's disobedience and asked her to confess. The girl denies having opened the 13th door, and so is dismissed from heaven and finds herself destitute in an earthly wilderness. She dwells alone until all her clothing tears and falls away bit by bit and only "her long hair covered her on all sides like a mantle." In time, a king finds her:

One day, when the trees were once more clothed in fresh green, the King of the country was hunting in the forest, and followed a roe, and as it had fled into the thicket which shut in this bit of the forest, he got off his horse, tore the bushes asunder, and cut himself a path with his sword. When he had at last forced his way through, he saw a wonderfully beautiful maiden sitting under the tree; and she sat there and was entirely covered with her golden hair down to her very feet. He stood still and looked at her full of surprise, then he spoke to her and said, "Who art thou? Why art thou sitting here in the wilderness?" But she gave no answer, for she could not open her mouth. The King continued, "Wilt thou go with me to my castle?" Then she just nodded her head a little. The King took her in his arms, carried her to his horse, and rode home with her, and when he reached the royal castle he caused her to be dressed in beautiful garments, and gave her all things in abundance. Although she could not speak, she was still so beautiful and charming that he began to love her with all his heart, and it was not long before he married her.

When their first child is born, the Virgin Mary appears and asks the girl, now a queen, to confess her sin. The queen again denies her disobedience and so the Virgin takes her child away to heaven. This cycle of birth, denial of her sin and loss of her child happens three times until the populace accuses the queen of being a child-eater and is about to burn her at the stake. Finally the queen shouts her confession to heaven, rain douses the flames of her pyre, and the infants who have been "playing with the ball of the world" in heaven are returned to their mother. The fable concludes:

...the Virgin Mary descended with the two little sons by her side, and the new-born daughter in her arms. She spoke kindly to her, and said, "He who repents his sin and acknowledges it, is forgiven." Then she gave her the three children, untied her tongue, and granted her happiness for her whole life.

This fable well illustrates the characteristics of its genre:

- (1) The facts are generalized, the characters un-named, be they kings or wood-cutters (only the Virgin Mary is named in the story).
- (2) The locations and dates are ambiguous.
- (3) The details are designed to appeal to children (e.g. eating sugar-cakes and playing with little angels).
- (4) There is drawn-out suspense to enhance the story-telling.
- (5) There are entertaining absurdities (e.g. "playing with the ball of the world").
- (6) There is a pointed moral to the story.
- (7) There is a romantic ending.

Admittedly gospel history and a Grimm brothers' fairy tale are two extremes of narrative style that no one would ever confuse. But having illustrated the gross differences between historical writing and fable-type myth, let us explore the more subtle

Bible vs. Myth

differences between biblical narrative and serious myth by comparing a “rescue story” from Genesis and one from Homer.

The Bible and Serious Myth: Subtle Differences

In Genesis 14.01-24, we can read the account of Abram’s rescue of Lot from Chedor-laomer’s marauders. The beginning of the story gives us more detail than we want regarding the names of the players in the drama, the locations of their battles and the extent of their victories. When Lot is captured and the news reaches Abram, we’re told even the name of the man who owned the trees that Abram was encamped by. We’re told exactly how many soldiers Abram took with him (not a rounded number) and told his basic battle strategy. When Abram returns victoriously, the witnesses of his victory are named, including Mamre and two kings. **Again we see the clear marks of historical narrative: specific details regarding persons, places and dates, and the means for verification (witnesses).** Whether or not historians and archaeologists are willing to take this narrative at face value, it is evident that the author intended to put it across to the reader as an event that really happened.

But now let’s compare an excerpt from Homer’s *Odyssey*, Book X (c. 900 BC; Translation: Butcher, S.H.; Lang, A.). This is the story of the Circe incident that opens with Odysseus recounting:

‘And we came to the isle Aeaean, where dwelt Circe of the braided tresses, an awful goddess of mortal speech, own sister to the wizard Aeetes. Both were begotten of Helios, who gives light to all men, and their mother was Perse, daughter of Oceanus. There on the shore we put in with our ship into the sheltering haven silently, and some god was our guide. Then we stept ashore, and for two days and two nights lay there, consuming our own hearts for weariness and pain.

Finally, half of Odysseus’ crew goes looking for help from the goddess. As they near her abode:

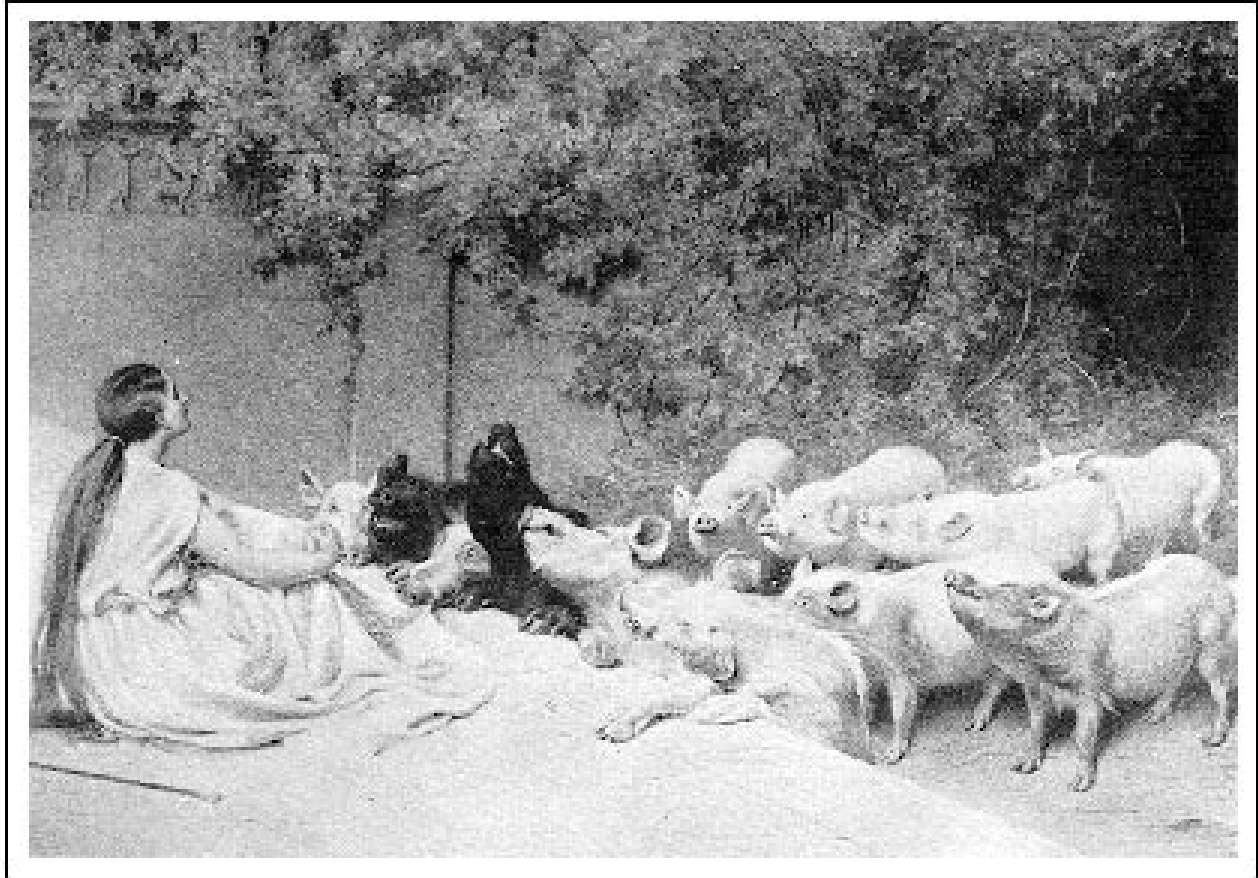
...straightway she came forth and opened the shining doors and bade them in, and all went with her in their heedlessness. But Eurylochus tarried behind, for he guessed that there was some treason. So she led them in and set them upon chairs and high seats, and made them a mess of cheese and barley-meal and yellow honey with Pramnian wine, and mixed harmful drugs with the food to make them utterly forget their own country. Now when she had given them the cup and they had drunk it off, presently she smote them with a wand, and in the styes of the swine she penned them. So they had the head and voice, the bristles and the shape of swine, but their mind abode even as of old. Thus were they penned there weeping, and Circe flung them acorns and mast and fruit of the cornel tree to eat, whereon wallowing swine do always batten.

So, Circe turned Odysseus’ crew into swine, and Eurylochus survived to hurry back and warn his captain. When Odysseus heard the report, he strapped on his armor and boldly strode forth to confront the goddess as though he had some idea how to overcome her magic wand! Fortunately for him, the god Hermes popped out on the trail along the way and gave Odysseus a magic herb that would fortify him against Cerce’s spells. The herb succeeds, and Odysseus overcomes the goddess, extracts an oath that

Bible vs. Myth

she will restore his men and then takes her to bed.

It's tempting to say of Homer's story, "Now that's not history, that's myth!" However, **both Genesis and Homer provide the geographical and personal detail in their stories that characterize historical narrative.** Using Homer's data, scholars have identified the island of Circe on the west coast of Italy between Rome and Naples, and one archaeologist believes that he has even found the dressed foundation stones



of her house.³ Of course, the discovery of Troy by Heinrich Schlieman has proven that Homer's writing at least preserves a core of history. The differences between true history and serious mythology (or embellished history) must be discerned by more subtle factors than those that divide history from out-and-out fable. In comparing the Rescue of Lot to the Rescue of Odysseus' Crew, we should compare (1) the plausibility of the details, and then ask (2) what is the underlying theology, (3) who is the hero and (4) what is the reward.

With regard to plausibility, we judge that while Abram's army seems small, the defeat of a larger army by superior strategy is not unknown, while Homer's magic wands, turning men into swine, etc. seems clearly in the realm of the make believe. Furthermore, in Homer, the frequency of *deus ex machina*, i.e. gods popping out of nowhere to solve unsolvable problems seems indeed contrived. One could say that the biblical God acts like a "god out of the machine" too in incidents like the parting of the Red Sea, but in contrast with Homer the biblical God's interventions occur in

Bible vs. Myth

logical progression with what He is revealing about himself at the time and do not seem implausible in their context.

As we compare the underlying theology of Genesis and Homer, we find holy monotheism contrasted to immoral polytheism. A moral God helps bring about justice on the one hand, and an immoral pantheon excuses men's debauchery on the other. When we ask who the hero of the story is, we see God Most High emphasized in the Genesis story and Odysseus in Homer. Finally, when we ask what the reward of the quest is, we see Abram receiving a divine blessing in Genesis, and in Homer we see Odysseus winning the prize of sex-with-a-goddess-for-a-year while his faithful wife Penelope continues to pine away at home.

The secular critic should choose the Genesis narrative as more likely to be historical than Homer's on the sole basis of the plausibility of the narratives' respective details. The Christian reader will of course be forced by his worldview to consider the monotheistic, moral and spiritual narrative as the more faithful representation of historical truth. **But whatever one's presuppositions, it should be evident by now that the Bible and even serious myth fall into two distinct classes of literature, and that the Bible should not be lightly relegated to mythology.**

Flood Stories: Mythology Intersects Theology

Still, the dividing line between biblical history and mythology does become blurred and difficult to discern when we compare the Genesis stories of creation and the flood to their pagan counterparts. Let us consider the section of the Gilgamesh Epic that tells the story of Utnapishtim, the man who survived the flood in a great boat. The parallels to the Genesis story of Noah in the Gilgamesh Epic are so striking that when George Smith discovered them on clay tablets in the archives of the British Museum in 1872, "he fainted dead away."

The Gilgamesh Epic tells the story of a Mesopotamian king who embarked on a quest seeking eternal life. Having heard of a man who survived the great flood and attained divine status, Gilgamesh sought him out in the land of "Faraway." Upon finding this Noah figure, named Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh extracted the story of how this immortal survived the flood (Tablet 11). Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh how the gods purposed to destroy mankind, but one of the gods, Ea, warned Utnapishtim and urged him to build a boat for his family and for representatives of the other living creatures. When Utnapishtim asked what he should tell his neighbors in view of the impending catastrophe, Ea coached him to speak of the imminent deluge in terms that made it sound like a great blessing coming upon their city:

**'...As for the city, fortunate Shuruppak,
In the morning dawning, abundance will then rain down:
there will be plenty, a flood of bounty, the city
teeming with heaven's profusion, game birds falling,
fishes unheard-of before in song or story,
tumbling loaves of fresh-baked morning bread;
grain will come showering in from all the grain fields;**

Bible vs. Myth

a harvest of everything, yes, more than enough.

These are the things to tell the elders and people.’⁴

In the following chapters of the Gilgamesh Epic, Utnapishtim (the Noah figure) tells how the people of the city helped him build his boat in seven days, load it with all his possessions and launch it into the river. He tells how the cataclysmic flood came and *frightened even the gods*. Then, in words echoing Genesis, Utnapishtim describes how his boat grounded on “Mount Nisir” and he proceeded to send out birds to seek dry land. When Utnapishtim finally goes ashore, he offers a sacrifice around which “the gods collected like flies.” Enlil, the god who commanded the flood, is enraged to find that one man had saved himself. Ea denies having told Utnapishtim of the impending disaster, and claims that the man “guessed the secret” and should be rewarded for his wisdom. As reward, Utnapishtim and his wife are inducted into the “company of the gods” and sent to live in “the Faraway” where Gilgamesh has now found them.

Since both Genesis and the Gilgamesh Epic undeniably tell versions of the same story and contain paragraphs of virtually identical material, can we still call one history and the other myth? Of course if our presuppositions are naturalistic, we will judge *both* Genesis and Gilgamesh as myths that at best preserve a kernel of truth about a natural and local flood disaster. If however, our starting point is theistic, such that divine judgments in the form of



Assyrian Nobles

floods do not seem unreasonable, then the plausibility test still helps us. The relative impotence of the Gilgamesh gods who become frightened of their own flood, and the ease with which they are deceived into bestowing divinity upon a mortal, make them seem quite absurd in comparison to the Almighty God of Noah. Nevertheless, we must ultimately judge the two narratives on the basis of their underlying theology and thus by *our theological presuppositions*. If one believes that the gospels and the biblical prophets are true, then he will accept histories that reveal a single, holy God, but will reject “histories” that describe an immoral pantheon. The monotheist will recognize these latter “histories” as myths that are colorful but utterly unreliable.

While it may seem unscholarly to bring our theology into the analysis of mythology, there is a distinct advantage in having faith in the Gospels as our starting

Bible vs. Myth

point. If our presuppositions are theistic and Christian, then we discover that our view of history explains the origin of all other mythology. Since the Bible reveals a cosmic battle between God and Satan for the souls of men, with the outcome hinging on man's relationship to the one true God, it follows that Satan will do everything in his power to draw men away from that one true God. Such a satanic objective will most certainly involve generating counterfeit histories and counterfeit religions. As a Christian, I judge this to be what has in fact happened. Secular and liberal scholars look at the Gilgamesh Epic and say, "this is the source for the Genesis story of Noah," but I see it the other way around. If the Genesis story is true, Satan has every incentive to pervert it and undermine its moral teaching by recasting it as an event overseen by an immoral pantheon. The Gilgamesh Epic gives no reason for the flood other than the whim of the gods, and no opportunity is given for humanity to repent of whatever they'd done wrong. (In one Mesopotamian version of the same story, the god Enlil decides to destroy mankind because people have become too noisy and are disturbing the god's sleep.⁵ In these Mesopotamian retellings, the story of the deluge loses all moral force, and this is exactly the kind of perversion of the facts that a Christian view of history would lead us to expect. Thus we see a final and impressive distinction between the Bible and myth: **the Bible explains myth, but myth cannot explain the Bible.**

Conclusion

J. P. Moreland tells of meeting a Jewish graduate student who had become a "committed follower of Jesus." When Moreland asked the student how he became a Christian, the Jewish man replied, "Dr. Moreland, I have studied myth most of my education. I know the earmarks of myth; that's all I study. My undergraduate training was in mythology; my graduate training has been in mythology. And I was practicing Koiné Greek reading the Gospel of Luke, and I got halfway through it, and as a Jew, I said, 'My God, this man really did these things. What am I going to do? This is history. It reads like history. It doesn't read like myth. I know what myth tastes like because all I do is read it, and that is not myth.'"⁶

As we have seen, the Bible does not at all taste like myth. The Bible is not only written in the style of history, but its content is also decidedly more plausible than pagan mythology. Furthermore, the Bible provides the explanation for all the counterfeit religions and perverted history of pagan mythology by revealing the cosmic and moral war between God and Satan. We are not surprised then to discover that the New Testament acknowledges the existence of pagan mythology and denounces it. In 1 Timothy 4.07, Paul warns, "But have nothing to do with **worldly fables** (μύθους)... On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness..." In 2 Timothy 2.13-4.04 he warns again:

But evil men and impostors will proceed {from bad} to worse, deceiving and being deceived... For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but {wanting} to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to **myths** (μύθους).

Bible vs. Myth

Paul also denounces myths in 1 Timothy 1.04 and “Jewish myths” in Titus 1.14. However, a denial by the apostle Peter carries the greatest implications for our present inquiry. In 2 Peter 1.16, the apostle declares: “For we did not follow **cleverly devised tales** (σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις) when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” The thing to note about this denial of peddling myths is that the continuing context takes us to 2 Peter 2.04-06 in which the apostle continues:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and {if} He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing {them} to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter...

We see that while denying that he deals in myths, Peter affirms the stories of the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (two stories so readily relegated to fantasy by liberal scholars), thereby affirming the historicity of the earliest chapters of Genesis. Since in addition to all the contrasts between the Bible and mythology we have already noted, the biblical authors themselves reject the characterization of their message as “cleverly devised tales,” we conclude that whatever one’s presuppositions, and whether one chooses to believe the Bible or not, one cannot put it in the same category as *myth*.

¹ See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*.

² Not only are the Gospels written in the style of history, but when taken at face value, they also provide the best explanation for the unfolding of Christian history. In the words of Peter Stuhlmacher of Tübingen University: “As a Western Scripture scholar, I am inclined to doubt these (Gospel) stories, but as a historian I am obliged to take them as reliable. The biblical texts as they stand are the best hypothesis we have until now to explain what really happened.” Quoted in R. Scott Richards’ *Myths the World Taught Me* (Nelson, Nashville, 1991).

³ See *The Voyages of Ulysses: A photographic interpretation of Homer’s classic*, by Erich Lessing (Herder Freiberg, Basle, 1965).

⁴ *Gilgamesh: A New Rendering in English Verse*, by David Ferry (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1992).

⁵ *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* by Alexander Heidel (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1946).

⁶ *Does God Exist? The Debate Between Theists & Atheists* by J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen (Books, Buffalo, 1990).

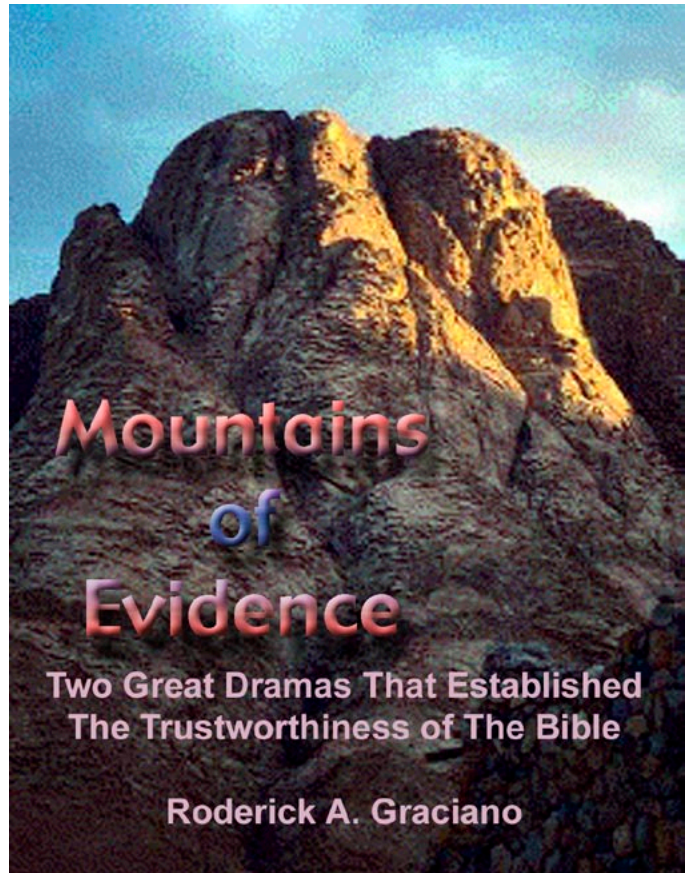
WHY HAS THE STORY OF JESUS CHRIST OF NAZARETH PERSISTED FOR SO LONG?

Secularists have increasingly come to think of faith as *hope without a basis*. A recent letter to the editors of Newsweek asserted that “faith is by definition, belief in the absence of evidence” (Newsweek, LETTERS, Oct. 7). The writer failed to see the illogic in his statement, since “faith” and “belief” are synonyms, but more importantly, he failed to check his dictionary. Authoritative dictionaries do not say that faith is “confidence in the absence of evidence,” but rather “confidence in the absence of *proof*.” The distinction is vital. Proof replaces faith, for when proof comes, faith is no longer necessary. Faith never replaces evidence, however, but depends upon it—unless it is what we call *blind faith*. Blind faith is what the Newsweek letter-writer apparently had in mind, but that is not the kind of faith that the Bible and historical Christianity have taught. The Bible has always called for intelligent faith, a belief that is reasonably founded on evidence.

Perhaps the best example of such a reasonable faith is a jury’s belief in the guilt or innocence of a defendant. Though the jurors were not present at the crime in question, they put their faith in the testimony of witnesses and other material evidence in order to establish the facts. It’s true that in the courtroom there is ample opportunity for bias and prejudice to obstruct a proper interpretation of the evidence, but once in a while a trial occurs in which the number of corroborating witnesses is so overwhelming, that prejudices must be set aside and the only reasonable verdict rendered. The Bible came into existence in the presence of just such an overwhelming number of corroborating witnesses.

The Birth of the Bible

The Bible originated around 1400 BC, when God, the Creator of heaven and earth, appeared in a body-like form on Mt. Sinai and dictated His laws to Moses. Those laws together with their pertinent history, make up the core of the first five books of the Bible, known collectively as the Pentateuch. There are two important things for us to realize about this birth of the Bible. The first is that it occurred in the full view of an entire nation of people, and the second is that those people were as wary of deception and religious charlatany as we are today.



Mountains Of Evidence

Two Million Witnesses

The story of an entire nation witnessing the birth of the Bible is one of the greatest dramas of all time. The nation was of course Israel, that great throng that marched out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. It included an army of “six hundred thousand men...besides women and children” (Exodus 12.37). Scholars estimate the total number of Israelites leaving Egypt at about two million. This multitude marched all the way from the area of the Suez to Mt. Sinai in the southern Sinai peninsula. Mt. Sinai is probably *Jebel Musa*, a granite mountain that peaks at 9,000 feet above sea level, and dominates a plain below, called *Er Ráhah*, which is wide enough accommodate a host of two million. When the nation assembled there, Moses went up on a ridge of the mountain and God came “down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people...Mt. Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire...the whole mountain trembled violently...then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him” (Ex.19.11,18,19). The next day, “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself...the Israelites...saw God, and they ate and drank” (Ex. 24.9-11). Thus, not only did the entire nation see the fiery manifestation and hear the thundering voice of God, but a select 74 witnesses ascended the ridge to view the bodily manifestation of God up close for an extended visit. Afterwards, God was able to say to the frightened Israelites, “You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven...”

This biblical manifestation of God before millions of witnesses contrasts sharply with the supposed divine revelations to Joseph Smith and Mohammed. Joseph Smith’s Mormonism and Mohammed’s Islam must be accepted on *blind faith*, because no one but the self-proclaimed prophets saw the appearances of angels, the discovery of the golden plates or the first recitation of the Qur’an. Not so in the case of the revelation to Moses. God gave His revelation to Moses in full view of the entire nation with the express purpose of giving the Israelites a basis for their faith. The Lord had said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will *always put their trust in you.*” In other words, God gave the first five books of the Bible to Moses, and gave them in such a way that the nation of Israel would never doubt that Moses’ writings had divine authority.

Skepticism Then and Now

This was very important, since the people of that era were as wary of deception as we are. With the growth of skepticism toward religion in our day, the media tends to depict the culture in which Judaism and Christianity were born as naïve and gullible. This assessment is not



Mountains Of Evidence

based on history so much as upon inferences convenient to infidelity. It's true that the late bronze age fostered bizarre beliefs that we consider superstitious today, but that does not mean that its cultures were devoid of critical thinkers. No doubt there were credulous simpletons in the pagan middle east, but there are probably just as many in our own culture watching Carl Sagan today. The ancient peoples of the middle east were quite good at observation and reasoning, as evidenced by their proverbs and their grasp of antithetical truth. They hated to be deceived, as illustrated in the stories of Isaac (Genesis 26.9), Jacob (Gen. 29.25), and Laban (Gen. 31.26), as well as by the 9th commandment (Exodus 20.16). They were not scientific incompetents, but had a well developed technology as proven by the pyramids and their treasures. They also resisted new religious claims as illustrated by Pharaoh's endless demands for proof before allowing the Israelites to follow their God out of Egypt, and by the Israelite's systematic testing of prophecies (Deuteronomy 18.22). Perhaps the pivotal difference between ancient cultures and ours was that their worldview and their science embraced spiritual realities, and not just the material ones that ours does. The early Semitic peoples demanded evidence for extraordinary propositions, but they knew that spiritual claims as well as material ones could be tested empirically. That is why God's dramatic attestation of the revelation to Moses was so important in establishing the Israelite's confidence in the Pentateuch.

The Pentateuch Test

This utter confidence in the first five books of the Bible served the nation well, because it allowed the Pentateuch to become the ultimate test for any books that followed. All the revelations that came through later prophets had to conform in principle and doctrine to the original five books or be deemed fakes. While God often confirmed the words of the later prophets with miracles, the people had to bear in mind that miracles themselves could be faked. There were only two ways to have absolute confidence in a new revelation: God had to appear in the overwhelming way He did at Mt. Sinai, or the new revelation had to agree with the Mt. Sinai scriptures. A Sinai-class theophany could not be faked, and neither could agreement with the original revelation to Moses. Therefore, since the Holy God of creation does not often choose to appear as He did at Sinai, the Israelites became accustomed to putting every new teaching or revelation to the litmus test of the Pentateuch. When spiritualism appeared in Israel, for example, and mediums started promoting necromancy as a path to truth, the prophet Isaiah demanded that they be put to the test of the Mosaic revelation: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light..." (Isaiah 8.20).

Objection, Your Honor!

What if all the witnesses died in the wilderness?

Even a skeptic can appreciate the wisdom in God's plan to safeguard His progressive revelation: God appears before 2 million witnesses and gives them 5 books, His appearance gives those 5 books unquestioned authority, and all books that follow have to conform in principle and doctrine or be rejected. The system should work—unless there's a break in the chain of witnesses. What if the supposed two million witnesses at Mt. Sinai all conveniently died as they wandered in the wilderness? What if some self-proclaimed prophet just walked out of the desert one day, and made up the whole story of the Exodus and God's appearance on Mt. Sinai? Thankfully, the Israelite enslavement in Egypt, the Exodus and the subsequent Israelite invasion of Canaan (Palestine) are well established historical facts.¹ The supernatural details of these events are more difficult to

Mountains Of Evidence

corroborate however, and for those we do rely on the witnesses. Sadly many of those witnesses did die as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. The original army of 600,000 men, aged 20 years and older, were afraid to invade Canaan even after God's spectacular assurances of victory. Consequently, God sentenced those men to die of hardships in the desert (Numbers 14.26-30). That's why we owe so much to the teenagers who were at Mt. Sinai. The teenagers at Mt. Sinai were old enough to intelligently observe the Exodus events, including the theophany at the mountain, and young enough to outlive the wilderness wanderings and serve as God's witnesses to the new generations of Israelites born in Canaan. When the Israelites finally settled in the land that is now Israel, the population included hundreds of thousands of senior citizens who could lucidly corroborate the miracles of the Exodus. The elders of every town and village were people who had seen God descend upon Mt. Sinai and had heard Him give His laws to Moses. Israelite children coming of age in the first several decades after the conquest could ask their parents and grandparents if the things written in the books of Moses had really happened, and their parents and grandparents could reply, "Yes, I saw it all happen with my own eyes." Any young man concerned that his grandpa was telling tall tales, could walk to the next town and ask any of the old men there the same questions and get the same assurances.

"Yes, I saw it all happen with my own eyes."



What if the Sinai theophany was just a volcano?

We must admit that something dramatic happened at Sinai, and that the entire nation of Israel saw it and heard it. Isn't it possible, however, given the biblical description of smoke and fire on the mountain, that the people just witnessed a volcanic eruption and superstitiously attributed it to a divine visitation? After all, Polynesians used to believe that the fire goddess, Pele, inhabited the crater of Kilauea Volcano on the island of Hawaii, and caused it to erupt by her jealous rages.

I suppose that one might chalk up the Sinai theophany to volcanic activity if not for two things: first, volcanoes are noisy but they don't speak distinctly, and secondly, the revelation at Sinai was not an isolated event, but came at the climax of a series of divine manifestations. When God spoke from Mt. Sinai to the entire nation assembled on the plain below, they distinctly heard the words recorded in Exodus 20, that we call the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments. The people were so shaken by God's voice and its accompanying unearthly phenomena that they begged Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us [anymore] or we will die." That was the point at which God relented, and replied, "You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven," now, don't make any other gods! (Cf. Deuteronomy 5.22-29.) Volcanoes don't communicate so well. More importantly, however, we must realize that the Israelites were already well acquainted with God by the time they got to Mt. Sinai. He had already brought down the ten plagues upon the nation of Egypt, plagues that struck down the Egyptians and their possessions, but did not harm the Israelites in their midst. God had already parted the sea at Moses' request. God had miraculously given the road-weary Israelites manna and quail to eat and water

Mountains Of Evidence

from a rock. And from the time they had left Egypt, God had led them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of *fire* by night. Volcanic fire doesn't travel like that. No, the Israelites knew very well that there was something more than a whole lot of shaking going on. They knew that they were in the thundering, surround-sound theater of the Living God, and to their joyous surprise, they lived to tell about it. The Exodus survivors corroborated by the hundreds of thousands that God had spoken to them and to Moses.

A Nation's Final Authority

This overwhelming corroboration of the Exodus events and the divine revelation of the Pentateuch entered so profoundly into the Israelite psyche, that the authenticity of these first five books of the Bible was never questioned while Israel remained a nation. Even when the Israelites strayed after other gods, they never denied Moses' authority nor the authenticity of his books. The revelation given at Sinai was held by the Jews to be their ultimate authority, right up until AD 73 when the Roman legions destroyed Israel as a political entity. Thankfully, by then another mountain of evidence had taken its place in history to confirm the revelation on Mt. Sinai for the world at large.

The Pentateuch Prediction

Long before the Roman destruction of Israel, Moses had predicted in the Pentateuch that a Savior would come into the world. This Savior, Moses wrote, would have a prophetic personality like his own, would speak with divine authority, and destroy Satan (Deut. 18.18,19; Genesis 3.15). Furthermore, by the sacrificial system detailed in the Pentateuch, Moses taught that mankind's salvation would come through a substitutionary death (Hebrews 9.22). Moses recorded how he himself, by a prophetic action, had illustrated the defeat of Satan and death by lifting up a symbolic substitute for sin on a wooden pole (John 3.14). Centuries later, when the nation of Israel groaned under the oppression of Rome, the people longed for the Savior that Pentateuch had promised. Suddenly, a motley group of Galileans, visiting Jerusalem for the holidays, began loudly proclaiming that Moses' Messiah had in fact come, atoned for the sins of the world, and victoriously ascended to heaven. The proof of all this, they said, was that this Savior, Jesus of Nazareth, had died and risen back to life.

A Man Raised Himself From The Dead? Yeah, right...

Now suppose that you and I, just for laughs, started a rumor that a man had died, raised *himself* back to life again, and then ascended to heaven. Would anyone listen? Perhaps if we were quite earnest and made sure our stories matched, someone might take us seriously enough to investigate. Then what? We'd have to come up with some kind of proof that our resurrection-man had existed, and had died. Perhaps we could clip out an obituary that roughly matched our story, but it would have to be one about a missing body. If we obtained such an obituary and claimed that we'd seen this man come back to life, we'd probably be investigated by the local police as the latest ones to have had contact with a missing body. Sooner or later, we'd decide it was time to call off the hoax before we had to hire a lawyer. Perhaps someone would expose our hoax by demonstrating that we had never really seen their dearly departed Uncle Harry. Needless to say, a fraudulent story about a man conquering death is not going to capture the local headlines for very long. The story of the Galilean witnesses, however, has been capturing media attention for the last 2,000 years! What has enabled the story of Jesus Christ of Nazareth to persist for so long?

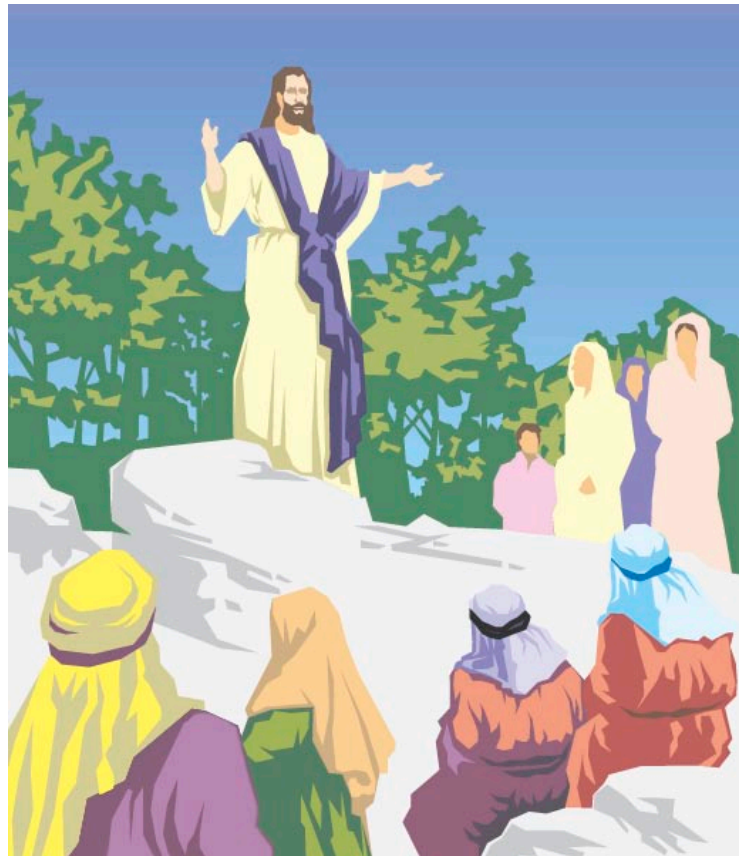
Mountains Of Evidence

Consider the differences between the story of Jesus and our fraudulent Uncle Harry story. Jesus was not an obscure figure. Several nations knew of His existence during his lifetime. His three-year, public preaching and healing career stirred up enough controversy that princes, priests and paupers in Judea and the surrounding countries had all heard of Him. Likewise, the representatives of multiple nations witnessed His public execution at Jerusalem. No one had to come up with an obituary; the death of Jesus was public knowledge. To this day, daring pulp writers who claim that Jesus of Nazareth never existed or that He wasn't executed, are not taken seriously by historians. The life of Jesus and his execution under Pontius Pilate are historical facts. But what about the radical part of the story, the part that says he came bodily back to life? How has that claim persisted through history?

The Other Mountain

The answer to this question has a lot to do with the power of Jesus' message (Romans 1.16), but that's not the focus of this article. Our present interest is in the power of overwhelming evidence, and that was the launching pad of the subsequently world-wide belief in Christ's resurrection. Unlike our fraudulent Uncle Harry, Jesus didn't disappear immediately after his resurrection. Jesus spent another forty days with His followers, teaching them and assuring them of His personal conquest of death (Acts 1.1-3). Now, if the resurrected Jesus had only appeared to one or two witnesses, His resurrection probably would have been chalked up to the wishful delusions of a couple of grieving friends, and the story would have dropped out of the local news pretty quickly. It's a little harder to refute the witness of hundreds of people though, particularly when over 500 people saw the resurrected Christ *at the same time* (1 Corinthians 15.6)! That's overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of a dead man!

The first people to see Jesus, after his body had lain dead for three days and come back to life, were two women, both named Mary. In that awesome encounter, Jesus said to them, "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28.10). The Gospel of Matthew tells us that "then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go" (28.16). The Gospel writers do not tell us the name of the mountain in Galilee where Jesus appeared to His followers (they probably didn't want a shrine built there), nor do they say explicitly that this is where the multitude saw Him all at once. It's the most likely place mentioned in the Gospels for such an event, however. A




Mountains Of Evidence

mountainside, like a lakeside, can form a natural amphitheater where many people can see and hear a teacher at once. It was in such a post-resurrection audience that Jesus convincingly taught His followers that everything Moses had written was true, and could be trusted, regardless of popular opinion. Furthermore, as Jesus taught the eleven remaining apostles in the hearing of the fledgling Christian community, He thereby instilled in those first Christians a confidence in what the apostles would soon write. It was the overwhelming testimony of that first Christian community that gave the first-century world confidence in the apostle's message and in the New Testament born from their writings. From that beginning, unbroken generations of Christians have safely carried the intact testimony from the mountain of Galilee down to us. It's no wonder that present-day lawyers, versed in the rules of evidence, appreciate the integrity of the apostolic writings. In his book, *Basic Christianity*, John R. W. Stott quotes one such lawyer, Sir Edward Clarke, K.C.:

As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidence for the events of the first Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling. Inference follows on evidence, and a truthful witness is always artless and disdains effect. The Gospel evidence for the resurrection is of this class, and as a lawyer I accept it unreservedly as the testimony of truthful men to facts they were able to substantiate.

Indeed, the well-substantiated events at Mt. Sinai and at the other mountain in Galilee provide us with the basis to explicitly trust the Old Testament and the New.

Christian Faith and Cold Reason

Does all of this imply that Christian faith is nothing more than a conclusion arrived at by studying facts with cold reason? Unfortunately not. Reason can lead us to an intellectual assent of the facts, but Christian faith is faith in a person, not just in a set of facts. Christian faith is a relational faith, and it has as much to do with the will as with the intellect. Your intellect may tell you that a tightrope walker can carry you across a chasm, but your will may well keep you from trusting the tightrope walker in practice. So it is with Christian faith. Your intellect may tell you that Jesus is the Son of God who paid the price for your sins with His substitutionary death on the cross, but you may still be unwilling to trust Him with your life and destiny. Nevertheless, as Clark Pinnock has said, "The heart cannot delight in what the mind rejects as false." The dramatic events at Mt. Sinai and at the other mountain in Galilee provide us with mountains of evidence that the writings of Moses and of Christ's apostles are true. Once our mind embraces that proposition, we are ready to consider taking the next step, which is to delight with our heart in the Person that Moses and the apostles wrote about, Jesus Christ. As one of the witnesses from Galilee wrote, "to all who received [Jesus Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1.12). 

POTTERY IN BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

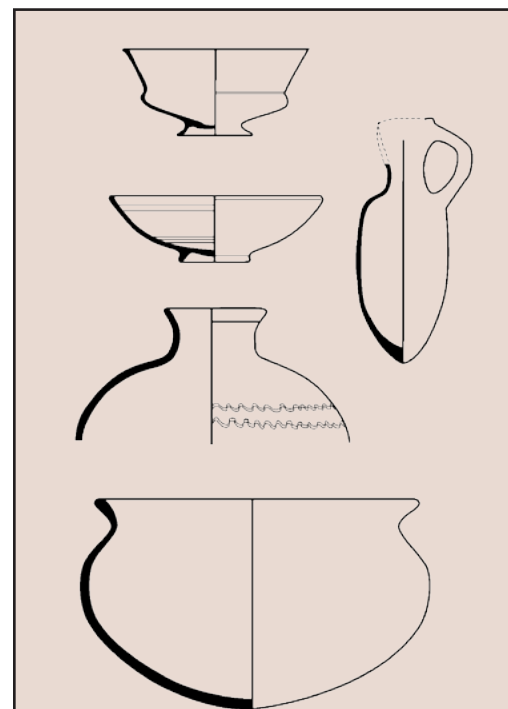
Why Archaeologists Value What the Ancients Didn't

Pot's shatter but potsherds are almost indestructible. This serendipitous paradox makes pottery one of the most valuable artifacts at an archaeological dig. Because pottery vessels are fragile, the people of antiquity used a great quantity of them and left behind a great quantity of broken pieces. Because the hardened clay itself survives the millennia so well, archaeologists now find those countless of ancient potsherds, and not only reassemble beautiful vessels from the time of Christ and before, but can also trace the evolution of pottery styles in a given culture. Unlike gold or silver coins, potsherds had no inherent value and were often left in their original cultural context and near their place of manufacture. This fact allows archaeologists to make important correlations between pottery types and their cultures of origin, and then use pottery to identify the cultures of different sites and to construct a relative-dating system for strata within multiple sites.

Axeheads, pottery and the like are dated relatively to one another by being arranged in an evolutionary series, from more "primitive" to more refined.



Reconstructed Pottery



Pottery types used to date Jericho's City IV: "A simple, round-sided bowl with concentric circles painted on the inside (No. 2) is particularly important for dating Jericho's City IV because such bowls were used only for a short time in the latter half of the 15th century B.C.E. The flaring carinated (angled) bowl with a slight crimp (No. 1), a storage jar with a simple folded rim (No. 3), a cooking pot (No. 4) and a dipper juglet (No. 5) are all common to the late Bronze Age [1550-1200 BC]." Source: BAR Mar/Apr 1990.

Why Didn't Jesus Say, "I AM GOD" ...In So Many Words?

By Roderick Graciano

Muslim friends have asked me, "If Jesus was God, why didn't he ever say, 'I am God'?" Fair question. It's true that a search of the New Testament will not turn up any verse in which Jesus says "I am God" in so many words. Other people called Him "God" (John 20.28), New Testament writers ascribe deity to Him (John 1.1; Colossians 2.9), and He Himself claimed divine attributes (John 5.21; 17.5) and referred to Himself as "Lord" (John 13.13). Furthermore, He claimed unique oneness and sonship with the Father, a claim the Jews recognized as equivalent to calling Himself "God" (John 10.30-36). Jesus even applied the personal name of the eternal God,



"I AM," to Himself, for which the Jews tried to stone Him (John 8.56-59). Still, He never in the New Testament record said, in so many words, "I am God." Why? I assure you, there are some very good reasons!

The Incarnation Cannot Be Explained In So Few Words

To begin with, for Jesus to have simply said, "I am God," would hardly have conveyed the full reality of the incarnation. If Jesus is God, He is obviously something besides (if not *other than*) God-in-His-infinite-essence." Everyone who saw Jesus with their own eyes knew that He was a man, whatever else He might be. A general claim to deity by Jesus would have jolted His audience with an immediate paradox: how can a man be God? Pagans in His audience may have accepted the possibility of Christ's "godhood," but would have wanted to know

Why Didn't Jesus Say, "I AM GOD"?

which god of the mythological pantheon He claimed to be. For Jews (as for Muslims today) the paradox presented a more difficult puzzle. People of the Bible knew that there is only one God and that the heavens cannot contain His glory, so how could a man claim to embody the infinite Creator of the universe without blaspheming? For Christ to announce, "I am God," too early in His ministry would have raised more questions than it answered.

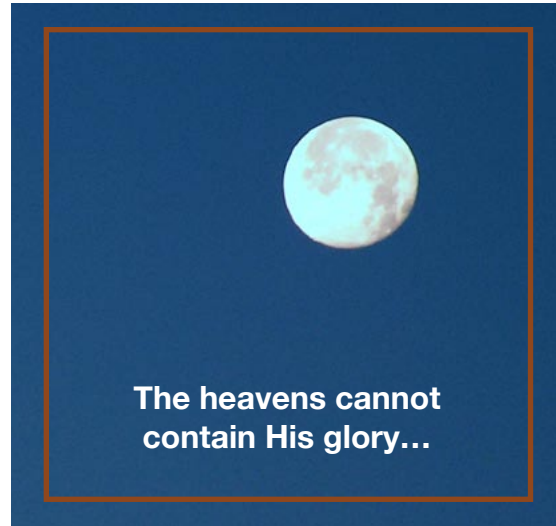
Jesus Would Not Identify With Crackpots

Furthermore, how would *you* respond if one of your contemporaries on the street or behind a pulpit said, "I am God!" Wouldn't that raise red flags in your mind? I would be scandalized. We all know that claiming to be God does not make it so. On the contrary, when a person claims to be God it marks him as a lunatic or a liar attempting to defraud his audience. If Jesus had injudiciously claimed deity, using a generic title for God like *Elohim* (Hebrew) or *Theos* (Greek), nothing inherent in the pronouncement itself would have set him apart from the countless crackpots who have claimed divinity throughout history. Talk is cheap and Christ did not wish people to take Him as a lunatic mouthing empty words.

Jesus Knew That Actions Speak Louder than Words

When a person claims to be God, it marks him as a lunatic or a liar...

On the other hand, Jesus knew that consistently acting like God—doing the things that one would expect God to do—would more effectively reveal His identity. When Jesus called God His father and said, "I and the Father are one," (John 10.30), the Jews picked up stones with which to put Him to death. They accused Jesus of blasphemy, saying, "you, a mere man, claim to be God." The sublime response of Jesus was: "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does" (John 10.37). No answer could be fairer nor more rational—*Don't believe my claim to deity unless I can back it up!*

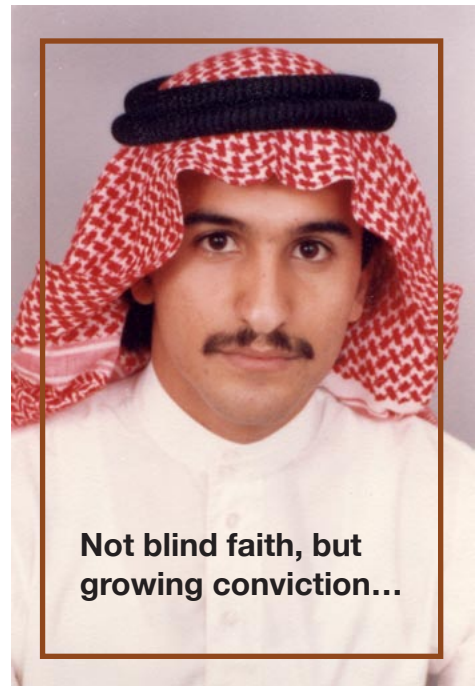


Why Didn't Jesus Say, "I AM GOD"?

Conviction is Stronger When We Draw Our Own Conclusions

Not only was Christ's approach to His self-revelation fair and rational, it was also supremely wise. Jesus understood that people make better disciples when they draw their own conclusions about the truth, rather than blindly following what they're told to believe. Our convictions are deeper and stronger when formulated from deep within ourselves as we weigh the evidence. Many of us have stopped believing myths our parents told us, but our convictions have deepened regarding those truths for which we see mounting evidence over the course of time. This is what Jesus desired from His disciples — not blind faith, but growing conviction.

After all, much was at stake. Jesus was not calling people to a mere intellectual assent to some esoteric idea, but rather to a self-denying, all-risking allegiance to His own person. He could not afford to have people follow Him just because He told them to, or just because they blindly accepted an audacious claim to deity. Such converts fall away at the first sign of difficulty. Jesus sought followers who would take up their cross and follow Him.



A Subtle Self-Revelation Was Like the Parables

Jesus also wanted followers who already had a heart for God. When the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke to the crowds in parables, He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them....In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:... 'this people's heart has become callused...'" (Matthew 13.10-17). In first-century Israel, a person had to deeply desire God before they would be willing to wrestle with the parables of Jesus. Many of the parables shattered the theological preconceptions of the day. Many of them cut across the fleshly desires of human nature. People interested only in fleshly things turned away from these teachings of Jesus. The parables served to weed out the complacent in Christ's audience and to draw in those with spiritually hungry hearts.

The subtle self-revelation of Christ served a similar purpose. Had He recklessly declared, "I am God," He would have drawn a mixed rabble of followers. On the other hand, the subtle and even metaphorical statements He made about Himself, drew only those people whose hearts had been prepared to recognize Messiah (see John 6.53-69). Those with prepared hearts, namely those

Why Didn't Jesus Say, "I AM GOD"?

committed to seeking and serving God, recognized His voice. As Jesus said, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." (John 7.17). When people turned away from Jesus because of the metaphors He applied to Himself, they fulfilled the very purpose of those sayings.

Jesus Would Not Jeopardize His Mission (John 17.4)

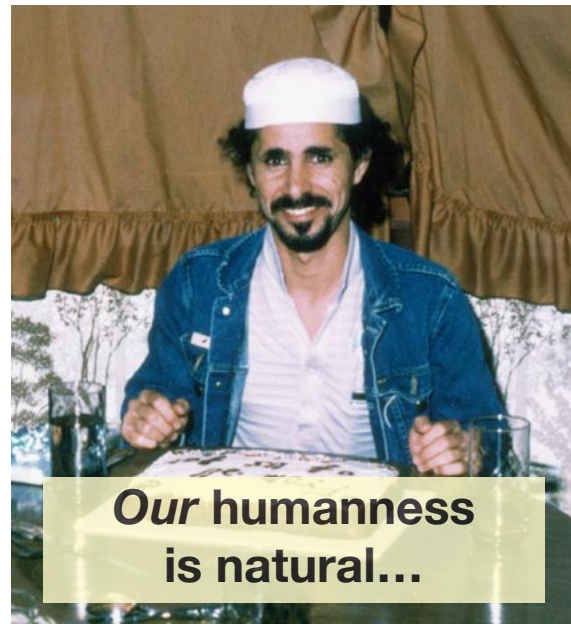
God's purposes in the incarnation were more profound and more complex than anyone at the time could have imagined. The gospel history, however, makes it very clear why Jesus did not more loudly broadcast His deity. In the words of B. F. Westcott:

"He veiled His own glory if it turned the eyes of men from the glory of the Father. He refused the homage which misinterpreted His mission. As He gave us the assurance of Sonship, He gave us also the example of Sonship."

Jesus *is* God, but His first coming was not to make a point of His deity, but rather to glorify the Father by completing a sacrificial work! Jesus came not only to give us life, but also to show us how to live, not as gods, but as sons of God. If Christ's priority had been to reveal His deity, there would have been no better time than when He fed the five thousand (John 6.1-15). The people who witnessed the miracle intended to "make him king by force." But Christ had not purposed to become an earthly king, and so He withdrew. He veiled His glory even then so as to not jeopardize His true mission of purchasing *an eternal kingdom* with His own blood. Those who complain of Jesus' lack of forthrightness with regard to His divinity show that they have not yet understood His mission.

Consider the Power of a "Superfluous" Title

Neither have skeptics understood the significance of the title *Son of Man*. Jesus often applied this title to Himself (Matthew 9:6; John 1:51). On the face of it, "son of man" simply means "human" (Numbers 23:19), but how would you respond if your pastor put his arm around your shoulder and whispered confidentially, "I'm human." You'd wonder if he was feeling all right. Why would he emphasize a superfluous point? If he went about saying it all the time you'd think he was a few books short of a



**Our humanness
is natural...**

Why Didn't Jesus Say, "I AM GOD"?

full canon. So did Jesus have a mental problem? Hardly. Never was any man so in control of his faculties as Jesus was. Jesus was emphasizing, to those who had ears to hear, that humanity was *not* a superfluous claim for Him. For Jesus, as for no other man or woman in history, humanness *is* something special. Whereas our humanness is natural, His was supernaturally acquired. Jesus was something else and came from another place *before He was human* (John 1.1; 3:13; 6:62). On His lips, the title *Son of Man* was one of the most powerful statements He could have made about His preexistence, and therefore of His deity.

All the more so since *Son of Man* is the description of the divine redeemer in Daniel 7.13, 14. In an earlier century, Daniel had reported:

"I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might **serve** Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed." (NASB, emphasis mine.)

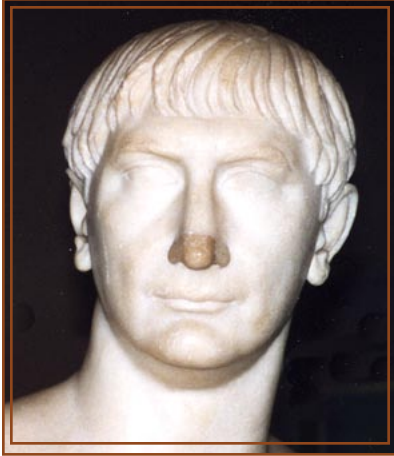
That someone "like a Son of Man" would come *from heaven*, the abode of God and angels, greatly surprised Daniel. That this man-like figure is divine is revealed by the fact that all people would "serve" Him, for the Aramaic term so translated means "pay reverence to, [or] serve *deity*," and is correctly translated "worship" in the NIV. The Son of Man in Daniel is a redeemer who is *with* God (the Ancient of Days) and who *is* God (Cf. John 1.1)!

Jesus had holy and wise reasons for de-emphasizing his divinity during His earthly ministry. In the final analysis, far from negating His divine nature, His subtle self-revelation served to set Him light-years apart from the many false messiahs who tried so hard and so futilely to prove that they were something they were not.



...with the clouds of heaven, One
like a Son of Man was coming...

Daniel 7.13



WHAT PANICKED PONTIUS PILATE ?

By Roderick Graciano

The fright of the Roman Prefect helps us understand what Jesus was claiming for himself and his followers.

THE CHILLING ACCUSATION

Pontius Pilate just didn't get it: the chief priests wanted Jesus of Nazareth *crucified!* Still, the hapless Roman governor, even after having Jesus scourged, kept declaring the bleeding man *Not Guilty*. Finally...

The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law He deserves to die, because He styles Himself *Son of God*." (Joh 19.7; my translation)

Then Pilate did something entirely unexpected. What the chief priests expected the governor to do was to capitulate to their demands, for now they had told him that he would offend their religious sentiments if he didn't cooperate. The gospel of John (19.08), however, emphasizes the unexpected response from Pilate with a curious Greek phrase: *rather he feared!* When Pilate heard that Jesus claimed to be *Son of God*, a phobia wrapped about his soul like a winter freeze and sent ice water washing through his veins. What was it that so chilled Pontius Pilate? Before exploring this question, let's verify that the charge made against Jesus by the chief priests wasn't trumped up.

DID JESUS ACTUALLY REFER TO HIMSELF AS THE SON OF GOD?

A review of the Gospels assures us that the chief priests had not fabricated their accusation against Jesus. In answer to the Jewish council's query, Jesus had explicitly confessed Himself "the Son of God." "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?" the high priest had asked. "I adjure you by the living God, tell us whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus left them no doubt: "It is as you have said: I AM." (Mat 26.64; Mar 14.62; Luk 22.70.) On an earlier occasion, Jesus had clearly admitted, "I said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Joh 10.36). Furthermore, He had often referred to Himself in the third person as the Son of God:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live." (Joh 5.25)

Oftener still, Jesus had referred to Himself in exclusive terms as "the Son" of the Heavenly Father:

"All things have been handed over to Me by My **Father**; and no one knows the **Son**, except the **Father**; nor does anyone know the **Father**, except the **Son**, and anyone to whom the **Son** wills to reveal Him." (Mat 11.27)

"And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the **Father** may be glorified in the **Son**." (Joh 14.13)

What Panicked Pontius Pilate?

Indeed Jesus was guilty as charged on this count of styling Himself *God's Son!* The chief priests had not invented this accusation. Is it possible, however, that they had misunderstood what Jesus meant?

WHAT DID JESUS MEAN BY THE PHRASE SON OF GOD?

Perhaps you have heard some dilettante explain: "When Jesus called himself the son of God, he was just teaching that *all people* are children of God and that we should all embrace the brotherhood of man." People who say such things demonstrate that they have never read the Gospels. Are we to suppose that Pilate panicked because Jesus was teaching the brotherhood of man? Hardly. We must remember that the first step to understanding the meaning of any word or phrase from antiquity is to investigate how that word or phrase was understood by the people who used it back then. Rather than interpreting the phrase, *Son of God* by modern secular or mystical usage, let's see how Christ's own contemporaries used it.

How First-Century Jews Understood The Title, Son of God

Nathanael, a man known for his integrity, said to Jesus, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel" (Joh 01.49). Apparently in Nathanael's mind, the title, *Son of God* was a royal one and meant that the bearer of the title had the right to rule Israel. In another case, when Jesus probed Martha about her faith, the grieving sister of Lazarus, replied, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world" (Joh 11.27). For Martha, the title, *Son of God*, was Messianic and applied to the long-awaited deliverer that God had promised to send into the world. The enemies of Jesus amplified the Messianic dimension of our phrase when they mocked Jesus as he hung from the cross. They shouted, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Mat 27.40). In other words, for them, anyone who was the Son of God had to have supernatural powers. But the accusation that the chief priests brought before Pilate infuses the phrase, *Son of God*, with its strongest meaning, for in that case the accusers considered Jesus' usage of the phrase as blasphemy. In other words, in the minds of the chief priests a person who claimed to be the Son of God was claiming to be intrinsically related to God, that is, divine.¹ The Jewish leaders' understanding of the phrase as implying deity is confirmed in other passages like Joh 10.33-36. Jesus had been referring to God as particularly *his* Father and the Jews picked up stones to stone him. To Jesus' question of why they wanted to stone him, the Jews answered, "...for blasphemy; even because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God." Clearly, to Christ's own culture, *Son of God* meant the promised, divine Messiah who would wield supernatural power and sovereign authority over Israel.

Jesus Had Not Been Misunderstood

But what did Jesus himself mean by the phrase? Recently published Dead Sea Scroll fragments that employ the phrase, *Son of God*, support the fact that Jesus understood very well how his own culture would interpret the provocative phrase. Therefore we must conclude that he intended the title to convey precisely the meaning it did to his countrymen. No one should suppose that Jesus was misunderstood by the chief priests. Whether one accepts his claims or not, one must accept that Jesus did claim to be the divine Messiah-King, the unique God-Man.

What Panicked Pontius Pilate?

The Old Testament Foundation

But there's more to it. In our search for biblical meaning, we often overlook biblical emphasis. For Jesus, the phrase, *Son of God*, conveyed various shades of meaning, but what was his intended emphasis? What was the main thing Jesus expected his audience to understand from this particular title? The meaning Jesus most desired to convey would have been based on the ideas associated with a "son of God" in the Jewish Scriptures. When we search the Old Testament, one connotation for "son of God" stands out above all others. Two examples will suffice to illustrate it: Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7. In the Psalm, the anointed King in Zion says, "I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, 'Thou art My Son, Today I have begotten Thee.'" In this passage, God refers to His Son, but notice that in spite of the figurative word "begotten," the Son in view is not one who is a son intrinsically, but rather one who is adopted as a son upon having been installed as king. This usage becomes clearer in 2 Samuel. In Nathan's prophecy about the future of the Davidic dynasty, God says to David:

"When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and **I will establish** his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and **I will establish** the throne of his kingdom forever. **I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me;** when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne **shall be established** forever." (2 Sam. 7:12-16; emphasis added)

While this prophecy has Messianic undertones, it refers directly to David's son, Solomon, who built the first temple in Jerusalem. The three-fold use of the verb *establish* makes clear that when God promises to be a father to Solomon and adopt him as a son, He is promising to establish Solomon's rule and maintain it against all challengers. In other words, to be the Son of God in the language of the Hebrew Scriptures meant **to have received the divine approbation and patronage to rule**. This then was what Jesus was communicating to both his followers and his enemies at appropriate moments: He was their God-appointed King and he intended to rule their lives. This helps us understand what scared Pontius Pilate.

WHY THE TITLE, SON OF GOD, MADE PILATE FEAR

The account of Pilate's governorship in both the Gospels and in secular histories, tells me that this wily politician normally feared only one thing, namely, a political gaffe that would sink his already battered career. Philo, the Jewish historian, reported that on a separate occasion when Jewish leaders threatened to refer a dispute to the Emperor Tiberius, Pilate "feared that if they actually sent an embassy they would also expose the rest of his conduct as governor."² Consequently, as Jesus stood before Pilate, the one issue the governor wanted to get to the bottom of was the initial charge that Jesus had called himself "Messiah, a King" (Luk 23.03). Pilate kept asking about this, for as governor he could ill afford another insurrectionist stirring up Judea. Pilate was momentarily relieved when Jesus explained that his kingdom pertained to a different realm and that Pilate need not fear an uprising from Jesus' subjects. It sounded like Jesus was just a mystic after all. Pilate was further relieved when he learned that Jesus was from Galilee and that the responsibility for this political brouhaha could be handed off to Herod Antipas, the Galilean tetrarch. But Herod sent Jesus back

What Panicked Pontius Pilate?

to Pilate and then the chief priests dropped the bombshell: “He styles Himself *Son of God*.”

Why A Man Of the First Century Would Claim to Be The Son of God

Pilate had his own lexical context for the phrase, *Son of God*, because rulers who aspired to *world conquest* had been calling themselves that for ages! Alexander the Great, for example, had followed a long line of claimants to divinity as an encyclopedia article on *Kingship* relates:

It was with his conquest of Egypt and of Persia that Alexander entered into the pretensions to divinity that his predecessors in those kingdoms had had. How far he believed himself to be a god and expected his Greek and Macedonian followers to regard him as a god rather than as a “godlike” hero worthy of divine honours is still vigorously debated.³

One of Alexander’s infamous political heirs, a Seleucid king named Antiochus, had styled himself *Epiphanes*, meaning *manifestation*, that is, *manifestation of God*. Another Seleucid ruler aspiring to dominion over the Jews is probably the person referred to in the Dead Sea fragment, 4Q246, with language hauntingly like Luke’s: “He will be called the Son of God, they will call him the son of the Most High.” Such rulers often claimed they were a son of one or another of the gods in order to claim the divine right to rule. Pilate knew of such claims, but would have had to look no further than his own culture for the meaning of *Son of God*. The sycophantic Romans themselves were in the habit of calling their own emperors *divi filius*, *Son of God*!

With this imperial connotation of the phrase well-imbedded in his mind, Pilate the politician became profoundly frightened because he knew there was only one reason a man would publicly claim to be *Son of God*. Such a man could only be making a bid for world dominion, and by this claim was announcing his intent to rule over his hearers—and others yet to be conquered!⁴ There was no better way for a first-century insurrectionist to rally rebels around himself than to claim that God was on his side because he was God’s son.

Therefore, when Pilate heard that Jesus had claimed to be *Son of God*, the first thing he did was to probe further about Jesus’ regional base. “Where are you from?” Could there be a secret army already organized up in Galilee somewhere? When Jesus answered nothing, Pilate’s fear overflowed: “Why don’t you answer me! Don’t you know that I have the authority to set you free and the authority to crucify you?” Why wouldn’t Jesus reassure him that there was no revolution in the making?

Why Then Did Pilate Try To Release Jesus?

In all the history of the world, if there was ever a man put on the spot it was Pontius Pilate. How should he judge Jesus of Nazareth? He knew that the chief priests had trumped up charges against Jesus out of envy (Mar 15.10). He could not escape the suspicion that the real grievance of the Nazarene’s accusers was a religious one, but if that were so, why had Jesus complicated everything by calling himself the Son of God? To Pilate Jesus was obviously not divine, for although an appearance of a god in human form was possible in the Roman worldview, a real god-man would not have allowed himself to be captured and tormented by these religious hypocrites—let alone scourged by Pilate’s flagellators. Jesus had to be claiming imperial destiny and announcing his intent to rule Israel and beyond. That in itself was not frightening to Pilate, because Jesus at that

What Panicked Pontius Pilate?

moment stood alone, bleeding, and defenseless, but behold the Man! As the Nazarene stood before the judgment seat he neither groveled and begged for mercy, nor recklessly shouted defiance. With the skin of his back hanging in ribbons about his waist, Jesus stood and spoke with perfect serenity and assurance. Such a demeanor could only indicate one thing: Jesus was not acting alone! Jesus had announced his intent to reign and exhibited a serenity that implied he had the power to make that reign happen. Pilate could see that Jesus was relying on some vast, secret force. This is what panicked Pilate: Jesus, by calling himself *Son of God*, had announced his intent to take up imperial rule and even now, judging by his demeanor, *still expected to succeed!*

The Governor decided to buy some time by releasing the Nazarene. What if Jesus *did* have a hidden army? Such an army could rise up to avenge their king's condemnation, wreaking havoc in the land and bringing Pilate's career down in flames. Yes, he decided, he would try to set Jesus free. Hadn't Claudia Procula, Pilate's politically savvy wife, warned him to do that very thing (Mat 27.19)? Of course the chief priests would hear nothing of releasing Jesus. They threatened to denounce Pilate to Caesar and with that threat instantly narrowed the panicking Prefect's political choices to one. Pilate made a show of renouncing all responsibility for condemning Jesus. He would give the chief priests what they wanted and get this nightmare of a trial over with. He only hoped he would survive the aftermath of condemning someone who apparently had plans in motion to rule the world—someone who called himself *Son of God and acted like he really was*.

WHAT DOES THIS DRAMA HAVE TO DO WITH US?

Thinking Responsibly About Jesus of Nazareth

The main thing we should gain from studying this drama ignited by the *Son of God* phrase is an accurate assessment of Christ's claims. It is irresponsible to think of Jesus as an innocuous holy man who never made any special claims about himself. Although Pontius Pilate could not see beyond the political realm, he correctly interpreted Jesus as pursuing world dominion. Jesus expected and intended to become the King of kings. A study of all Christ's titles and claims in the Gospels makes it clear that Jesus expected to rule not just Israel but also the world, and not just the world but also the heavens! To think of Jesus as having any lesser intent is to envision a different Jesus than the one portrayed in the Gospels and other writings of the time.

A Destiny To Rule With Christ

There's one more thing. Understanding what Jesus meant when he called himself the Son of God, helps us understand what the Scriptures mean when they call believers "children of God" (e.g., Rom 08.16,17). When God adopts someone into His family, it is to form them into suitable siblings for His Son (Rom 08.29), and that means among other things, preparing them to rule with Christ (2Ti 2.12; Rev 05.09,10; 20.04-06). Nothing better prepares people to rule, however, than the discipline of submitting to authority! Are we learning that discipline? Does our attitude toward authority foreshadow a royal destiny, or, like Pontius Pilate, do we fearfully reject anyone who would rule over us?

What Panicked Pontius Pilate?

END NOTES

¹ Jesus left no doubt about his claim to divinity when pressed by the high priest with the demand, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God” (Mat 26.63). Ironically, Jesus hammered home his claim of divinity by bringing in his other title, Son of Man, that referred to the apocalyptic, heavenly King of Daniel 07.13, 14 who would be worshipped by the entire world: “You have said it yourself; but I’ll tell you more, in the future you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of [Divine] Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven to reverse our present roles” (my paraphrase). When the high priest instantly tore his clothes, it was for unequivocal blasphemy—if one assumed, as the high priest, did that Jesus’ claim was false!

² Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 302. Quoted by Morris in *The Gospel According to John*.

³ Encyclopedia Britannica, 1971 edition.

⁴ The likelihood that a Roman prefect would have understood Jesus in this way is supported by the example of an insurrectionist who claimed divinity in the reign of Nero:

Amid the adventures of these illustrious men, one is ashamed to relate how a certain Mariccus, a Boian of the lowest origin, pretending to divine inspiration, ventured to thrust himself into fortune’s game, and to **challenge the arms of Rome**. Calling himself the champion of Gaul, **and a God (for he had assumed this title)**, he had now collected 8000 men, and was taking possession of the neighbouring villages of the Aedui, when that most formidable state attacked him with a picked force of its native youth, to which Vitellius attached some cohorts, and dispersed the crowd of fanatics. Mariccus was captured in the engagement, and was soon after exposed to wild beasts, but not having been torn by them was believed by the senseless multitude to be invulnerable, till he was put to death in the presence of Vitellius. (Tacitus *Histories*, Book II, emphasis mine)





THE SACRED GROVE

A Tale of Divine Irony

By Roderick A. Graciano

©1995-2008

AD 135

That sound! Ben Chimham, the innkeeper, felt a chill run up his spine. The sound of tramping soldiers was all too familiar now. He jumped from his chair and hurried to the window that looked down upon the highway. *Oh, my Lord!* It looked like an entire cohort marching up to the town. “Ruth! Elizabeth!” he cried. “Shutter the windows and go upstairs. Samuel, go below and close the door to the grotto, and then come back inside.”

Chimham and his adolescent son sat nervously at the dining room table as the incessant tramping came nearer and nearer. *They can't possibly be coming here*, the innkeeper thought. *They can't possibly expect food and lodging with the war barely ended and supplies nowhere to be found.* But the thundering of heavily-clad feet came nearer and nearer until it seemed that the entire dining room echoed with the slap of leather and the clink of armor. Chimham heard an officer bark the command to halt, and he knew the soldiers were just outside his door. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the door strained its hinges under the force of three crashing knocks. “Stay here, Samuel,” he whispered, unable to conceal his fear from the boy. Chimham unbarred the door and opened it a crack. Dust boiled into the room and glittered in the sunlight. Chimham squinted as he peered out through the crack, and saw...trees.

The innkeeper remained motionless

for a moment, confused by the vision of leafy greenery, but then a muscular arm slammed against the door and it swung wide. A burly centurion stepped into the room, followed by a weasel-faced civilian who was dressed rather well for the times. “This the place?” barked the centurion as his eyes scanned the room.

The civilian (he looked Phoenician to Chimham, and vaguely familiar) replied nervously, “Yes, as I told you, but mainly the grotto below the building.”

“All right,” said the soldier, then looking directly at Chimham for the first time he continued, “By order of the Emperor Hadrian, this property is hereby confiscated. If you value anything in this pig sty, carry it out now or watch it burn!”

Within the sixth part of an hour, Chimham, and his family found themselves standing in the street surrounded by soldiers and potted trees. Chimham’s wife and children each clutched a sheet full of salvaged possessions as they watched the roof of the inn collapse in flames. The world had gone mad! What have *I done to antagonize the Romans, Lord?* the innkeeper wondered silently. *I have tried to obey you and respect their authority. I've even suffered persecution from my own people for not joining in the rebellion. Why is our home burning before our eyes while we stand here amidst a nursery of trees? Perhaps*

“For the emperor Hadrian, in the belief that he could destroy the Christian faith by the dishonoring of a place, dedicated a statue of Jupiter on the place of the passion, and Bethlehem was profaned by a grove of Adonis.”

*Paulinus of Nola,
Epistle 31.3*

The Sacred Grove

it is I who am going mad! Why has the infantry taken to carrying trees on their marches? Lord, whatever this all means, may it please you to preserve the grotto.

Later in the day, Chimham returned from seeing his family safely to his brother's farm on the outskirts of town. Soldiers were plowing the ashes of the inn into the ground and others were building an altar with some of the foundation stones. At the far end of the property, still others were smashing the pots and releasing the roots of the trees they had brought, before lowering the leafy plants into rows of well-aligned pits. The centurion and his civilian companion stood together watching the activity. "Ah, the innkeeper," smirked the Centurion as he turned to see Chimham approaching. The officer gestured toward the rising altar and said, "Welcome to the new, Sacred Grove of Thammuz." Then he nodded toward the man beside him, and continued, "You've met Alexander before, though you might not remember him, or recognize him when he's not wearing his Jewish peasant garb. He attended one of your Christian gatherings last month so as to mark for certain the place where you worshipped your god in that grotto down there. Be sure to go down and take a look inside. I'm sure you'll agree that the statue of Venus we brought along will inspire greater veneration than those ugly, stone mangers you had in there. I guarantee you, your people will never worship your pitiful, crucified god here again, ha ha!"

AD 327

A neighbor boy had run into the field yelling for them and Philip and his little brother had scurried down to the highway to see. Just as their friend had said, a small

but richly-clad group of travelers had arrived at the entrance of the town. Someone had run to fetch the town elders, but for now the visitors had no one to greet them but a wide-eyed circle of children. An elderly woman seemed to be the one with authority among the visitors, the one to whom the others deferred. *She must be a queen*, thought Philip, as he pressed his way to the front of his playmates. *Who could she be?* Suddenly the regal but kindly face turned toward him and Philip saw her eyes fasten on his. "Come here, child," said her strong voice.

Philip approached timidly. *What could she possibly want with me?*

Tell me, child," said the woman, "are you a Christian?"

Philip swallowed. He silently called upon the gods to give him the right answer. He did not want to offend this great person. *What did she want?* He felt her eyes boring into his, and he had to speak, come what may. "No, my Lady," he said, "my family still worships the ancient gods." The royal woman's countenance fell, and in that instant Philip realized that he did not even want to *disappoint* her. She was as old as his grandmother, but her elderly face glowed with purpose. Philip felt she must be a person with some special destiny.

"What a pity," she said, looking at him still, "I seek someone who can help me find the stable where my Savior was born."

Philip's heart leapt. He had what this queen wanted after all! "Oh, my Lady," he said, "you mean Jesus, the god of the Christians. I can show you!"

"Even in my own Bethlehem, as it now is, that most venerable spot in the whole world of which the psalmist sings: 'the truth hath sprung out of the earth' (Ps 85:11), was overshadowed by a grove of Tammuz, that is of Adonis; and in the very cave where the infant Christ had uttered his earliest cry, lamentation was made for the paramour of Venus."

*St. Jerome,
Letter 58 to
Paulinus,
written in AD 395.*

The Sacred Grove

“...in conformity with the narrative in the Gospel regarding His birth, there is shown at Bethlehem the cave where He was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. And this sight is greatly talked of in surrounding places, even among the enemies of the faith, it being said that in this cave was born that Jesus who is worshipped and revered by the Christians.”

*Origen,
Against Celsus 1.51,
written around
AD 160.*

The woman’s face brightened. “What is your name, child.”

“Philip, my Lady, at your service.”

“Thank you, Philip. My name is Helena. I am the emperor’s mother, and I have come to mark the holy places of our faith. Guide me to the stable where my Lord was born and you will have my gratitude.”

“Yes, my Lady. Come, it’s only a short way. But it’s more of a cave than a stable.¹ They say it was used as a stable when Jesus was born there, but it’s a room dug into the hillside. There used to be an inn standing above it, but there’s a beautiful grove of trees over it now. I hope it does not dismay my Lady that an emperor of long ago planted a grove in honor of Adonis² over the spot.³ They say the emperor wanted to hide the place from the Christians, but he only made it better known. Everyone knows the cave where the Christians have celebrated the birth of their god since the beginning of their religion. The grove of Adonis has helped mark the place, you see.”

The emperor’s mother looked up to the sky and Philip saw a single tear course down her lined cheek. “Great art thou, O Lord,” she said, “and greatly to be praised. Even the wrath of man shall praise Thee! Thine enemies raised trees of idolatry in an attempt to hide your glory, but in so doing have preserved the sacred history. Now, O Lord, enable us to raise a great basilica to preserve your name in this place forevermore!”

Philip didn’t quite understand

what the great Helena’s prayer meant, but he could tell she was happy. And that made him happy too.

AD 1978

I looked around and saw that the room was still cave-like, even if it was paved in marble and decorated all about with rich draperies and ornamental lamps. I bent down to look at the large silver star set in the stone floor. *So this is the place that Helena marked*, I thought to myself. *How amazing that this tiny spot on the face of the earth, has been kept track of from the first century until now. I wish that every skeptic who doubts the historicity of Jesus could stand where I’m standing right now. How ironic that pagans back home doubt that Jesus ever existed, but pagans in history inadvertently helped preserve the record of His birth.*

I went back upstairs, making my way past the huge main altar in the apse of the spacious basilica. How glorious to visit the ancient Church of the Nativity in the little town of Bethlehem. The Church had been destroyed in past centuries, but quickly rebuilt to preserve the spot where *the real God became a real man in real time*. I looked up at the tall columns lining the nave and side aisles. They stood magnificently in four great rows, very much like a sacred grove.



¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, ch. LXXVIII.

² Adonis is the Greek counterpart to the Babylonian Thammuz, and the mythological lover of Venus.

³ Jerome, *Letter 58 to Paulinus*.

THE STRANGE CASE OF ISRAEL'S RED HEIFER

Kendall Hamilton with Joseph Contreras and Mark Dennis in Jerusalem

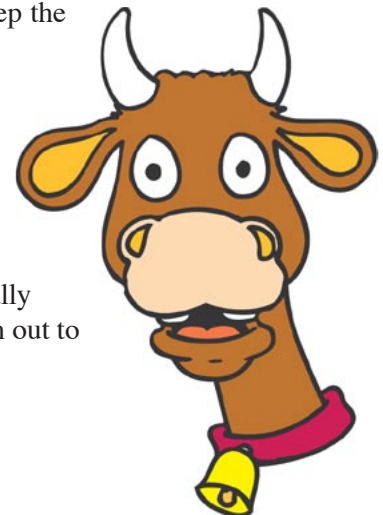
Newsweek 5/19/97 Departments/The Millennium

Her name is Melody, and she whiles away her days oblivious to the controversy that surrounds her. Some would like to put a bullet in her head. Others want to burn her to cinders. But the greatest troubles Melody knows are the flies that swarm about her pen. Melody, a red heifer, was born on an ordinary farm in northern Israel last year. But to observant Jews, there is nothing ordinary about her. A couple of millenniums ago, in the era of the first and second Jewish Kingdoms, the ashes of a red heifer, butchered in her third year, were mixed with water and used to purify Jews before they could approach the Holy Temple on Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Not since the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, however, has a red heifer been born in Israel, Judaica scholars say. Some Israelis have greeted Melody's arrival as a wondrous portent for the new millennium; others view her as an ominous threat to Middle East peace.

The furor springs from the fact that some devout Jews see Melody's birth as a sign from God that the coming of the Messiah is nigh. **Many Muslims, and some less observant Jews, are concerned that extremists might take the red heifer as a signal to destroy the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa mosques, which now occupy Jerusalem's Temple Mount.** That would clear the way for the construction of a third Jewish temple—and possibly provoke a war. “The potential harm from this heifer is far greater than the destructive properties of a regular terrorist bomb,” wrote journalist David Landau in the influential Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz. Landau has suggested the heifer's rapid, unceremonious, dispatch.

He may be overreacting, but there is precedent. In the early '80s, a handful of Jewish militants were arrested and convicted of plotting to blow up the two mosques. And sentiment still runs strong. Gershon Solomon founded the Temple Mount Faithful Movement 30 years ago to press for the hill's liberation from what he calls “Muslim imperialist occupation.” His followers periodically challenge the Israeli government's longstanding stricture against Jewish prayer anywhere on the Temple Mount, apart from the Western Wall. Solomon sees Melody's advent as an omen, “another sign that we are very close to the rebuilding of the temple,” he says. “This will [allow] big crowds of Orthodox Jews to join us in our campaign to liberate the Temple Mount.” Among those hoping that predictions of heightened unrest don't pan out are Israeli tourist officials who, in the year 2000, want to attract hordes of Christian tourists to, of all places, Armageddon. The Book of Revelation names Armageddon—or Megiddo, as it's known in Hebrew—as the site of the final, all-consuming battle between good and evil. The Israeli National Parks Authority has approved a multimedia reconstruction of Armageddon on the site of its ruins, 15 miles southeast of Jerusalem. High-tech prayer grottoes will enable pilgrims to contemplate the final showdown with the aid of virtual reality. But if the recent plunge in tourism at Megiddo is any guide, continued trouble will keep the visitors virtual, millennium or not.

Melody, of course, is just one potential threat to peace in a region that seldom lacks a light for its tinder. And she may not even be the hot discovery first imagined. Under Jewish law, Melody—who's really sort of auburn, when you get right down to it—must be immaculately red. Melody's local rabbi, for one, doesn't think she'll pass muster. “I'm very doubtful whether she is kosher,” says Rabbi Shmaria Shore, pointing to a pair of white hairs in Melody's tail, white whiskers in her snout and eyelashes that are red only on one end. “If I really thought she was, I'd send her away to an undisclosed location.” She may turn out to be more red herring than red heifer—which may be better for everyone.



THE SEARCH FOR THE KALAL

For some rabbis, coming up with a perfect Red Heifer today
still isn't enough!

Here's the formula:

- A. The Temple rituals can't be restored without purified priests.
- B. Priests can't be purified without the "water for impurity" (Numbers 19.9).
- C. The "water for impurity" is made with the ashes of a perfect Red Heifer (Numbers 19.1-10).
- D. **BUT**, according to the Mishnah, the burning of the Red Heifer and the preparation of the "water for impurity" is done by a priest who is purified by the left-over ashes of all Red Heifers *previously prepared* throughout history, totaling nine in all (Mishnah, *Parah* 3.1-5)!

The Mishnah eases its requirements a little by stating that "if they did not find the ashes from the [nine earlier] Sin-offerings, they could use them...from one" (*Parah* 3.5). Nevertheless, the Mishnah's guidelines require the discovery of Red Heifer ashes prepared in Israel before AD 70 to get the whole ritual started again.

That's why people like biblical researcher Vendyl Jones have searched for decades to uncover the *Kalal*, the container which holds the "precious mixture of ashes. He believes that it is vital for the restoration of the Beit HaMikdash (Holy Temple). This is an opinion held not only by the late Lubavitcher Rebbe but also by such important rabbinical figures as Adin Even Israel Steinsaltz and Reuven Grodner, formerly of Hebrew University. Menachem Burstin, a botanist and expert on Biblical chemistry, has stated that he has isolated all of the necessary ingredients for preparing the water of purification, except *the ashes of the previous nine red cows.*" (Source: <http://vjri.purpleguy.com/Researcher/articles/Ashes_for_Beauty>, emphasis added.)

And where might the *Kalal* be? "In the days of the First and Second Temples, the ashes were divided into thirds [Mishnah, *Parah* 3.11]. One portion was given to the Levites guarding the entrance to the Temple. Another part was stored in the Anointment Hill (Mount of Olives). That share was used to purify the priest. It was deemed necessary should the priest need to burn another red heifer. The remaining third was placed in a wall known as the *chail* which faced the Women's Gallery of the Temple." Perhaps as the Roman Legions approached in AD 70, priests hid a *Kalal* of ashes somewhere on or under the Temple Mount. Alternatively, Vendyl Jones interprets a reference to "an urn" in column 6 of the mysterious Copper Scroll (3Q15) as a *Kalal*. If that reading is correct, a *Kalal* was buried in "the cave of the pillar" which Jones believes he has identified along the road between Jericho and Qumran. Apparently an urn has not yet turned up in searches of the cave, however.

Will the *Kalal* ever be found? God knows, but watch for more news on the *Kalal* and the ashes of the Red Heifer, for according to researcher Jim Long, Jewish tradition indicates that "the tenth Red Heifer will be burned in the time of *Mashiach*."

NAZARETH QUICK FACTS

Location

Nation of Israel, in lower Galilee, overlooking the plain of Esdraelon. Go to *Google Earth* and set your preferences for coordinates to “Degrees, Decimal Minutes.” Then go to:

32° 41.621’N 35° 18.685’E

Name Of Nazareth

In keeping with the agricultural personality of Nazareth, Hoade interprets the town’s name to mean flower, from the Hebrew root NSR. This accords with the pilgrim letter of Paula and Eustochium (AD 386) in which they say, “We shall go to Nazareth, and, according to the interpretation of its name, shall behold the flower of Galilee.” (Sources: Hoade; also *Holy Land on Disk*.)

Earliest Biblical Reference

Matthew 02:23, speaking of how Joseph and his family “came and resided in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” While Matthew implies an earlier reference to Nazareth, no Old Testament prophecy explicitly provides the basis for the gospel quote. Matthew may be making a play on words that alludes to such prophecies as Isaiah 11.01, “Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch (Heb.: נֶצֶר) from his roots will bear fruit.” The Hebrew root for the name Nazareth, (NZR or NSR) means branch, shoot, blossom or flower.

Habitation Time Frame

Hoade reports that the ancient village of Nazareth was inhabited during Iron Age II, i.e. since before the Babylonian Captivity. A modern Israeli city retaining the name stands on the site today.



Approaching the Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth. Photo by Rachel Graciano, Feb. 2008.

NAZARETH ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT



Photo by Rachel Graciano, 2008.

Early Existence Of Nazareth

Ian Wilson, in his *Jesus: The Evidence*, reports that “according to one school of thought, Nazareth may not even have existed in the first century AD.” This theory is based on the absence of the name *Nazareth* in Josephus’ list of Galilean towns and the lack of references to Nazareth in other first century documents and inscriptions. The earliest known non-canonical reference to Nazareth appears on a fragment from a 3rd to 4th century marble tablet discovered in Caesarea in 1962, and which probably listed places

where priestly families had settled. The lack of early references to Nazareth may indicate the smallness and relative unimportance of the village in the first century, but according to Finegan, excavations in the vicinity of the modern Church of the Annunciation have demonstrated beyond doubt that an agricultural village did exist at the site of present day Nazareth in the time of Jesus. In fact, Hoade reports that the village was inhabited during Iron Age II, i.e. before the Babylonian Captivity. (Sources: Finegan; Hoade, p. 685; Wilson (2), pp. 67, 68.)



Looking from the tower of Zippori (Sepphoris) across the fields to the smoky ridge of Nazareth about 4 miles away. Photo by Roderick Graciano, October 12, 2008.

NAZARETH ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

Nazareth And Sepphoris

The lack of early references to Nazareth no doubt have to do with its relative unimportance in the first century, as compared to Sepphoris, the Galilean capital that was within sight of Nazareth and only an hour's walk away. Shortly after a rebellion in Galilee was crushed by the Roman legate of Syria, Quintilius Varus, in 4-3 BC, Herod Antipas arrived in Galilee to assume authority over the region and chose the smoldering ruins of Sepphoris as the location for his new capital. Josephus says (*Ant.* 18.02.27) that “Herod also built a wall about Sepphoris (which is the security of all Galilee), and made it the metropolis of the country.” Elsewhere, Josephus speaks of Sepphoris as “the strongest city of Galilee,” (*Wars* 2.18.511), one of “the greatest cities of Galilee” (*Life* 346), and mentions the “strength of their walls” (*Life* 373). Since Sepphoris was Herod's capital and the strongest and greatest metropolis in the region, it is no surprise that Josephus would anonymously lump a small village of farmers and artisans like Nazareth among the “many villages [that Sepphoris had] about it” (*Life* 346).

Artisans For Sepphoris

To Josephus, writing a political history of Galilee, Sepphoris was vastly more important than Nazareth. For us however, Sepphoris is important precisely because of its proximity to Nazareth, the home of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. We know that Herod Antipas launched a vast construction project in Sepphoris that lasted throughout the lifetime of Jesus. There is little doubt that it was the construction in this Galilean capital that kept Jesus employed as a “carpenter” (Mark 06.03) throughout his early life. Furthermore, “the construction of an influential Roman capital city near Jesus' home in Nazareth redefines the carpenter's occupation in central Galilee.... The Greek word *tekton*, translated *carpenter* in Mark 6:3, has the root meaning of *artisan*, that is, a skilled worker



The approach to the Church of the Annunciation. A Muslim banner in front of the public plaza quotes the Qur'an to the effect that God does not "beget." Photo by Roderick Graciano, October 12, 2008.

NAZARETH ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

who works on some hard material such as wood or stone or even horn or ivory. A metal smith also might be described as a *tekton*. The preferred translation of *tekton* in Mark 6:3 is *carpenter*. In Jesus' day construction workers were not as highly specialized as in today's work force. For example, the tasks performed by carpenters and masons could easily overlap. When a *tekton*, or artisan, from a village near Sepphoris, visited the construction site, he would be introduced to another world—an urban world." In other words, while we have traditionally pictured Jesus as building tables and chairs out of wood in a tiny shop, or at the most, helping a farmer mount the wooden beams for the roof of his small barn, the excavation of Sepphoris causes us to realize that Jesus was more likely involved in the raising of a spectacular theater and beautiful basilicas constructed out of finely dressed limestone and marble! (Source: Batey)

Basilica Of The Annunciation

Where once existed the southern end of the ancient village now stands the majestic Latin Church of the Annunciation. The visitor to this building is greeted at the entrance by a stunning facade of stained glass windows and awed within the upper sanctuary by a dozen or so mosaics of Madonna and Child, each donated by a different country and made with materials reflecting the culture of origin. I was particularly struck by the Japanese mosaic with its Asian Madonna,

the wings of whose kimono flare out like the beam of the cross.

The mosaic is made with tesserae so fine that the kimonos appear to be embroidered with pearls.

O t h e r

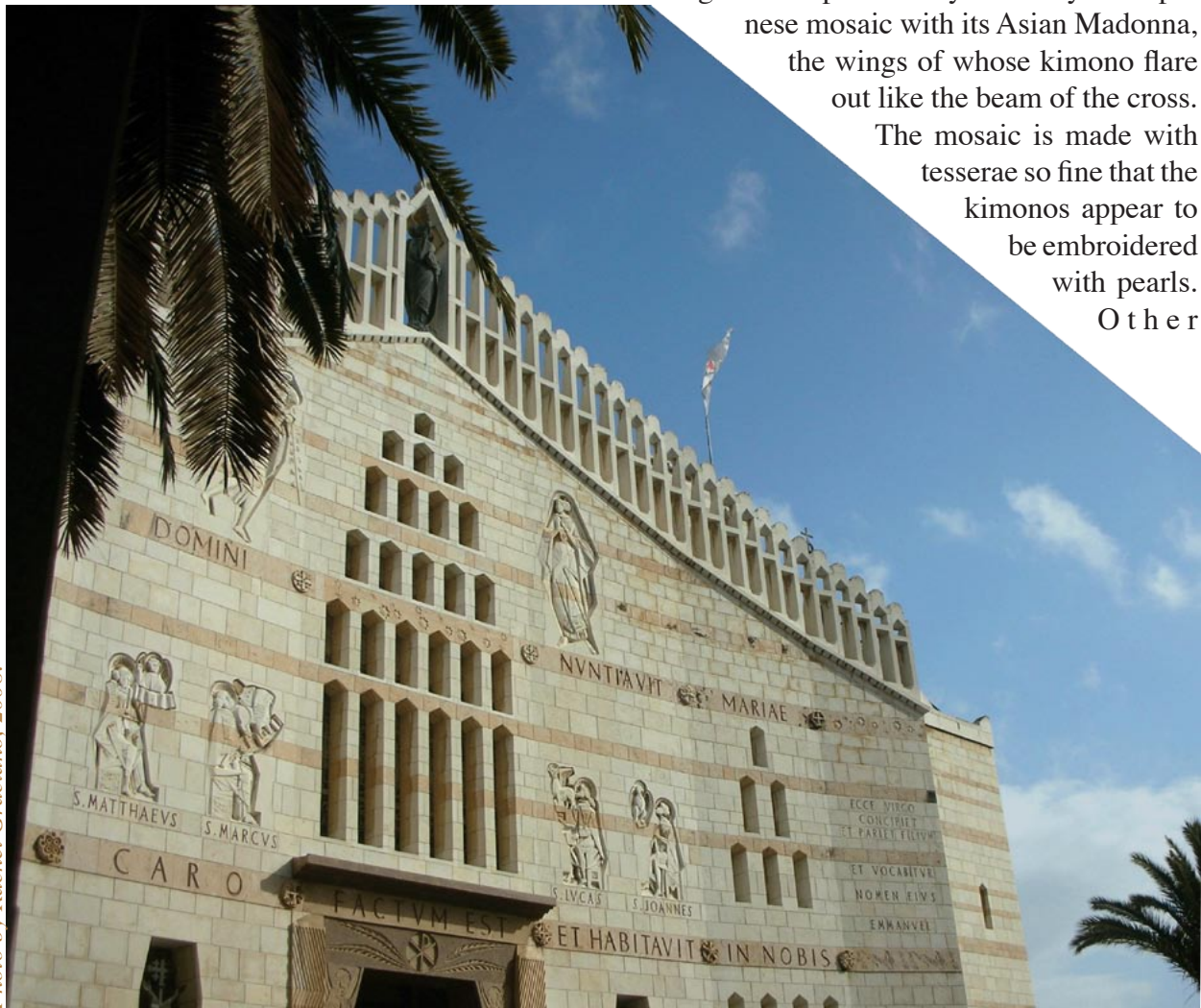


Photo by Rachel Graciano, 2008.

© 1997-2008. www.timothyministries.info

SHOUTING STONES: ARTICLES & QUICK FACTS

NAZARETH ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

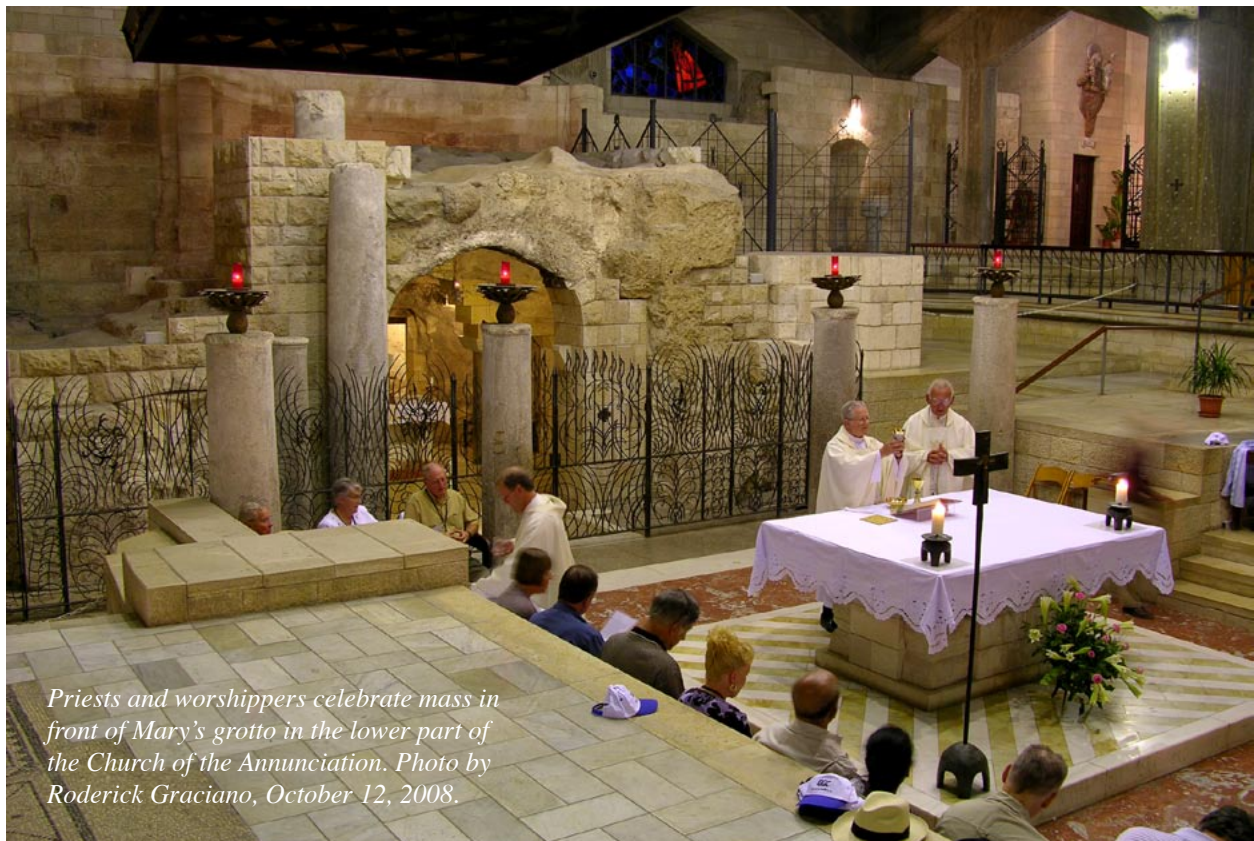
works of art donated by different countries adorn the courtyard corridors. This gorgeous basilica is built over and incorporates the ruins of (1) the supposed grotto where the angel announced to Mary that she would give birth to the Savior; (2) Mary's house which the deacon Conon of Jerusalem converted to a Byzantine church around AD 427; (3) a Judaeo-Christian Church-Synagogue, the first building erected near the grotto; and (4) a Crusader basilica erected by Tancred. According to Hoade, "Remains of the Judaeo-Christian period include seven steps, inscriptions and other symbols..." One inscription, the oldest of its kind and dated before the council of Ephesus (AD 431), reads *XE MAPIA*, "Hail Mary." Another reads, "Christ, Son of God." (Source: Hoade, pp. 690-697.) Whether or not these archaeological remains mark the precise spot of Mary's (and subsequently Joseph's and Jesus') house, they testify to the veneration of this location for its believed connection to the holy family by Christians since the very beginnings of the New Testament faith.

Cliffs In Nazareth?

While modern Nazareth still rests upon an elevation above the Plain of Esdraelon, Hoade described the ancient village as "situated on a hill bounded to the E and W by valleys, which although 10-15 m. deep, are today in great part filled in." It would have been to one of these brows of the hill of Nazareth that the inhabitants drove Jesus with the intent of throwing him "down the cliff" (cf. Luke 04. 28-30). (Source: Hoade, p. 685.)

Nazarene Epithet

The evangelist says that the return of the Holy Family to Nazareth brought the fulfillment of the prophets' prediction that Jesus "would be called a Nazarene." No specific Old Testament prophecy



Priests and worshippers celebrate mass in front of Mary's grotto in the lower part of the Church of the Annunciation. Photo by Roderick Graciano, October 12, 2008.

NAZARETH ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

predicts this of Messiah, but Matthew points not to a specific prophecy but to the words of the prophets. While we may not be able to prove exactly what Matthew had in mind, it's possible that he used the term "Nazarene" as an example of the slurs that the prophets predicted would be hurled at Messiah (Psalm 22.06,08; 69.11,19; Isaiah 53.02-04; cf. John 01.46).

Why precisely did Nathanael speak disparagingly of Nazareth (John 01.46)? God knows. History says nothing of the inhabitants until the Gospels report their unbelief in Jesus. Perhaps Nathanael was thinking of the town's smallness, particularly as compared to Sepphoris in whose shadow it stood. Archaeological inferences imply that first-century Nazareth covered just under 60 acres and the population numbered no more than about 480. Surely the Messiah would come from a much grander place! (Yes, Nathanael, he did.)



Detail of the Japanese mosaic. Photo by Roderick Graciano, October 12, 2008.