

Tuesday, March 24, 2009

## A Response to Josh Ratliff on the "Creed" in I Corinthians 15

While I was traveling abroad last month, someone on the internet, apparently posing as me, engaged a Christian by the name of Josh Ratliff. Apparently this discussion between the imposter posing as me and Mr. Ratliff began on a [YouTube site](#) (featuring the pathetic Michael Shermer of all people) and subsequently moved to an exchange in e-mails. In that exchange the poser actually sent Ratliff a link to a blog of mine and invited him to respond in the comments section of that blog.

From the language used in the portion which Ratliff quoted from the e-mail he received, it should be obvious to anyone who is familiar with my writing that it was not I who composed or sent that e-mail. Sniping comments like "you love to hear yourself speak," "you fancy yourself the scholar" and "you can defend your indoctrinated presuppositions to your heart's delight... if you're not scared" are certainly not the kinds of statements I make to others on the internet, even to detractors of my view. My lengthy exchanges with David Parker, for instance (see these blogs' comments sections: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), et al.) should suffice to show that I do not seek to intimidate or provoke my opponents, especially on a first salvo. I simply see no reason for doing this, since I know my position is right (which is usually sufficient to irk my detractors in the first place). My concern is certainly not to "scare" my readers, Christian or otherwise, but to establish my verdicts.

I'm not going to dwell on the exchanges which Ratliff documented between himself and the individual apparently trying to pose as me, as this is unimportant to me. Instead, I'm going to jump right into [Ratliff's criticism](#) of [my blog](#).

Ratliff summarizes my position as follows:

So what if I Cor. 15:3-8 is an early Christian creed and so what if Paul writes in A.D. 55? How do you know Jesus Christ wasn't crucified on some astral plane?

He seems to be taking this summary from the following statement taken from [my blog](#):

Paul's treatment of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is so open-ended and unspecific that for all we know he could be referring to an event that took place five centuries earlier or in some astral plane.

Now although I do stand by this statement, it does not exhaustively summarize my position. Not in the least. My point in the above statement should be pretty clear. Paul says that Jesus was crucified and that he was resurrected, but he gives no details about the circumstances of these events. He does not say when they happened or where they happened. Paul does not even mention an empty tomb. He does say that the risen Christ appeared to some individuals, but he does not indicate how long after his crucifixion and resurrection these appearances took place. In other words, from all that Paul gives us, he could have had in mind someone who was crucified two hundred years earlier and is only now starting to make post-resurrection appearances to the faithful. I see nothing in what Paul writes that conflicts with such a possibility. As G.A. Wells points out, "People who claim to see a ghost do not necessarily suppose it to be the wraith of someone recently deceased" (*The Jesus Myth*, p. 125).

Now how does Ratliff deal with these points? Does he show us where Paul in fact does provide the kinds of details which I have observed are absent from his accounts? No, he does not. Instead, he simply assumes that Paul was speaking about a recently crucified Jesus and that various individuals mentioned as witnesses of the risen Christ in I Corinthians 15 were actually his companions while he was alive on earth, just as the gospel narratives would have us believe. These assumptions are certainly not justified by anything Paul states in I Corinthians 15.

In response to the summation of my argument which he has concocted, Ratliff states:

With comments like this, and the fact that he quoted G.A. Wells on the subject, it seemed I had happened on one of those strange birds that questions the existence of the historical Jesus altogether. So let us see if his minority views can hold up to the facts.

Not only am I happy to be considered a “strange bird” (I’m certainly no “common man”), I am also happy to look at the facts. As for “the existence of the historical Jesus,” just what is meant by “the historical Jesus”? If it is supposed to refer to the Jesus of the gospel narratives, there is good reason to doubt the historicity of such an individual.

Ratliff quoted me:

As I pointed out, there's nothing in I Cor. or any of Paul's other letters (that is, in letters that are authentically Pauline) which puts a time or place to Jesus' resurrection. If the stories about Jesus' resurrection that we find in the gospels are legends built on sources like Paul's 'testimony,' that testimony cannot be validated ('too early to be legend') by appealing to a dating scheme suggested only by the gospels and later documents influenced by them (like Acts). That would be like using a later Harry Potter book to 'validate' one earlier in the series.

In response to this, Ratliff writes:

Now if you're not familiar with the debate surrounding I Cor. 15:3-8, then you may be a little lost, but the case is simple. This passage contains eyewitness testimony to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.

This statement, namely that I Corinthians 15:3-8 “contains eyewitness testimony to Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances” is misleading. It is commonly repeated by Christians, however. What we have is a statement in one of Paul’s letters, the author of which I am willing to suppose is Paul, the apostle to the gentile mission. In this passage, we read about the risen Christ appearing to people other than Paul, in addition to the claim that the risen Christ appeared to Paul also. This is not eyewitness testimony from Peter, James, “the Twelve,” or the “five hundred brethren,” for it is not by their hands that we are learning of these alleged post-resurrection appearances. At most, we have Paul telling us that the risen Christ appeared to other persons, whatever that is supposed to mean.

Ratliff continued:

The dating of I Cor. and the creed of the eyewitnesses that Paul includes is much too early to be the product of legendary embellishment.

Here Ratliff simply asserts exactly what is in question, that the alleged “creed” which Paul is supposedly reciting in I Corinthians 15:3-8 is “much too early to be the product of legendary embellishment.” If Paul were writing of a man who was crucified fifty, 100 or 200 years before his own days, then we have ample time for legends to crop up about the deceased individual, whatever his name might have been. To corroborate this, I mentioned the following in my [28 Nov. 2008 comment](#) in response to David Parker:

In the two centuries prior to Paul, hundreds of Jewish priests were crucified alive, such as the 800 Pharisees that Josephus accounts to being crucified under Alexander Jannaeus in BC 88 (see *Antiquities* 13:14:2). Paul himself was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5), and I would expect that he had heard stories about such horrific atrocities. Wells discusses the significance of such events to his own legend theory in the Introduction to his *The Jesus Legend*.

If what we read in Josephus’ *Antiquities* about these 800 or so Pharisees under Alexander Jannaeus in 88 BC is true, it is very possible that Paul had learned of something of this in his earlier teachings as a Pharisee himself, and that the crucified savior idea that he was promoting as a Christian missionary to the gentiles may have germinated in stories about such a horrific event which would have likely impressed someone like Paul. Nothing in Paul’s writings are in direct conflict with this possibility. Christians want us to accept the “possibility” of miracles, but why should we not accept legends springing from such momentous events as even more possible?

Ratliff helps make my case:

Myths of this proportion simply do not spring up in this short amount of time seeing that Jesus crucifixion is dated around A.D. 30.

Where do we get the understanding that Jesus was crucified in or around AD 30? From the gospels, of course. Paul certainly does not tell us that the Jesus he is talking about was crucified in AD 30. Like so many other Christians

who bang their head on the legend theory in such a futile manner, Ratliff is assuming the validity of something which the legend theory has successfully brought under dispute, namely the validity of the gospel narratives as reliable historical accounts. Paul nowhere suggests that the Jesus he is talking about was crucified in AD 30, and in fact gives no timeframe for this event. What he does tell us is compatible with the possibility that the Jesus he is talking about was someone who lived and died decades or more before his own time. This blows the “too early to be legend” thesis out of the water.

Ratliff continued:

But as you can see, Bethrick has figured out how to end the debate! His main argument is: "Prove that Jesus was really crucified in 30 A.D.!" I hope the other atheist scholars don't figure this out because then Christianity will be ruined! Hopefully, you can sense my sarcasm.

Is it really sarcasm here? If this theory is really so incredible, why even jest about hoping that “other atheist scholars don't figure this out because then Christianity will be ruined!”? Sometimes sarcasm has a way of exposing one's deeper fears in the twists of its own unintended irony.

Ratliff then went on to state:

But in all seriousness, he makes one huge error that I'll deal with here first. And that is to say that since the Gospels were written after I Cor., they could have been based on Paul which would debunk Paul using an earlier gospel message as his source.

I'm not sure where Ratliff is getting this. I have never stated that because the gospels were written after Paul wrote I Corinthians, that therefore Paul could not have been using an earlier gospel version as his source. There is a better reason to suppose that he was not relying on an earlier version, and this is not it. Besides, even if I did argue this and it was mistaken, this would not prove that the Jesus Paul had in mind was crucified in 30 A.D. If Ratliff thinks he can validate this date using statements from Paul (as opposed to interpreting Paul through the filter of later gospel stories), I'd like to see it. So I am keeping my eyes out specifically for this.

Ratliff continues:

Well, first of all, I am aware of no theory that claims that the Gospel writers based their writing on Paul's testimony. I'm not saying it's not out there, I just haven't heard it within the realm of scholarship.

Had Ratliff read my statements a little more carefully, he would have seen that I had suggested, hypothetically in fact, that “the stories about Jesus' resurrection that we find in the gospels are legends built on sources *like* Paul's 'testimony'” (emphasis added). By “sources *like* Paul's 'testimony'” I mean early Christian stories, even if only oral, which, like Paul's writings, gave only vague treatment of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, sources which pre-date the kind of development which we find in the gospel narratives which we find in the NT canon today. Paul's early form of Christ-worship constitutes a kind of “Christianity in the rough,” and lacks entirely a developed narrative of the earthly Jesus' pre-crucifixion life. Paul expresses virtually no detailed knowledge of his Jesus' life on earth, but clearly believed that the earthly Jesus was “humbled” or “emptied” of his heavenly status and divinity. The essentials which Paul emphasized in his version of Christianity are elements such as affirmation of Jesus' resurrection, salvation by faith, liberation from the law, fellowship in the last days (Paul explicitly believed that he was among the last generation), et al. Paul's Christianity is not characterized by view of Jesus informed by historical anecdotes such as a virgin birth, baptism by John the Baptist, an itinerant ministry, miracle performances, miraculous healings, travels with accompanying disciples, teachings in parables, public prayers, disputes with Jewish leaders, betrayal by Judas Iscariot, a trial before Pilate or the Sanhedrin, an empty tomb, etc. These latter elements represent the story of Jesus as it was later developed, after Paul's ministry. That other versions of Christianity were in circulation during Paul's time is evident from Paul's own writings, so my use of “*like* Paul's 'testimony'” is not without justification. I do not think that the later gospel writers concocted their model of Christian essentials from whole cloth. Rather, I see them as filling in gaps which existed in previous versions as well as combining those earlier versions with various teachings which were not originally ascribed to Jesus (cf. the Q sayings source). One major gap of course was the earthly life of Jesus, before his crucifixion, of which Paul gives essentially no information.

In response to the suggestion that the gospel writers based their writings on sources *like* Paul's, Ratliff states:

But evidence from Paul's own writings contradict this. Now, clearly the Gospels had not been written before I Cor. 15, but we find testimony from Paul that he "received" this creed (v. 3). Where could he have received this creed? Looking to Paul's autobiographical writings in Gal. 1-2, we find that Paul actually laid out his Gospel he had been preaching to be examined by the apostles Peter, James, and John to see if he had been preaching in vain (Gal. 2:2). In v. 6, Paul says they "added nothing to me." This, of course, means that the Gospel he preached was the same one they had been preaching-- no more no less.

I do not see how any of this contradicts the suggestion that the gospel writers based their writings on sources *like* Paul's, i.e., on early, undeveloped and vague stories which take certain religious notions (as opposed to historical anecdotes) as their key essentials. The fact that Paul compared notes with other believers poses no conflict with my suggestion. Paul could have consulted with any number of early believers, but this would not prevent later writers from taking early sources as inspiration for fuller development of the Jesus legend.

Ratliff does bring up a good point, however, when he reminds us of the fact that, in his conference with Peter, James and John, "Paul says they 'added nothing to me'." (The NIV translates Gal. 2:6 as follows: "As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message.") But this in itself is problematic with Ratliff's own suggestion that Paul got his "creed" from Peter, James and John. If it is the case, as Paul himself says, that these individuals "added nothing" to Paul's gospel, then it seems amiss to turn around and say that the source of the "creed" in I Corinthians 15 is the Jerusalem church. Indeed, Paul nowhere indicates that he got this "creed" from them (he does not even identify it as a creed to begin with!), and here we have Ratliff pointing out that Paul himself tells us that Peter, James and John "added nothing" to what he had already been preaching!

At any rate, Paul does not give us a detailed list of the points he covered in his discussions with Peter, James and John during his visit with them in Jerusalem. That does not give us license to assume which points he may have discussed with them.

In developing my thesis, I put emphasis on the fact that Paul tells us that he claims to have gotten his understanding of Christianity directly from the risen Christ by way of divine revelation. I am referring specifically to the passage found in Galatians 1:11-12, where Paul writes:

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Couple this claim with Paul's subsequent statement in Galatians 2:6, brought out by Ratliff himself, that "those who seemed to be important" in the Jerusalem church "added nothing to my message," and it becomes clear that Paul believed (if what he writes in his letters indeed indicates what he believed) that the gospel he preached came exclusively from the risen Christ, not from other human beings (even "those who seemed to be important" in an established church hierarchy). In response to this, Ratliff calls my emphasis on the fact that Paul claims to have gotten his gospel message directly from the risen Christ by way of revelation "real clever" and states:

Bethrick goes on to claim that to say that he had received what he was passing on in I Cor. 15 from Peter and James is contradictory by Paul's own words. Nothing could be further removed from the truth.

How could my point be untrue? Paul not only tells us that he got his gospel message directly from the risen Christ, but also (as Ratliff himself pointed out above) that those with whom he conferred in Jerusalem "added nothing to my message." Consequently, it seems quite contradictory to me to say that something Paul teaches in his gospel message came from Peter, James and John. Nothing means nothing. Doesn't it? Given Paul's statements, what justifies the supposition that anything he tells us in his letters came from Peter, James or John? Ratliff does not address this question, but rather speculates on what motivates my emphasis on these points:

First of all, allow me to point out that this a ploy to avoid the clear fact that there was a gospel being preached that predates Paul. This is evidenced by Paul's meetings in Gal. 1-2. Thus to say that the Gospel accounts were based on Paul's testimony is unfounded.

Contrary to what Ratliff states here, no part of my thesis conflicts with the possibility that other versions of Christianity were already in circulation by the time Paul came on the scene. I most certainly have not contrived "a ploy to avoid the clear fact that there was a gospel being preached that predates Paul." In fact, the record indicates

that there were multiple versions of the gospel enjoying currency at the time, and I see no reason to suspect that at least some of these predated Paul, and nowhere does my thesis require that there were no such animal. The way I see it, Paul saw himself as preaching *the correct* version of the gospel, the “authorized” version, if you will. In Galatians 1:6 he complains,

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:

Similarly in II Corinthians 11:4, Paul expresses the following worry:

For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.

It's clear from his writings that not only was Paul at pains to establish his authority on matters pertaining to the Christian gospel message (he not only claims that he received it directly from the risen Christ by way of revelation, apparently a private revelation, but also that his teachings were consistent with the teachings of the leadership of the Jerusalem church), he was also very weary of competing versions of the gospel which he clearly considered spiritually dangerous. In fact, while my thesis is fully prepared to take these points into consideration, it seems that they are ignored by defenders of literalist Christianity. Many apologists routinely assume that all early Christians believed the exact same message, down to the pettiest of details. I don't think the record in the NT itself justifies this assumption.

Ratliff continues:

Just for sake of argument, even if Paul did make up his own creed in I Cor. 15, we still have sufficient evidence that the message of Paul was consistent with a message that was being preached before he came on the scene.

Paul nowhere tells us that he got what many have come to consider a “creed” in I Corinthians 15 from Peter, James, John or any other contemporary human believer. That his message may have been “consistent” with what some others were teaching at the time, is not in dispute. But Paul clearly indicates that the message he was preaching was something he received directly from the risen Christ by way of revelation, and that “those who seemed to be important” among the congregants of the Jerusalem church “added nothing” to his message. So all indicators extant in Paul's writing can only suggest that he did *not* get this “creed” from Peter, James or John. Also, since this “creed” is nowhere restated in any other writings of the NT, we are not in a position to assume justifiably that it was in fact circulating independent of I Corinthians 15 at the time, or earlier. Indeed, if it were in fact an early creed, the fact that it is absent from all other writings (Paul himself nowhere repeats it) makes the claim that it is a creed seem all the more tenuous. Creeds are formulated for recitation, so it is strange to say the least that it is not recited elsewhere in the NT. Nor is there any hint, outside of I Corinthians 15, of an appearance of the risen Christ to 500 persons at one time, or of an appearance to someone named James. If this were in fact an early “creed,” it seems that elements of the creed itself, if they had any legitimate historical basis, would be encountered elsewhere in the NT. But curiously they are not.

Does this mean that Paul “made it up”? I see nothing in the record which could rule out this possibility, and I do in fact accept it as a possibility. Paul was a human being, and human beings are capable of making up things. It may very well be that Paul thought it was true, and perhaps believed it was divinely revealed to him. When Paul introduces what has been called a “creed” by today's apologists, he refers to it as “what I received” (I Cor. 15:3), without explicitly identifying his source for it. For this, it seems that his statements in Galatians 1:11-12 (already quoted above) suitably fill this void in information. I don't know why Christians would resist this inference, for this would mean that the content of what they call a “creed” came directly from the risen Christ, and is therefore more apt to be infallibly true, than if it were transmitted to Paul by word of mouth from fallible human sources.

Ratliff continues:

So I concede, without reservation, that Paul received the contents of His message first as a revelation of Christ Himself. But to say that the creed in I Cor. 15 was invented by Paul as a result of this revelation is an entirely different issue.

Of course, to say that one has learned anything by way of a direct revelation from a supernatural source, suggests to me that the content in question has no objectively factual basis. It is very easy to make up a claim and say one “

knows” it by means of revelation from an invisible magic being. Much invented “knowledge” has been passed on as “revelation.” Just look at Islam if you’re skeptical of this. Again, while my argument nowhere argues this per se, I see no sufficient reason to rule out the possibility that Paul did in fact concoct the list of post-resurrection appearances he gives in I Corinthians 15 and really believed that he had “received” it directly from a supernatural source, as he does in fact explicitly claim in Galatians 1:11-12. Then again, there are some, such as Dr. Robert Price, who think that I Corinthians 15:3-8 is [a post-Pauline interpolation](#), an insertion by some later Christian copyist trying to give Paul’s writings more substantiation.

Ratliff’s assessment of the view that Paul got this “creed” directly from the risen Christ by way of revelation is most curious, coming from a believer:

The implication here would be that we have a creed, not based on historical testimony, but rather on Paul’s own revelation.

If it were a revelation, why would a Christian think it was “Paul’s own revelation,” and not Christ’s? Paul does not claim to be the author of revelations, but a recipient and messenger of them. Would Christians give more credence to the “creed” if it were “based on historical testimony” than if it were divinely revealed by Christ himself? The doctrine of the trinity is defended to the hilt by Christian apologists, but it is something that is said to have been revealed by Christ, not something observed by historical spectators. In their urgency to find historical corroboration for their beliefs, many Christians often seem to prefer the testimony of men over revelation from Christ. Were I a believer myself (and I am speaking from personal experience as a former Christian), I would find this attitude most puzzling, even heretical.

Ratliff continues:

Even if this were true, it wouldn’t change the argument because the contents of the creed would be exactly what the early church had been preaching before Paul’s meeting with Peter, James, and John as proven above. However, I would argue that the creed itself did come from an early source outside of Paul.

This seems to read a lot more into Paul’s claim to have conferred with Peter, James and John than is justified by the content of the record we find in the NT itself. Paul does not give us a specific list of which contents of his message he reviewed with the elders at the Jerusalem church when he met with them. On his first visit, Paul says he met with Peter and stayed with him for fifteen days (Gal. 1:18), and “saw none of the other apostles - only James” (Gal. 1:19). Fifteen days seems hardly sufficient to review a substantially developed version of Christianity, right down to the specifics of purported testimonials. But given the kind of defense that Ratliff has laid out, we are apparently expected to believe that Paul covered every detail found in his many letters with Peter. In his second visit to Jerusalem, “fourteen years later” (Gal. 2:1), Paul says that he “set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:2). Paul does not specify the individuals to whom “them” refers here. Nor does Paul specify exactly what elements of his preaching he “set before them.” Apparently Christians would have us believe that Paul regurgitated before them every detail found in his many letters. What’s curious is that, at this point, Paul expresses the fear that he “was running or had run [his] race in vain,” apparently concerned that the gospel message he had been preaching may have been wrong. Again, this strikes me as rather curious, since earlier in the same letter Paul claimed that he had gotten his gospel directly from the risen Christ by way of revelation, but here he apparently is looking for the seal of human approval. One would think that had Paul truly believed that what he was preaching had been “revealed” to him personally by the risen Christ, he’d say to hell with what any mere mortal would think about it. After all, he insists in Romans 3:4, “Let God be true, and every man a liar.” His attitude before the Jerusalem church seems markedly subservient to human authority.

Regardless, Ratliff takes these points as sufficient indication that Peter, James, John and the rest of the Jerusalem echelon were aware of this “creed” which Paul is allegedly reciting in I Cor. 15, and yet curiously we have nothing specifically attesting to this, either in Paul’s own account of his meeting with them in Galatians, or in any other New Testament document. A vague reference is apparently being used to shoehorn a lot of specific assumptions into the mix here.

But in spite of explicit statements by Paul to the contrary (namely that he claims that the gospel message he preached came directly to him from the risen Christ by way of revelation, not from other human agents, and also that the elders at the Jerusalem church “added nothing” to the message Paul had been preaching), Ratliff still thinks it is warranted to conclude that the “creed” Paul is supposedly reciting in I Cor. 15 not only predates Paul

(even though it is not restated in any other NT document), but also that Paul got it from some human source (which directly conflicts with Paul's own claim in Galatians 1:11-12). Ratliff writes:

We arrive at this conclusion because of the technicality with which the creed is delivered. David, the Christian Bethrick takes on in his blog, points this out quite well when he says:

"So what we have in 1 Cor 15:3 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received :'  
After the colon we get the creedal statement.... , 4 ;that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...' The language here is the exact same as the Pharisees used when passing on their traditions to one another...so we have even more reason to think Paul's about to tell us something from oral tradition."

This argument requires that the "creed" in I Corinthians 15 was formulated after the very fashion employed by Pharisees. Curiously, in Philippians 3:5, Paul tells us he was a Pharisee himself. What other early believers are known to have been Pharisees such that they would have formulated a creed after their fashion? If it is in fact a creed, and it had to have been formulated by someone versed in Pharisaic methods, why does it have to have been someone other than Paul? Ratliff gives his own response to this as follows:

[Bethrick] finds plausible the idea that I mentioned, and that is to say that "...Paul, a former Pharisee himself, fashioned his own creedal formulation after a style with which he would have been intimately familiar." This completely misses the point. Paul uses very technical rabbinic terms when he says "received." He was passing on an oral tradition to them.

Here it seems that Ratliff is missing the point, namely that the source from which he allegedly "received" what he states in I Corinthians 15 need not be human, but could very well be divine in nature. The word Paul uses for "received" could very well be a technical term, but I see no reason why he could not have used this in reference to teachings he believed had been revealed to him directly from the risen Christ. That Ratliff assumes that "received" here exclusively indicates a human source ("he was passing on an oral tradition"), simply begs the question: it is precisely this premise which needs to be argued for. In fact, the Greek word which Paul uses in I Corinthians 15:3 for "received" is *paralambano*, the same exact word he uses for "received" in Galatians 1:12, where he indicates that the gospel which he was preaching came to him by way of revelation from the risen Christ rather than from human sources. So I see no reason to suppose that *paralambano* indicates specifically a human as opposed to a divine or supernatural source. Again, what holds more weight: human testimony or divine revelation? Apologists seem to think the alleged "creed" in I Corinthians 15 would hold more weight if it were based in human testimony rather than supernaturally revealed to Paul.

This is why Ratliff's position seems rather odd to me, coming from a Christian, when he states:

Were Paul only passing along something he had formulated, he would have been destroying the validity of his message as the readers would have understood it.

If Paul truly believed that what he was stating in his letter was in fact divinely revealed to him by the risen Christ, why would employing Pharisaic phrasing to state the content of that divinely revealed message in the form of a creed "destroy the validity of his message," especially if his readers were expected to understand that what Paul was teaching was a divinely authorized message? Perhaps I just don't get it, but again, it seems that divine revelation should carry more weight than an oral tradition recited mechanically.

Ratliff's reasoning for this view is apparently as follows:

Here is Paul claiming that he had received information about eyewitness accounts to the resurrection. He is, in essence saying, "Here are the facts, and you can check them out."

It is not disputed that Paul is "claiming that he had received [the] information" which he gives in I Corinthians 15. Apparently what is in dispute is the source of that information. Ratliff clearly wants it to be a human source, even though Paul nowhere identifies it as coming from a human source, and elsewhere tells us explicitly that the gospel he has "received" came to him by way of revelation from the risen Christ, and that the elders of the church, when he conferred with them, "added nothing" to his message. Just to be clear, Ratliff's argument is not with me, but with Paul. Ratliff insists that it comes from a human source other than Paul, but cannot name that source, and is apparently willing to ignore Paul's own claim to have received this information directly from the risen Christ.

As for the claim that Paul “is, in essence, saying, ‘Here are the facts, and you can check them out’,” how would Paul’s readers be able to follow up on what he claims in I Corinthians 15? He gives no details that would enable one to follow up on them. For instance, how would any of Paul’s immediately intended readers be able to “check out” his claim about the 500 believers? Paul does not identify any of them, nor does he say where they were when the risen Christ allegedly appeared to them, when this happened, or exactly what they are thought to have seen. Christians today are likely to assume that what Paul had in mind here was a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus in the flesh, such as what we find in the gospels. But nothing in Paul’s treatment of the matter suggests that the post-resurrected Jesus made this kind of appearance. The testimony of Canon Michael Carr (as well as countless other believers today) makes it clear that Christians can believe that they are standing in the presence of Christ when in fact there is no physical Christ at all. Believers “feel” Christ’s presence, though no one actually *sees* Christ. As [Cole himself put it](#):

I’m just aware of God being there in the person of Christ in all sorts of different situations, speaking to me by his spirit through the word of God. There was one particular experience when I was very, very conscious of the risen Christ, actually standing with me in the church I was serving, asking whether we would make him Lord of that church... I wouldn’t say anything about that for 24 hours, it was too personal, too close.

Cole essentially that the risen Christ appeared before him and was “actually standing” by his side. Clearly this was not a resurrected body standing there, or others would have seen it. In this sense, Christians demonstrate that it is possible for something to appear and yet not be seen. Cole says that he “was very, very conscious of the risen Christ,” but he does not identify the means by which he was aware of it. Nor does he explain how he identified what he was allegedly aware of as “the risen Christ.” Similarly in the passage found in I Corinthians 15, Paul does not identify the means by which any of the 500 believers had awareness of the risen Christ (if in fact he is saying they were aware of it), or explain how they identified it as “the risen Christ” (if in fact the 500 believers thought that what appeared to them was “the risen Christ”). The “creed” here is simply too scant to give readers anything to go on had they desired to “check out” Paul’s claim.

Ratliff continues, saying:

Now what if this was a Pauline fabrication, there goes his validity.

I suppose that by “validity” Ratliff probably means *credibility*. But I don’t think Paul’s claims are credible to begin with. What makes them incredible is not their source, but their content. Paul’s claims contain supernatural claims, and [I have already pointed out numerous problems with belief in the supernatural](#). Quite simply, from a rational standpoint, claims affirming the reality of “the supernatural” invalidate themselves.

But Paul’s immediately intended readers were the congregants of one of his churches. They already granted validity to the notion of “the supernatural,” so epistemologically speaking it was “too late” for them to examine Paul’s claims rationally. Since they already assumed that there is truth to “the supernatural,” they most likely would not have suspected Paul of fabricating the content of his claims. And if they believed Paul’s claim that he had received the content of his message directly from the risen Christ via personal revelation, so much the more would they have been in a position to take his claims as unchallengeably true. So while Paul has no validity or credibility as far as the supposed truth of his message is concerned from a rational standpoint, from a standpoint which grants validity to the notion of supernaturalism and which is inclined to believe that the OT forecasted Jesus as the Jewish messiah, one’s critical faculties would be far too disabled to challenge Paul’s claims. Hence their “success” through the ages.

But Ratliff still thinks there are reasons to suppose that Paul is repeating testimony from human sources, contrary to his own statements. Ratliff argues:

Paul’s background as a Pharisee only serves to prove that he would have been very careful about the accuracy of what he stated. This is exactly the idea in Gal. 1:18 when Paul says that he went to Jerusalem “to visit” Peter. The word here for “to visit” is “historesai” from “historeo” which means literally “to visit for information.”

It may very well be the case that Paul was anxious to “have been very careful about the accuracy of what he stated,” but one not need appeal to his experience as a Pharisee for this. After all, Paul thought he was passing on information that he had received by way of personal revelation from the risen Christ himself. His credentials as a



former Pharisee may have endowed him with certain methods for safeguarding the “accuracy” of what he believed was revealed to him by the risen Christ (such as technical phrasing in formulating creedal statements from that revelation). But this does not at all indicate that the source of Paul’s claims was human in nature.

As for his visit with Peter mentioned in Galatians 1:18, Paul very well may have used the word “historesai,” but it should be borne in mind, as Ratliff himself has pointed out, that Paul was explicitly clear that Peter and other elders of the Jerusalem church “added nothing” to his message. So if Paul went to visit Peter for information, it seems the best we can claim is that he sought confirmation for things that he was already teaching as opposed to combining what he was already teaching with additional teachings presented by Peter.

Ratliff then opines:

To suggest that Paul would so wrecklessly throw out claims in creedal form that he had not received from a verifiable human source is to do so apart from the evidence.

The evidence is that Paul insists that he did not get what he was teaching from human sources (as Ratliff apparently prefers to believe) and that when he did confer with the elders of the Jerusalem church, they “added nothing” to his message. There is nothing “wreckless” [sic] about taking these points into account. Consider: how did Paul learn the rest of his gospel message? How did he learn, for instance, that Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection serve for the redemption of believing sinners, that “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9), that believers are liberated from the law, etc.? Paul does not claim to have learned this from other human beings; he claims that it was revealed to him directly from the risen Christ. It’s clear that much of what he taught was inspired by his reading of Old Testament texts, but this seems to be what Paul had in mind much of the time when he claimed that his message was “revealed” to him.

It should be clear then, at this point, that the evidence Paul shares is *not his own*.

Ratliff writes:

There is no room then for the theory that later Christian gospels were based on made-up legends by Paul.

Of course, this somewhat mischaracterizes my thesis. My view is that the gospels represent legendary development of earlier Christian stories, not necessarily Paul’s views per se, but sources contemporary to or even predating his. Clearly the gospels did not take Paul’s writings as their source for anecdotal details pertaining to the earthly Jesus’ life such as the virgin birth, a baptism by John the Baptist, miracles, miraculous healings, teachings in parables, disputes with Jewish elders, strict adherence to the law (cf. Mt. 5:18), betrayal by Judas Iscariot, a trial before Pilate, an empty tomb, etc., for none of these details can be found in Paul’s writings. (For a fuller list of gospel details absent from, not just Paul’s writings, but from all early epistles, see my blog [Reckless Apologetic Presumptuousness](#).) Indeed, if Ratliff can claim that Peter, James and John were all aware of the appearance stories found in I Corinthians 15 on the basis of what we read in Galatians 1 and 2, how much more can we conclude that Peter, James and John knew nothing of these details ascribed to Jesus’ earthly life in the gospels since they figure nowhere in Paul’s message? It seems implausible to say that Paul knew of these things and yet did not consider them important enough to mention them in his letters, for a generation later they were so important to Christians that numerous gospel narratives of Jesus’ earthly life were composed and circulated among the faithful (four of which found their way into the NT canon). Why would they be so unimportant to Paul such that he does not even hint at them and yet within a few decades they became so important that they served as the focal backdrop of the gospel message itself?

But there’s more to the issue than simply the absence of details about the earthly life of Jesus which puts the early epistles in such curious relief against the later gospels. It’s also the fact that many of the moral teachings which Paul gives (but are not ascribed by Paul to have come from the earthly Jesus) are put into the earthly Jesus’ mouth in the gospels. G.A. Wells gives several examples of this:

Paul gives it as his own view (Rom. 13:8-10) that the law can be summed up in the one Old Testament injunction “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” According to Lk. 10:25-8, Jesus himself taught that love of neighbor (together with love of God) ensures salvation; but one could never gather from Paul that Jesus had expressed himself on the matter. In 1 Thess. 4:9 it is not Jesus but God who is said to have

taught Christians to love one another. And in the injunction not to repay evil for evil but always to do good to all is given in the same epistle (5:15) without any suggestion that Jesus had taught it (as according to the gospels he did in the Sermon on the Mount). In his letter to Christians at Rome Paul says "bless those that persecute you" (12:14 and 17) and "judge not" (14:13). Surely in such instances he might reasonably be expected to have invoked the authority of Jesus, had he known that Jesus had taught the very same doctrines. (The former doctrine is ascribed to him at Mt. 5:44 and Lk. 6:28, and the latter at Mt. 7:1 and Lk. 6:37.) In the same epistle he urges Christians to "pay taxes" (13:6), but does not suggest that Jesus had given such a ruling (Mk. 12:17). It is much more likely that certain precepts concerning forgiveness and civil obedience were originally urged independently of Jesus, and only later put into his mouth and thereby stamped with supreme authority, than that he gave such rulings and was not credited with having done so by Paul and... by other early Christian writers. (*The Historical Evidence for Jesus*, p. 33.)

I agree with Wells on this very curious point: If Paul knew that Jesus had taught these same moral tenets which he includes in several of his letters, why would he not credit Jesus as their source? It is surely very possible that later writers, after teachings like those found in Paul's letters had gained wide currency within Christianity but not originally attributed to Jesus, took those teachings and integrated them into their portraits of the earthly Jesus in order not only to give those teachings divine authority, but also to explain how they came to be taught in the first place. Christians giving full credence to the gospel narratives of Jesus' earthly life would not question the validity of such portraits, just as today's believers who read Paul's letters only after they've become familiar with those portraits are not likely to notice that they've read the texts in reverse order with respect to the chronology of their authorship. These and other tell-tale indicators of legendary development within the NT canon are well documented and amply defended in the critical literature.

Ratliff then quoted me:

Nothing in the letter itself suggests that the resurrection that Paul speaks of happened any time recently (for all that Paul gives us, his Jesus could have been crucified a century or more earlier, and not necessarily in Palestine for that matter), and only by interpreting Paul's account by reading elements from the gospel stories into it can it be made into a reference to a recent event.

and gave his own summary of my position as follows:

As far as I understand, this seems to his main line of reasoning. But the very objection itself is flawed. This point is basically being made in response to the Christian claim that the testimonies are too close to the evidence to have been legendary development. From the outset, then, we must understand that whatever is lacking in Paul's message (i.e. that Jesus was crucified around A.D. 30 and that the disciples actually knew Jesus during His lifetime) must also have been lacking in the message of the disciples based on Paul's conference with Peter, James, and John (Gal. 2:6). So, it would follow then, that maybe the disciples had only seen a vision of the resurrected Christ as well, but it doesn't mean that their vision is closely related to the actual life and death of Christ.

While I would not say that the points I made in my above quoted statement are my "main line of reasoning," it does encapsulate what I consider some significant issues, and I stand by my statement. It is true that Paul nowhere indicates the time or place of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection or post-resurrection appearances, nor does he indicate the length of time intervening between the time of Jesus' resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances. Paul gives no details on these matters at all, which would be surprising if in fact he thought these were recent events. But nothing in Paul's writings suggests that he did believe these were recent events. This flies in the face of apologetic claims to the effect that the so-called "creed" in I Corinthians 15 dates back to within a couple years at most after Jesus' resurrection and is thus "too early" to have been the product of legendary development.

As for what Peter, James and John were teaching in their versions of Christianity, we have precious little to go on. I agree that there is some cogency to the supposition that, if Paul were ignorant of details about the earthly life of Jesus which are emphasized in the later gospel narratives, and Paul conferred with Peter and perhaps others of the Jerusalem church for the purpose of ensuring that his teaching was not "in vain," and they "added nothing" to Paul's understanding of the gospel, then it is quite possible that these other early believers were unaware of the same details about Jesus' earthly life, details of which they could not have been unaware had they been true (since they

are cast as participants in Jesus' earthly life in the gospel narratives).

With respect to the question of what the early "witnesses" to whom the risen Christ is said to have "appeared" actually saw or experienced, again we have precious little to go on. The only early post-resurrection appearance stories are those found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and here Paul does not elaborate on the matter. If Cephas, "the twelve," the five hundred brothers, James and Paul himself actually saw something, Paul does not indicate what exactly they saw, or how they identified it as the risen Christ (if in fact they did so). We saw above that believers can think they are in the presence of "the Lord" and not actually see anything, certainly not a freshly resurrected body with wounds and all, à la the story of Doubting Thomas. Paul does not even tell us who "the twelve" are or what their significance is. But this much can be said with incontestable certainty: Paul nowhere suggests that "the twelve" were companions of the earthly Jesus during itinerant missionary work, for Paul does not even suggest that Jesus conducted such a ministry in the first place. (On "the twelve" I will have more to say below.)

The question of how these individuals might have identified what they saw as the risen Jesus is of great importance, since we are expected to accept such identifications at face value. Many believers today often claim to see the image of Jesus in such mundane things as tree trunks and tortillas. But I'd really like to know how they came to think that what they see is an image of Jesus as opposed to, say, Osama Bin Laden, Alexander Solzhenitsin, or Confucius. After all, a burn mark on a tortilla does not speak, and thus does not verbally identify itself, and even if someone thought it did speak, all the more reason to suppose there's something wrong with the "witness" to such things.

As for what Paul knew of the earthly Jesus, it is clear that we would be unjustified in simply assuming that he was familiar with stories such as we find in the New Testament gospel narratives, for, as I pointed out above, Paul indicates no knowledge of these things. In contrast to the ample detail of Jesus' earthly life found in the gospel narratives, Paul's knowledge of Jesus strikes me as conspicuously Spartan. He tells the Corinthians that he was "determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Things like a virgin birth, baptism by John the Baptist, missionary work in Jerusalem, Galilee and elsewhere, miracles, healings, parables, prayers, disputes with Jewish elders, betrayal by Judas, an empty tomb, etc., were clearly not important to Paul, and it would be puzzling, to say the least, to suppose that he was aware of these things but considered them of no importance.

On this matter, Wells indicates his more mature view regarding Paul's knowledge of the earthly Jesus:

My view is that Paul knew next to nothing of the earthly life of Jesus, and did not have in mind any definite historical moment for his crucifixion. As we saw, holy Jews had been crucified alive in the first and second centuries BC, but traditions about these events, and about the persecuted Teacher of Righteousness, could well have reached Paul without reference to times and places, and he need not have regarded their occurrences as anything like as remote in time as they in fact were. Whenever it was that Jesus had lived obscurely and died, he had, for Paul, returned promptly after death to heaven; and the evidence for this exaltation, and indeed for his whole religious significance, was his recent appearances to Paul and to contemporaries of Paul which signaled that the final events which would end the world were imminent,,. Thus even if the death and resurrection were put at some indefinite time past, it remains quite intelligible that Christianity did not originate before the opening decades of the first century AD. Nor need any supposed relevance to Jesus of the Wisdom literature have been appreciated earlier. (*Can We Trust the New Testament?*, p. 34)

If in fact the view Wells expresses here is plausible (and I am wholly confident that it is plausible), it would have been irresistible to believers after Paul's time to develop stories about Jesus, stories which took as their inspiration the Wisdom literature, various Old Testament passages (such as from the Psalms and the prophets), the Q sayings source, and quite potentially even pagan sources, for the development of portraits of who had by this time been hailed as the messiah by break-away Jews and missionized gentiles. All that would have been needed to get the ball rolling in this regard would have been the obvious question: Who was Jesus before his crucifixion? One could not look to Paul's letters for answers to such fundamental questions.

Ratliff then stated:

Already, you can see that this seems to leave out a very important part of the creed: "...how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried..." (1 Cor. 15:3-4). It seems that from

the evidence Paul had gathered, Christ did actually live and that He did actually die.

It is unclear how my observation that “nothing in [I Corinthians] itself suggests that the resurrection that Paul speaks of happened any time recently” leaves out any part of what Ratliff refers to as a “creed” in its fifteenth chapter. It’s simply an observation, and had Paul stated in that creed or elsewhere that Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection took place on such-and-such recent date, Ratliff could cite this and prove my observation wrong. But he can’t do this. No one can, because Paul never gives such details.

While I would say it is safe to say that Paul believed that Christ had actually lived and died (and was resurrected), Paul gives no indication of when he lived, where he lived, when he was crucified or under what circumstances, etc. In fact, Ratliff’s statement “from the evidence Paul had gathered” gives the impression that Paul was some kind of roving fact-checker, going to and fro throughout Palestine interviewing eyewitnesses and following leads like a reporter for a newspaper. But nothing in Paul’s letters suggests that he did anything of the sort. He references these post-resurrection appearances in passing, failing to name even five percent of the individuals to whom the risen Christ is said to have “appeared,” giving no indication of time or place, and keeping conspicuously silent on what specifically any of these alleged eyewitnesses might have seen, or how any of them would have identified what they saw or experienced as the risen Christ.

Ratliff asks:

Who could have confirmed this evidence to him? Paul addresses that by saying “...he was seen of Cephas then of the twelve” (v. 5) after his resurrection. What is Paul telling us? First of all, this portion of the creed lends itself to fact that it was, in actuality, very early.

But as we saw above, Paul could not have gotten the list of appearance he gives in I Corinthians 15 from any of the elders of the Jerusalem church, for he assures us that they “added nothing” to his message. Neither does Paul identify either Cephas, James or “the twelve” as the source of his information. As we saw earlier, Paul explicitly insists that the source of his gospel is revelation from the risen Christ himself.

To say in the face of these points that “this portion of the creed lends itself to the fact that it was, in actuality, very early,” is trying to say more than one really can. “Very early” in regard to what? It may represent early Christian thought, but since it is not given the earliest Christian writings when Jesus lived, died and was resurrected, it is unwarranted to simply assume, as Geisler and Turek and a plethora of other Christian apologists do, that we here have a “creed that dates right back to the Resurrection itself” (*I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be An Atheist*, p. 242). The only thing that could justify such a claim is taking the gospel narratives as reliable histories, and that is precisely what my thesis puts into dispute. This is why Earl Doherty is right to point out that “reading the Gospels into 1 Corinthians is simply circular reasoning” (*Challenging the Verdict*, p. 214). Indeed, there seems to be no non-question-begging way to conclude that the so-called “creed” in I Corinthians 15 “dates right back to the Resurrection itself”

Ratliff then focused on Paul’s mention of “the twelve” as if this somehow secures close chronological proximity between Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection on the one hand, and the “creed” which Paul is allegedly reciting in I Corinthians 15:

In the later epistles of the N.T., we don’t see the emphasis on “the twelve” that we do in the early days of Christianity. The issue of twelve disciples seems to be of great importance shortly after the resurrection as Luke shows us in the first chapter of Acts.

It strikes me as misleading at best to say that “in the later epistles of the N.T., we don’t see the emphasis on ‘the twelve’ that we do in the early days of Christianity.” For there is only one mention of “the twelve” in all the early epistles, namely in I Corinthians 15, and only in passing at that. In fact, it is mentioned as if readers are expected to know what this reference is supposed to mean, but Paul nowhere indicates that “the twelve” were a band of disciples who followed Jesus and participated in his ministry before his crucifixion. This understanding does not come from any early epistolary document whatsoever. So to say that “the issue of twelve disciples seems to be of great importance shortly after the resurrection” is without warrant in the present context. Ratliff himself indicates that this understanding comes from Luke (as well as other gospel narratives), not from Paul or any other early source. What in Paul’s letters suggests that these twelve unnamed persons had any link to the earthly life of Jesus? What in Paul’s letters suggests that they were “of great importance shortly after the resurrection”? If Paul believed

that the resurrection took place two hundred or more years earlier (which my thesis rightly grants as a possibility), Paul's contemporaries hardly constitute "shortly after the resurrection." Ratliff clearly has in mind the view, obtainable only from the gospels (which my thesis contends are later legends), that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection took place ca. 30 AD. Unfortunately nothing in Paul's letters even remotely suggest such a timeframe for these events.

Ratliff claims:

The understanding is clearly that "the twelve" as well as the other eyewitnesses were not just witnesses who saw the resurrected Christ at some time, maybe 200 or 1,000 years, after His death. The understanding in the 1st century was that these men had actually followed Jesus, and that is why they would be considered reliable as testimony to His resurrection.

But where does Ratliff get this understanding? Certainly not from Paul. On the contrary, he gets it from the later gospel stories of Jesus' earthly life. Paul nowhere suggests that "the twelve" were followers of Jesus during his earthly life; he does not even tell us that they were men. In fact, I think there is a better reason why Paul may have thought a post-resurrection appearance by Jesus to "the twelve" would have been significant, as I will explain below.

Ratliff then states:

Thus it is untrue that Paul does not suggest a timeframe for Jesus death. While he doesn't explicitly give us the year, there is little doubt that Paul was speaking of eyewitnesses who also witnessed the life and death of Christ. I challenge Bethrick to show me any evidence that would suggest the "twelve" to be understood any other way.

Paul could not be suggesting a timeframe for Jesus' earthly life and death, for he never gives any indicators, even vague ones, of any period when these might have occurred. The list of persons to whom the risen Christ is said to have "appeared" in no way vouches for a date recent to Paul's lifetime. As Wells rightly points out, "People who claim to see a ghost do not necessarily suppose it to be the wraith of someone recently deceased" (*The Jesus Myth*, p. 125). Ratliff himself admits that Paul does not "give us the year" in which Jesus was allegedly crucified, but in spite of this still contends that "there is little doubt that Paul was speaking of eyewitnesses who also witnessed the life and death of Christ." If he is basing this doubtless conclusion on the points he gave above, he'll need to go back and check his premises.

Ratliff then challenges me to "show... any evidence that would suggest the 'twelve' to be understood any other way." For this we only need to consult pre-Christian Judaism, which idealized twelve tribes of Israel as numbering among "God's chosen." For the earliest Christians, who were in fact Jews, it seems that inclusion of a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel would be natural, since they were so emphatic on Jesus constituting a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Earl Doherty makes a valuable point in this respect in the following statement:

One could ask why Paul does *not* use the term "the Twelve" anywhere else in his letters, despite often talking about the Jerusalem apostles. In fact, one would be hard pressed to understand what it refers to simply by this sole reference in 1 Corinthians 15:5. One might also be forgiven for thinking that, as Paul expresses it, "the Twelve" doesn't even include Peter. And more than one commentator has fussed over the fact that this really ought to be an appearance to "the Eleven," since the gap left by Judas' departure had not yet been filled, according to Acts. So I might suggest that the reason why Paul does not "customarily use" the phrase "the Twelve" is because it doesn't refer to the body of apostles we have in mind under the influence of the later Gospels. (*Challenging the Verdict*, p. 193.)

The obvious discrepancy between Paul's "the twelve" - if it is in fact supposed to refer to individuals who banded about Jesus during his earthly life - and the gospel picture of Jesus appearing before only "the eleven" (cf. Mt. 28:16; Mk. 16:14; Lk. 24:9, 33), simply calls into doubt the assumption that "the twelve" in I Corinthians 15 is supposed to refer to disciples who followed Jesus during an earthly ministry. Since Ratliff challenges me to provide evidence to the effect that "the Twelve" should not be taken as a reference to the disciples portrayed in the gospels, I offer the very count of the phrase itself as evidence that it probably should not be taken as Ratliff wants

to believe.

Again, since Paul does not elaborate on who “the twelve” were or what their significance might have been, it would seem plausible that this reference has something to do with the twelve tribes of Israel. In fact, that is precisely how I would interpret it if I did not know of the gospel stories, for there is nothing in Paul’s mention of these unnamed individuals which suggests they were traveling companions of the earthly Jesus.

The only reference to “the twelve” found in any of the other epistles is in James 1:1, which confirms my interpretation. The author addresses his letter “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” (James 1:1). Here the author of James refers explicitly to “the twelve tribes,” which he says “are scattered abroad.” Paul’s reference to “the twelve” could very plausibly have referred to an administrative body representing the twelve tribes. Nothing in Paul’s letters vies against this interpretation, and Ratliff seems unprepared to offer anything against it.

Ratliff makes the following acknowledgement:

I am aware of no one who sees “the twelve” as anything but the first followers of Jesus. This objection seems to be stemming from nowhere other than his deluded skepticism.

This is an autobiographical statement on Ratliff’s part, most likely suggesting the limited range of sources he has examined on these topics, and could only constitute an argument from his own personal ignorance if it is supposed to serve as an answer to my points. As for “deluded skepticism,” Ratliff has nowhere shown that I am “deluded” in any way (believers like to assume that non-Christians have been deluded; it’s safer for them this way), and he errs if he is supposing I am an advocate of philosophical skepticism. I am an Objectivist, not a skeptic. There is a huge difference, but I don’t expect Ratliff to be familiar with this. Most believers have little if any knowledge of the philosophy of Objectivism, and those who have heard of it often suppose it is little or no different from other non-Christian worldviews.

But Ratliff is still not satisfied. He contends that

we are still left with a creed that is much too close to the events to have been the product of legendary embellishment.

Given the foregoing points which I have raised against this view, Ratliff appears simply to be reciting a statement of faith. At no point can he establish that the passage in question is in fact a “creed” predating Paul, nor can he show, without begging the question against the legend theory, that this so-called “creed” is actually “much too close to the events to have been the product of legendary embellishment.” If Paul’s Jesus did in fact live and was in fact crucified, from all that Paul gives us, these events could have taken place decades or centuries before the timeframe indicated in the gospel stories, which would be more than sufficient time for legendary embellishment on the theme of some anecdotal germ to have taken place.

Ratliff opines:

Also, the claim that Christ was anything less than an actual historical figure known by the eyewitnesses is ridiculous, which is clearly why it is the view of a small minority of scholars.

What one considers “ridiculous” is governed by his “worldview presuppositions.” On my worldview, the following claims are ridiculous (from [Richard Carrier’s debate with Mike Licona on the Resurrection of Jesus](#)):

- (1) The God of the universe,
- (2) Who loves us all,
- (3) And came to preach a message of Salvation to mankind,
- (4) Appeared in his resurrected body
- (5) In only one tiny place in the whole of the civilized world,
- (6) At only one time in all of human history,
- (7) To a small number of people
- (8) Almost none of whom were hostile or neutral observers,
- (9) And all of whom were superstitious people lacking in scientific understanding.

This all seems rather ridiculous to me.

Ratliff continues:

Bethrick's objections do not stop here, however. Not only does he not believe that the disciples actually knew Jesus, but he has problems with the corroboration of the creed.

For one thing, Paul never identifies "the twelve" which he mentions in I Corinthians 15 as disciples of the earthly Jesus, as we find in the later gospel stories. And as pointed out above, if they are supposed to represent Jesus' disciples per the gospel traditions, it should read "the eleven," not "the twelve," since according to the gospel stories Judas had defected and was not replaced until after Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and ascension into the clouds. The conflict here cannot be simply pushed aside, as many apologists apparently want to do. This causes an insurmountable problem for corroborating this particular element of the "creed" in I Corinthians 15.

There is also no corroboration for an appearance of the risen Christ to someone named James anywhere in the New Testament. If what we read in I Corinthians 15 actually included a creed, it is hard to see how this element would not have been corroborated. The epistle ascribed to James does not even mention it, but the apologetic excuses I've seen for this ring rather hollow (e.g., James didn't want to call too much attention to himself, or exploit his sibling relationship to Jesus, etc.). Such excuses could be made even if the stories are in fact legendary in nature.

Ratliff then states:

He seems to get hung up on the mentioning of the 500 witnesses.

He then quotes me:

And the understanding I would get from Geisler and Turek - if I didn't know any better - is that what Paul states in I Cor. 15:3-8 (the very passage they quoted) is sufficiently corroborated to secure its claims, which is simply not the case (where else, for instance, do we read of the resurrected Jesus appearing to 500 or so people at once?). Paul doesn't even name 5% of the mass of persons he claims to have experienced an appearance of Jesus. Indeed, so far as authentication or corroboration, I Cor. 15:3-8 couldn't be weaker.

Ratliff's response to the issues I raise here are as follows:

Couldn't be weaker? If you want strong corroborating evidence, you could start with the fact that he lists James the skeptic as well as Himself who was the bitter opponent of the church clearly shown elsewhere. Why would he have included James? He wasn't apart from the twelve, said to be a brother of Jesus, so why was he so important. The reason is that he was understood to have been a skeptic of the ministry of Jesus. At any rate, I do hold that the 500 eyewitnesses strengthens the argument. Obviously, it doesn't strengthen it in the sense that we have a legal document. But insofar as a creedal statement is concerned, it serves its purpose.

Notice that, in my statement my concern focuses on Paul's mention of Jesus appearing to 500 or so people at once. I pointed out that, not only does Paul nowhere name any of these individuals (he gives no details whatsoever - including time or place or even a description of what these unnamed persons allegedly saw, if they saw anything at all), but also that no other NT document mentions this alleged sighting of the risen Christ. In sum, there is no corroboration here, even though Geisler and Turek give the impression that this is a well attested fact of history. This is what I have called into question by raising the questions which Ratliff has quoted.

In response to my questions about the 500 anonymous witnesses and the failure of any other NT document to mention them, Ratliff drops the 500 and quickly shifts his focus onto James. Apparently Ratliff does not understand the questions I have raised. Paul's mention of James does not serve as independent corroboration of his mention of the risen Christ appearing to 500 persons. Indeed, that Ratliff has to shift focus from the 500 to James is itself indicative of the enormity of this problem. But this shift of focus onto James is itself ironic, for several reasons. Ratliff identifies James as "the skeptic." But Paul nowhere suggests that James was a skeptic. Where do we get this view of James? That's right: from the post-Pauline gospel accounts. In attempting to interact with my point that Paul's early writings fail to support the portrait of Jesus which we find in the gospel narratives, Ratliff demonstrates that he cannot find the earthly Jesus of the gospels in Paul's writings without reading elements taken from the gospels into Paul's writings. In other words, in trying to defend against my criticisms, he merely confirms

their validity.

Ratliff asks why an appearance of the risen Christ specifically to James might have been important. Paul does not explain this, certainly not in I Cor. 15. However, in Galatians he does refer to a James as one of the “pillars” of the Jerusalem church, which I would interpret as indicative of a high station of leadership within that church. Christians typically assume this is the same James mentioned in I Corinthians 15. If it is the same James, then the very fact that this James was one of the “pillars” of the church is what would presumably, at least for Paul, make an appearance by the risen Christ to him important. But Ratliff thinks the mention of James in I Corinthians 15 is important because “he was understood to have been a skeptic of the ministry of Jesus.” But Paul never expresses this “understanding.” He does not even suggest it by way of hinted implication. Where do we get this understanding? From the gospels - i.e., from later material written after the legend of Jesus had already been undergoing vast development.

But notice the irony here. Ratliff apparently tries to corroborate Paul’s mention of the risen Christ’s appearance to the anonymous 500 or so “brethren” by highlighting Paul’s mention of the risen Christ’s appearance to James, but even this is not corroborated anywhere else in the NT. Not even the gospels mention an appearance of the risen Christ to James. Indeed, in the epistle attributed to James, there is no mention of this either. So what purportedly has come from James’ own hand does not attest to an appearance of the risen Christ to him. In order to strengthen the weakness of Paul’s mention of the 500, Ratliff points to another weakness. Two weak links do not a strong chain make.

In spite of these marked deficiencies, Ratliff feels that “the 500 eyewitnesses strengthens the argument.” Specifically what argument is it supposed to strengthen? He admits that “it doesn’t strengthen it in the sense that we have a legal document,” which is quite an understatement. However, he hastens to add that “insofar as a creedal statement is concerned, it serves its purpose,” which is a much weaker claim. The criteria which a religious creedal formulation is expected to satisfy can be found anywhere on a wide continuum of ultimately arbitrary requirements. What’s interesting is that the passage in I Corinthians 15 is said to be an early creed, which suggests it would have been in wide use. But where else do we find this creed? Paul never even repeats it elsewhere in his writings. We find it in no other NT epistle, either early or late, either pre-gospel or post-gospel.

So not only does Ratliff fail to produce any independent confirmation of Paul’s mention of an appearance of the risen Christ to 500 believers, he also points to an additional source of problems, Paul’s mention of an appearance by the risen Christ to James. Far from the latter serving to substantiate the former, Ratliff simply shows how the problems grow as one attempts to untangle them.

But Ratliff considers my criticism of the mention of 500 believers in I Corinthians disingenuous. He writes:

Bethrick wants to know where else we find this claim. He wants to have his cake and eat it too! Clearly from his blog, Bethrick doesn’t consider the Gospels reliable, so if they recorded the 500 eyewitnesses it wouldn’t persuade him. He’s throwing this objection out into the wind to bolster his argument. Further, as we have shown this to be an early creed, it appears that this would be the best source to consult on the issue anyway. It’s perfectly fine to ask why this isn’t recorded elsewhere, but it is not appropriate to dismiss the reliability of the source on those grounds.

It is true that I have raised the question of where else can be found any mention of an appearance of the risen Christ to some 500 or so believers at one time, but this is not an instance of my wanting to have my cake and eat it, too, as Ratliff claims. It is true that I do not consider the gospels historically reliable; far from it in fact. But why suppose that independent corroboration of these 500 witnesses to the risen Christ must be found only in the gospels? This is not something I have stipulated. I’ve simply pointed out that there is no independent corroboration of this claim anywhere, whether as part of the NT canon, or outside it. It would be quite a different story if we had writings from one or more of those 500 attesting to what is written in I Corinthians 15. But I suspect if we did have that, there would be far less emphasis on the importance of I Corinthians 15 than we have today. Any claim to importance on behalf of I Corinthians 15 would be decisively eclipsed by any firsthand accounts from any of those 500. But we do not have this. We don’t even have any of their names. We are not told who they were, where they were when the risen Christ allegedly appeared to them, when this allegedly happened, or what exactly these unnamed spectators supposedly saw. Did they see a human figure? Did they see a light? Did they see nothing but experience a powerful emotional event? We are not told either way. Many Christians are prone to assuming that



they saw a human figure, like the one we read about in the latter chapters of the gospel narratives, such as that which appeared before Thomas the Doubter. But nothing in I Corinthians 15 justifies this assumption. The account of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus found in Acts does not have a physical body of the risen Christ appearing before Paul; on the contrary, Paul simply sees a light and hears a voice. If we assume this is authentic (which Christians clearly do), isn't it curious how Paul makes no effort to distinguish the nature of the sighting he supposedly experienced from what the other witnesses mentioned in I Corinthians 15 supposedly experienced?

I submit that Ratliff is far too hasty in deciding what would and what would not persuade me. If we had independent accounts which could be reliably attributed to the hand of any of these 500 believers mentioned in I Corinthians 15, I would be happy to take a look at them. So contrary to what Ratliff states, I do not "throw... this objection out into the wind" only "to bolster [my] argument" (as if bolstering one's argument by citing facts were wrong), but to point out how irresponsible it is of apologists to claim that what we read in I Corinthians 15 is well "corroborated." It simply is not. As I stated in the passage which Ratliff himself quoted from my hand, it couldn't be weaker, and nothing Ratliff provides has succeeded to overcome this.

But this will not do for Ratliff. Drawing on the assumption that the passage in question from I Corinthians 15 is in fact an early creed, Ratliff states that "it appears that this would be the best source to consult on the issue anyway." It's only "the best source to consult on the issue" because it's the only source which mentions, not only the appearance of the risen Christ to 500 unnamed believers, but also to someone named James. That it is allegedly part of a creed does not make this mention valuable. That would suggest that there are other sources which state the same, but since this one is part of a creed it's somehow better. That's not the case though. Had we an independent account of this event from the hand of one of the 500 believers said to have experienced an appearance of the risen Christ, I'm quite confident that it would be of at least the same if not far more apologetic value than the passage in I Corinthians 15. In such a case, the passage in I Corinthians 15 would serve as supplemental corroboration of a far more impressive set of claims.

Ratliff admits that "it's perfectly fine to ask why this isn't recorded elsewhere." Indeed, if it were a fiction, it would be understandable that it is not mentioned by anyone else. "But," Ratliff adds, "it is not appropriate to dismiss the reliability of the source on those grounds." What reliability? If it has no reliability to begin with, one only needs to point this out. In such a case, there would be no reliability to dismiss in the first place. My objections, which have sustained the efforts of Christian apologists to undermine, show that the claims in I Corinthians are simply too frail to hold any reliability to begin with. And Ratliff has provided nothing to substantiate his assumption that it is historically reliable.

Ratliff continues:

Bethrick points out that the 500 were not named, and this is not surprising when you consider that creeds are not exhaustive histories.

Now look who's trying to have his cake, and to eat it, too! Above Ratliff has Paul referencing the appearance of the risen Christ to James as a historically important account because James was a skeptic of Christianity, even though Paul never states this. Now suddenly we should not expect details from the passage in question because "creeds are not exhaustive histories." But pointing out that "creeds are not exhaustive histories" hardly answers the point. Whether the passage in I Corinthians 15 is a creed or not, the fact is that Paul does not name any of these 500 persons. And not only that, as I mentioned, he does not give any other pertinent details either. He does not say where this alleged sighting took place, when it happened, or what exactly was experienced by these 500 persons. How would any of Paul's immediately intended readers be able to check out these claims?

Ratliff goes on to say:

The one thing this does show is that if it were important enough to be included in the creed, Paul and the rest of the apostles were willing to defend its claims to those who inquired about it.

If it were important enough to be included in a creedal formulation, which does not convey "exhaustive histories," why is there no other mention of an appearance of the risen Christ to these unnamed 500 believers anywhere else in the NT? This is what makes the claim that the passage in I Corinthians 15 constitutes an early creed so remarkable: it is on the one hand said to be a creed and therefore should not be expected to provide historically documentable detail, but on the other hand it was so important to the early church that it should figure in an early creed. So

again, who is trying to have his cake, and to eat it, too? And why is there no detailed historical account of these alleged appearances of the risen Christ, if these events were so important to early Christians? Why weren't more details preserved in some other text? If it were in fact an invention by Paul or someone else, it would be understandable why there is no other mention of an appearance to "the Twelve," to 500 plus brothers at once, to James.

Ratliff says that the inclusion of this mention in an early creed indicates that "Paul and the rest of the apostles were willing to defend its claims to those who inquired about it." Not only does this seem to stretch things more than a bit (especially by claiming that other apostles, who nowhere mention an appearance to 500 believers at one time, were willing to defend this claim), but it doesn't help us today whatsoever. Such claims are highly speculative, and provide no value in corroborating what is claimed in this "creed." Ratliff himself seems to understand this latter point when he laments,

It's a shame that we can't actually talk to Paul today, but we must remember that the people he wrote and preached to could have.

Paul seems to have preached to a lot of people in a lot of different locations. But we have record of him mentioning an appearance by the risen Christ to 500 believers in only one place, namely in his first letter to the Corinthian church. I see no justification for the assumption that congregants in churches at Ephesus, Colossae, Rome, Lystra, et al., might have inquired about these 500 brothers, for I see no evidence that they were told about them. So we have to focus on the congregants at the Corinthian church. The claim is that these congregants "could have" talked to Paul and inquired about these 500 unnamed believers mentioned to have enjoyed an appearance by the risen Christ. Again, this does not help us, but let's suppose they could have asked Paul about them. Would they have asked him? It's not cut and dry that anyone would have. We must remember that this is a religious community we're talking about, not a group of critically minded thinkers who demand validation for everything they're told. Religious people by virtue of their religiosity *want* to believe what their religion teaches, so it's quite possible that congregants of Paul's churches would have been reluctant to inquire further on what was mentioned in his letters, or simply saw no reason to do so. Paul's letters were written for the purpose of settling matters in dispute, not for raising new questions to be revisited upon his return to the church. Believers today exhibit the same kind of mindset: don't question what Paul wrote; instead take it for granted that what he wrote was reliable.

Now suppose perchance some of the congregants of the Corinthian church did have an opportunity to ask Paul about things mentioned in his letters to them, and actually took it upon themselves to speak to him. Paul wrote a lot of things in his two letters to this church, and it would be quite coincidental that his mention of 500 brothers would have been one of things they sought to inquire on. But suppose some did. Perhaps Ratliff envisions the conversation to have gone as follows:

**CONGREGANT 1:** Master, tell us about these 500 brothers you mentioned in your first letter to us.

**CONGREGANT 2:** Yes, master. You say that the risen Christ appeared to them. Who were these brothers, and where are they now?

**PAUL:** As I mentioned in my letter, some are now asleep. But some still live.

**CONGREGANT 2:** Do we know any of them?

**PAUL:** No, they weren't from these parts.

**CONGREGANT 1:** Tell us what happened, master. Who were they, and how can we fellowship with these brothers?

**PAUL:** There was Bill of Antioch. He now lives at 165 Al Metholos Road in Damascus. It is a two week journey from here by mule. There was Fred of Tyre. He also lives in Damascus. Bill knows him well, you can ask him how to find Fred. There was Al of Galilee....

Unfortunately for Ratliff and other Christians who so nonchalantly assume that Paul would have been able to provide such details, there is nothing in Paul's letter which suggests that he had any knowledge of such details to begin with. The fact that he mentions it in passing, and never mentions it again elsewhere in his letters, suggests to me

that it was not a very important matter to him, and was not worth revisiting again in his letters. Given the nature of what he claims in the passage in question, this is quite noteworthy. I simply find it doubtful that Paul would have suddenly been able to gush all this information about the 500 brothers mentioned in I Corinthians 15 upon request. But this is the impression which apologists defending the alleged reliability of I Corinthians 15 give.

I suspect the following dialogue may be more accurately representative of what Paul's congregants could expect if they inquired on the 500 believers:

**CONGREGANT 1:** Master, tell us about these 500 brothers you mentioned in your first letter to us.

**CONGREGANT 2:** Yes, master. You say that the risen Christ appeared to them. Who were these brothers, and where are they now?

**PAUL:** As I mentioned in my letter, some are asleep now. Did you not read?

**CONGREGANT 2:** What about those who still live? Do we know any of them?

**PAUL:** No, they weren't from these parts.

**CONGREGANT 1:** Tell us what happened, master. Who were they, and how can we fellowship with these brothers?

**PAUL:** Look, you know all that you need to know about the gospel. I have already told you. Jesus came to save you from your sins. You do believe, don't you? For if you do not confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that he was resurrected, you cannot be saved. If you don't believe, what good will details about the 500 witnesses to the resurrected Jesus do you? If I were you, I would see to it that I believe even if I hadn't heard about any such witnesses. The witnesses cannot save you, only Jesus can. So I suggest you get your priorities straight and get with the program. The Lord is not pleased by doubting, and has a place in hell for those who do not believe.

Of course, they could inquire, were they familiar with the stories found in the gospels, why the "creed" Paul includes in his letter to them conflicts so much with what the gospels say about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. As we saw above, Paul's "creed" has the risen Christ appear to "the Twelve," but anyone familiar with the story as contained in the gospel narratives would know that this would be impossible, since Judas had defected and was not yet replaced. The gospels also have a group of women be the first to see the risen Christ, but Paul's "creed" nowhere mentions them. Apologists often address this by saying that, in the culture of the day, women bore no weight as witnesses to something. This would have been a splendid time to challenge this irrational, sexist viewpoint. On the contrary, apologists would have us believe that the "creed" is conforming itself to a primitive view of women, but for no good reason. Besides, if the "creed" is supposed to be registering facts, and the gospel picture is factual, then the exclusion of the women makes the "creed" highly suspect. The gospels also record no appearance by the risen Christ to James, so I would think Paul's addressees might question this as well. And if they were familiar with the stories of Paul's conversion in the book of Acts, where Paul is portrayed as having a visionary experience of Christ rather than a sighting of a physical body, his readers might ask about this as well. They might wonder why the gospel stories have a physical body appearing to the women at the tomb and the eleven remaining apostles, while the appearance of the risen Christ to Paul is so markedly different. They might ask why Paul fails to explain this in his letter.

In sum, examining the "creed" in I Corinthians 15 against what is found in the gospel narratives opens up a huge can of worms, which is why I suspect the latter version of Paul's dialogue with his inquiring readers might be more representative of what they could expect if they were to grill him on his claims.

Ratliff states:

This should help one to better understand the oversimplification of calling the eyewitnesses hearsay as is seen in Bethrick's quote above. The disciples that Paul received this creed from were convinced they had evidence to back it up.

Even if it were the case that "Paul received this creed" from some of those mentioned in it, and those persons

were in fact “convinced [that] they had evidence to back it up,” this would not mean that the “creed” is not hearsay. In law, [hearsay](#) is “Evidence based on the reports of others rather than the personal knowledge of a witness and therefore generally not admissible as testimony.” All the elements in Paul’s “creed” (with the sole exception of his own appearance claim tacked onto the end of the list of appearances) are at best secondhand information for Paul. In the case of the appearances of the risen Christ to Peter, James, “the twelve,” and the 500 plus brothers, Paul is not relating information about something he himself experienced or witnessed, but something reported to him, especially if - as Ratliff would have it - he learned of these appearance stories from human sources. These stories are “reports of others rather than the personal knowledge of a witness” which Paul is subsequently including in his letter. And given the utter lack of detail in this so-called “creed,” even if one wants to deny the label of ‘hearsay’ to what it claims, what of substance does it really tell us? It is vague, unspecific, and in fact is either uncorroborated (such as in the case of James and the 500 brothers) or in conflict with other New Testament documents (such as in the case of “the twelve” and its failure to include the women mentioned in the gospel narratives).

Ratliff concludes:

Thus, the grounds upon which Bethrick has touted the legend theory are quite shaky. My argumentation above should show that not only was the creed early, but it also contained the testimony of men who were Christ’s contemporaries taking away the possibility of a crucifixion that took place anywhere at anytime in the universe.

Ratliff has not come close to establishing his claim that the grounds upon which I have defended the legend theory are “quite shaky.” He has attempted to interact with only a small portion of my larger case, which is not confined to the single blog he chose to critique. I have published numerous other blogs which contribute to my defense of the legend theory. At the time of Ratliff’s writing, there were a total of 14 posts with the label [Christian Legends](#) on my blog, each one of them containing references to printed sources which also take up the matter. So the assessment that my defense of the legend theory is “quite shaky” on the basis of looking at only one of my many posts on the matter, is itself quite shaky.

And even in the case of the current topic, Ratliff’s points fall well below the mark. With respect to showing that the so-called “creed” embedded in I Corinthians 15:3-8, Ratliff has not even established that this passage is in fact a pre-Pauline creed. His case for this seems to rely on the point raised by David Parker in my own discussions with him, namely that symmetrical language introducing its points suggests a formalized statement, that “the language here is the exact same as the Pharisees used when passing on their traditions to one another.” This of course does not establish that someone other than Paul composed the passage in question as a creedal formulation. Paul himself was a Pharisee prior to his conversion to Christianity, so if the passage in question does in fact conform to Pharisaic conventions, I see no reason why Paul himself could not have been its originator. Paul does say he “received” what he is passing along, but he nowhere indicates that he received it from a *human* source, let alone identify any human individual(s) as the source from which he received it. Elsewhere in his letters, as I have pointed out, Paul is explicit that he did not receive his gospel from other human beings, but directly from the risen Christ.

Anyway, I think I’ve made my point.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Legends](#)

*posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)*

**2 Comments:**

[Suzanne](#) said...

I’ve always wondered if Paul didn’t make up a mystery religion whereby he dramatized the Crucifixion, much like the Eleusinian Mysteries dramatized the myth of Demeter. After all, in Galatians 3:1 he says “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.” If he was dramatizing as part of his religious ceremonies, could not that have accounted for the “500”?

I'm also intrigued that I've never seen a religious scholar address the "portrayed as crucified" statement...

[April 30, 2009 1:22 PM](#)

[Josh Ratliff](#) said...

Hi Dawson. I have responded to your blog here:

<http://awesleyansresponse.blogspot.com/>

[May 19, 2009 1:42 PM](#)

[Post a Comment](#)