

## Another Response to David, Part 1: The Charge of Strawman

On 16 August David, who has been interacting with my views on early Christianity, submitted a [lengthy and thoughtful comment](#). As I dove into considering the points he raised against me in his comment, my counter-response itself began to grow in length and substance. So I have decided to roll out my response to David in stages on my blog, since many of the points which have subsequently come up are worthy of discussion in their own right.

To begin, I want to quote GA Wells who summarizes some relevant points which should be borne in mind throughout the following exchange:

As the substance of the gospels is so much better known than that of the epistles, it is difficult for the reader of the latter to peruse them without - consciously or otherwise - interpreting them from his knowledge of the former. One must constantly remind oneself that, as the gospels did not exist when Paul wrote, one has no right to assume, prior to investigation, that the traditions which came to be embodied in them were known to him, even when appearances suggest this, as in a few cases they do. The most striking example is Paul's reference to "the brethren of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 9:5) and to "James the brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1:19), whom he here designates as one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church. We immediately think of those persons designated brothers of Jesus in the gospels, without pausing to ask whether Paul had in mind members of a fraternity, of a small group of Messianists not related to Jesus, but zealous in the service of the risen one. (*The Jesus Legend*, pp. 26-27)

In the present case, David expressed some confusion on my take on the legend theory. He wrote:

Dawson, in my first response to your blog article, I missed that you were trying to posit that Jesus' existence was legendary. I'm accustomed to people arguing that the resurrection was legendary and not the entire events in the Gospels. Perhaps I will back up a moment since I have gotten a hold of the book you were originally referring to, as well as some of Wells' work.

To clarify my view of Jesus, let me quote myself from a discussion which I had with another Christian on [early non-Christian testimony](#), where I wrote:

Whether or not the gospel of Mark holds priority over the other synoptics is ultimately of little value to my overall view. Where Doherty may be regarded as a "mythicist," I can be regarded as a "legendist" - I think it's clearly the case that the stories we read in the gospels and the book of Acts are the product of legendary developments, regardless of whether or not Mark came first, regardless of whether or not there was ultimately a human being named Jesus which initially inspired sacred stories messianic heroism.

So what I consider legendary are the portraits we have of Jesus in the gospels and the stories of Peter, James and Paul in the book of Acts. This view is not a baseline starting point or root assumption, but the conclusion of an enormous some of consideration. As I state above, whether or not a man named Jesus was crucified at some time in the distant past is really neither here nor there, given this conclusion, of which I am convinced. The earliest Christians did believe that a crucified savior was resurrected, but what this means in terms of specifics is hazy given the way it is treated in the earliest epistolary strata of the New Testament. For instance, the gospels portray Jesus as being resurrected in a physical body, but Paul nowhere specifies that the appearances of Jesus which he mentions were of a physical body. The empty tomb and a physical resurrection seem to be later traditions of which Paul shows no familiarity. Granted that these are highly controversial remarks to Christians, it is important, again, to note that these are conclusions of much consideration of the matter, and I would hope that David and others can appreciate this fact.

David's first point of business in his lengthy comment was to declare that certain statements that I have made on [my blog](#) in response to a passage from Norman Geisler and Frank Turek's book *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, strike him "as quite heavy and unsupported." Essentially, he believes I have misconstrued their argument. From here forward I will address my comments to David, who wrote:

In your original blog article, you attempted to cast G/T's argument in opposition to your rendition of Wells' legend theory.

I reviewed what I wrote in my initial blog, and I don't see where I put as specific a cast on the section I quoted from Geisler and Turek's book as you say here. Geisler and Turek are the ones who are saying that Paul's "testimony could describe a legend, because it goes right back to the time and place of the event itself." I'm simply pointing out that this begs the question against the view that Jesus' resurrection is legendary. It begs the question because it assumes the truth of the gospel accounts of the passion (for how else does one figure a date for the resurrection), but that's precisely what's in question vis. the legend theory. Below you mention that there are many different legend theories, which is fine, but which legend theory holds that the resurrection actually happened? For my point here to obtain, the legend theory in question does not need to be Wells' own, or even my own "rendition" of Well's theory. For one could, against Wells' earlier views (but in line with his mature view), hold that there was really a man, very possibly named Jesus, who was crucified, but still hold that the resurrection story itself is a legend.

David wrote:

I assumed that G/T was indeed arguing against the legend theory, because normally folks don't simply toss a position at an author and criticize them for not dealing with it when the author didn't aim to in the first place.

Geisler and Turek do not attempt a full-fledged refutation of the legend theory. Rather, they offer a very commonplace dismissals of it in the form of passing blows, in the present case claiming that the earliest testimony of the resurrection is essentially too early for a legend to have developed. This simply assumes that the resurrection actually happened, which - when it comes to considering the legend theory - is precisely what's in question. I have quoted Geisler and Turek, so there should be no question that they said what I've quoted them saying.

David wrote:

I also assumed when you accused professional philosophers of question begging and lying, that perhaps I shouldn't judge until I could have a look at the source.

I certainly have no objection to consulting a source when it's been critiqued to confirm whether or not the critique in question distorts it. For the record, however, I do not consider either Geisler or Turek to be "professional philosophers." They're apologists for a religious view, which in my view is anti-philosophical. But I still have no objection to you checking the source for yourself. That's why I give the book's name and page numbers. It's a way of saying "See for yourself." Wouldn't it have been nice if Paul had done the same when he claims that Jesus appeared to some 500 or so people?

I wrote:

But if the Jesus story were a legend in the first place - the very premise which our authors are trying to defeat, then appealing to what might have happened or could have happened to Jesus' body simply begs the question, for it assumes precisely what they are called to prove: namely that the story we have of Jesus in the New Testament is not legend. If the story about Jesus is merely a legend, then there was no body to crucify and seal in a tomb or parade through the streets of Jerusalem.... Geisler and Turek's book is admittedly aimed more at a popular audience, but it's fair game so far as I see it, and it's typical in regard to how blatantly many Christians beg the question when it comes to how they argue against the legend theory.

David wrote:

Simply put, I think you've built a straw man and forced it to beg the question. Does G/T present Habermas' resurrection argument to conclude that the legend theory is false? No.

As I read it, Geisler and Turek's purpose in citing Habermas appears to be, at the very least, in the interest of establishing the position that I Cor. 15:3-8 contains a quotation from a creed which predates Paul, thus making what we read in Paul earlier than even Paul's own letter. This fits the overall purpose of the chapter in which the offending passage appears, which they title "Do We Have Early Testimony About Jesus?"

Let's look specifically at what they write when they invoke Habermas:

"as Gary Habermas points out, most scholars (even liberals) believe that this testimony was part of an early creed that dates right back to the Resurrection itself - eighteen months to eight years after, but some say even earlier." (*I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, p. 242)

Now it is unclear where Habermas leaves off and Geisler and Turek pick back up. It's clear from what Geisler and Turek give that Habermas has affirmed that "most scholars... believe that this testimony was part of an early creed." But does Habermas also think that "most scholars believe... that [this creed] dates right back to the Resurrection itself"? They do not quote Habermas (according to the book's index, p. 242 is the first reference to Habermas), but the way they have it does imply that Habermas believes this to be the case. At any rate, Geisler and Turek cite Habermas in order to substantiate the view that the alleged creed contained in I Cor. 15 is so early that it "dates right back to the Resurrection itself," and it is from this that Geisler and Turek go on to assert that "There's no possible way that such testimony could describe a legend, because it goes right back to the time and place of the event itself," which is the statement to which I raised my objection, which you find controversial. In essence, they cite Habermas as an authority in order to support their dismissal of the view that Jesus' resurrection is legendary. I have not mischaracterized Geisler and Turek (or Habermas), nor have I forced their statement into a fallacy which it clearly commits on its own.

David wrote:

Besides the fact that there are all sorts of "legend theories" and Wells is the most extreme, you are missing out on what is actually being argued.

I don't think I've missed what Geisler and Turek were trying to argue. It's pretty clear what they were trying to establish. As for Wells' legend theory, he has modified it in recent years, and I don't think it was ever as radical as Doherty's view.

David wrote:

Generally when New Testament scholars speak of "embellishments" or "legend development" they are not necessarily asserting that the narratives are not without any historical seed at all;

Depending on what "historical seed" is considered to me, this may very well be the case. But I don't think it's relevant in establishing the charge that I have misconstrued Geisler and Turek's points. Wells' more mature line of thinking on the matter, for instance, does concede that there probably was a man, maybe even named Jesus, who died by crucifixion, thus satisfying this common expectation you mention of a "historical seed" element here, and that over time various legends developed about this man who was purportedly resurrected and "seen" in visions or waking fantasies, much like what many of today's Christians have experienced. Wells indicates his updated position in *Can We Trust the New Testament?* as follows:

The weakness of my earlier position was pressed upon me by J.D.G. Dunn, who objected that we really cannot plausibly assume that such a complex of traditions as we have in the gospels and their sources could have developed within such a short time from the early epistles without a historical basis (Dunn [*The Evidence for Jesus*], p. 29). My present standpoint is: this complex is not all post-Pauline (Q, or at any rate parts of it, may well be as early as ca. A.D. 50); and - if I am right, against Doherty and Price - it is not all mythical. The essential point, as I see it, is that the Q material, whether or not it suffices as evidence of Jesus's historicity, refers to a personage who is not to be identified with the dying and rising Christ of the early epistles. (p. 50)

David wrote:

specifically, G/K are not defending against the supposition that Paul took some pagan mythology to wash down his hallucinations, and then regurgitated some no-less-than maniacal letters with which later writers found much accord and fabricated more complex Jesus tales.

Perhaps they aren't. Incidentally, if this comment is intended to reflect Wells' case, I'd recommend a closer study of it.

David wrote:

Indeed, if G/K is arguing for the historicity of the resurrection and not the historicity of the whole "Jesus story", this is a sound argument.

What exactly is the "sound argument" you refer to here?

David wrote:

On that note I contend that if the legend theory you suppose is true, then Paul is completely insane

I'm reminded of Festus in Acts 26 who calls Paul "mad" to his face. Regardless, it is hard to perform a psychological evaluation on someone who's been dead for over 1900 years. But judging by the content of his letters, supposedly he actually believed what he preaches in them, I would say he was at the very least hyper-delusional. His worldview was so steeped in the primacy of consciousness that such delusion is unavoidable if it is taken seriously. For that matter, I think Christians today are deluded, at least when it comes to their religious views. Fortunately for them, most believers are well rehearsed at compartmentalizing their beliefs, but there are some who do make the attempt to integrate their religious views with their life in the world. It's not a very pretty sight.

David wrote:

(after all his statements are incoherent without the Gospels being read back into them or assuming his audience had any idea of what he meant),

I wouldn't argue this at all. With regard to the resurrection, for instance, Paul's letters could make sense if the resurrection he had in mind were believed to have taken place two centuries prior to his own time just as well as (if not even better than) if it were believed to have taken place when the gospel narratives situate it. Paul's letters could make sense if his Jesus was not supposed to have been born of a virgin, raised by a carpenter, baptized by John the Baptist, betrayed by Judas Iscariot, tried by Jesus, crucified outside Jerusalem, entombed under the auspices of Joseph of Arimathea, visited by a group of women, etc. The intelligibility of Paul's letters in no way necessitate any of these gospel elements. From what we learn from Paul's letters, Jesus' parents could have been named Bob and Cindy, they could have been shopkeepers selling textiles, living in Macedonia ca. 200 BCE. The twelve could have been an institution of enthusiasts, like die hard rockstar groupies, whose members are replaced after passing on, keeping the fire of their devotion alive for generations, as is common in religious cults. They need not have been named Matthew, Peter, John, etc. From what Paul gives us, they could have had names like Habeeb, Carl, Suki, or Bill. Paul nowhere specifies that "the twelve" were men; it could have been a coed group from all that he gives us. From Paul's letters, we never learn how old Jesus was when he was crucified. He could have lived to 70 years of age for all that he gives us. Paul never speaks of an empty tomb; he just says Jesus "was buried." Thus for Paul, his Jesus could have been buried in the ground, under a pile of rocks, in a mass grave, etc. Nothing in Paul's letters necessitate a sealed tomb, as he never mentions it. In fact, while I realize that the Greek word 'thapto' in I Cor. 15:4 means 'bury' or 'inter', and that interment can mean depositing the deceased in either a grave or a tomb, virtually all the English translations I've seen use the word 'bury' instead of 'inter' in I Cor. 15:4. And typically, when someone says a dead person has been "buried," I tend to think of a grave, not a tomb per se.

David wrote:

and the Gospel writers are some of the most outrageous fraudsters fiction has ever seen.

You're free to worry about such rankings, but fiction is fiction any way you slice it.

David wrote:

Now back to this corny book (actually I agree with your analysis there). G/T is specifically arguing for the historicity of the resurrection, which, as you've pointed out, rests on other premises (the historicity of specific statements made in the Gospels) to support it. It is perfectly valid argumentation to have a series of linked premises (with sub-arguments) that support a larger conclusion.

Premises offered in support of a conclusion would be a minimum requirement for validity. I don't think anyone is disputing this. But the way these authors attempt to counteract the charge that Paul's testimony might be a product of legend is to claim that it is essentially too early to be such, and the only way they can argue this is by taking the portraits of Jesus which we find in the gospel narratives for granted, which - unlike Paul - puts Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection in a historical context, indeed one which does not at all fit well with Paul's overall conception of Jesus. In other words, if Paul is thought to be relating a legend, it won't do to challenge this thought by pointing to later writings (namely the gospel narratives) which would surely be legends if that thought were true.

David wrote:

One need not reject or accept the entire New Testament as legend; indeed many critical scholars reject the miracle stories and resurrection as legendary yet find no good reason to reject the descriptions of political events, geography, etc.

Indeed, I acknowledge the actual existence of places like Jerusalem, Galilee, the Dead Sea, Damascus, Tyre, Ephesus, and Rome, all of which are mentioned in the New Testament. So do Wells, Doherty and other legend theorists. Similarly, I acknowledge the actual existence of the state of Kansas, which is where Dorothy lives according to *The Wizard of Oz*. However, because this story mentions an actually existing place, does not at all suggest to me that the story itself is true. Fiction can easily use actual places and genuinely historical events as backdrops for its characters and plot development.

David wrote:

Regardless, you are misrepresenting G/T and introducing a false dichotomy.

So now I'm guilty of a second fallacy. Well, let's see.

David

Craig Blomberg discusses this dichotomy: "It certainly seems fair to say its no more appropriate to take the hardest and most fantastic part of a piece of literature and write all the rest of it off as a result, than it is to take the most sober, corroborated piece of literature and use that as a reason for believing everything else in the document." (Difficult Questions about the New Testament, mp3 online).

I think you may have read quite a bit more into my position than is warranted. As I mentioned above, I do not doubt the historicity of many of the geographical places mentioned in the New Testament. So I'm not throwing the baby out with the bathwater as it were. However, I would point out that I don't subscribe to the historicity of, say, Jerusalem or the Dead Sea *because* it's a setting backdrop in the New Testament. Besides, if it is acknowledged that portions of the gospel portraits of Jesus qualify as a "fantastic part of a piece of literature," as Blomberg seems to be doing in the excised portion of his speech (I have not listed to it, so you can clarify this), then that seems to be quite a concession on his part. I see no problem with accepting as factual elements such as the existence of Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin, the prefecture of Pilate, the existence of donkeys, pigs, the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, etc., while viewing the stories of Jesus' virgin birth, escape from the slaughter of the innocents, miracle performances, magical healings, parables, resurrection, etc., as legendary.

I wrote:

There's a persistent and annoying perhapsical nature to all this, and puts a great burden on the memories of those whom Paul personally missionized, persons who may or may not have been the recipients of Paul's letters, which - like I Corinthians - was addressed to the church as a whole, not to a specific individual.

David responded:

You complain that there is a "perhapsical" nature to this whole idea that Paul's letters were not written in a contextual vacuum.

I don't think - nor did I say - that Paul's letters were "written in a contextual vacuum." Recall that the statement you quote from me above was made in the context of the following point regarding Paul's unexplained mentioning of "the twelve" and "the apostles" in I Cor. 15:3-8:

I would suspect that at least some of Paul's readers would have wondered whom he meant by "the twelve" and who were "the apostles" he mentions. Apologists typically respond to these kinds of questions by alleging that Paul's audiences would have known whom he had in mind with such expressions, because this would have been included in his on-site missionary work when he visited the churches he later addressed in letters.

The standard refrain that Paul's intended audience would have just known what he was talking about, does not help us very much, because it does not supply the details which Paul fails to give, nor does it confirm that the individuals who made up "the twelve" were the disciples mentioned in the gospels. Indeed, by indicating that we are not Paul's intended audience, believers suggest that what Paul is saying in his letters was not directed to us. But Christians performatively behave otherwise, expecting everyone to take what Paul says as if it applies to us today.

The point is that this kind of apology still does not establish who were members of the groups which Paul mentions. It is unknown what Paul taught the Corinthians when he was watering the church there. When he visited the church, did he name the members of "the twelve" and "the apostles"? How could we know? Does a passing mention of these groups indicate that he did? That seems rather tenuous, but tenuous inferences are

pretty much all we have to go on given the scantiness of the details here, so it could go either way. But if it is not possible to establish that Paul did identify the members of either group when he was actually at the church in Corinth, how is it any more possible to know who those members were, especially since Paul himself never mentions “the twelve” again in any of his letters, or provides a list of who were “the apostles”?

Besides, regarding the members of “the twelve,” even going by the gospels, is no cut-and-dry affair. Wells describes the quagmire as follows:

The twelve disciples are often regarded as guarantors of Jesus’ historicity, although we are told nothing of most of them except their names, on which the documents do not even agree completely. In Mk. and Mt. the list of names is also very clumsily worked into the text. All this makes it obvious that the *number* is an older tradition than the *persons*; that the idea of the twelve derives not from twelve actual disciples, but from some other source - quite possibly from the expectation that Jesus, as Messiah, would command twelve men as leaders and judges of the new Israel. Thus the epistle of Barnabas (written some time between AD 70 and 145) says (ch. 8) that ‘those whom Jesus empowered to preach the gospel were twelve in number, to represent the tribes of Israel, which were twelve’. The fourth gospel (unlike the synoptics) does not even list the names. From 6:60 we learn that the disciples are ‘many’, and a few verses later Jesus is suddenly made to address ‘the twelve’. There has been no previous hint of choosing the number. Clearly, then, John knew of a tradition that there had been twelve disciples, but was unable or unwilling to elucidate it and is therefore not a valuable witness to its historical accuracy. In the synoptics, Peter, James and John are Jesus’ most intimate disciples, but in the fourth gospel Peter plays but a minor role, and James and John are not mentioned at all. (Jn. 21 - generally admitted to be an appendix added to the solum conclusion of the gospel recorded at the end of ch. 20 - does indeed mention ‘the sons of Zebedee’, but even here they are not named as James and John.) ON the other hand, the fourth gospel makes disciples of personages who are not mentioned in the synoptics (Nathanael, Nicodemus). All this is clear evidence that the traditions on which the fourth evangelist drew were aside from the synoptic stream. (*Did Jesus exist?*, p. 122)

So even when we get to the gospel narratives, where specifics are finally given to inform what is meant by “the twelve,” there is not only disagreement and confusion among the gospels, but also signs that the number itself had a theological significance in and of itself apart from any individuals thought to make up its membership.

Now my point above, to which you (David) were responding, has to do with how cavalierly apologists have routinely discounted the conspicuous silences we have in Paul on such matters. The view that what Paul mentions in passing in his letters would have made sense to his readers because they would have already known what he was talking about, which insofar as it goes may have been the case, tends to be used to secure a harmonization with the later gospel accounts that is not supported by what we actually find in Paul’s and other early letters. The common defense that Paul would not have needed to “repeat” what his intended audiences would have already possessed as common knowledge is asserted in order to explain these silences. It is into this unrecorded gap that apologists have inserted all the details of the gospel narratives which are absent in Paul’s letters. Geisler and Turek, for instance, intimate that when Paul mentions “the twelve” in I Cor. 15, that we have the names of those people, even though Paul never identifies who they may be. Where do they get these names? From the gospels, of course. Can we name them? Sure, if we insert what the gospels at this point. One of those twelve, of course, would be Judas the traitor, but we’ve already seen how this poses problems. And which list of disciples do we go with? The one in the synoptics? Or a list that John does not give, but would apparently need to include Nathanael and Nicodemus? The truth of the matter is that we don’t have the details of what Paul taught on his missionary journeys, other than what is indicated in his letters. Paul does not tell us that “the twelve” are people who traveled with Jesus on his missionary journeys throughout the Judean countryside during his earthly life. Indeed, nothing in Paul suggests this.

Wells points out how apologetic responses to the silences in Paul’s and other early NT letters often involve an appeal to silence of their own:

I remain critical of many of Dunn’s arguments against me. He acknowledges what he calls a well-known “relative silence of Paul regarding the historical Jesus.” But in this context of his criticism of me, he fails to note that it is not Paul alone who is thus silent, but all the earliest extant Christian writers; and he tries to account for Paul’s silence by the familiar hypotheses that Paul “had little need or occasion to refer back to Jesus’ earthly ministry,” and could in any case take for granted that his addressees already knew all about it. To show that these explanations will not do was an important part of my task in *The Jesus Myth*, where I also had to counter (pp. 245ff.) the standard argument (often regarded as decisive, even by those who deprecate arguments from silence!) that, since ancient opponents of Christianity did not deny that Jesus existed, his crucifixion under Pilate can be taken as historical. What outsiders in the first century thought of Christianity

we do not know, there being “no evidence at all for any views they may have held” of it (Downing, [*Making Sense in (and of) the First Christian Century*], p. 142). Downing gives evidence that the first outsiders whose reactions are preserved for us in any detail regarded Christians as “followers of a Cynic philosophical lifestyle” (p. 145). It has been repeatedly noted that, by this time, men who were both teachers (Cynic or other) and miracle workers were familiar figures. Consequently, there was no reason why the historicity of anyone alleged to have been such a teacher should have been questioned. (*Can We Trust the New Testament?*, pp. 50-51)

Elsewhere Wells shows how the silence which Dunn cites on the part of opponents of Christianity can be easily explained:

Practically all commentators retain belief in Jesus’s crucifixion under Pilate and hence accept the historical framework given to his life in the gospels... Much is made of the fact that his existence - and by this is meant his ministry and his subsequent crucifixion in the opening decades of the first century - was not impugned even in antiquity. “No ancient opponent of early Christianity ever denied that Jesus existed. This is the Achilles’s heel of attempts by a few modern scholars such as G.A. Wells to deny that Jesus existed.” Thus writes Graham Stanton in a dismissive footnote. [“Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and a False Prophet Who Deceived God’s People?”, in Green and Turner, *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*, p. 165n.] If such denials were made at all in the earliest days of Christianity, one would expect them from Jews rather than from pagans, as Jews encountered Christians and their ideas from Christianity’s inception. It is clear from 2 Cor. 11:24 (“Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one”) that both Paul and the Jews who punished him regarded the Christian movement as falling within Judaism. And some Jews may well have found the Jesus portrayed by early missionaries - the Jesus figured in the early epistles - not credible as a historical personage: for this Jesus, in his human aspect, is a shadowy figure, not said in these documents to have taught or worked miracles, nor to have lived and died recently in specified circumstances. But what non-Christian Jews of the mid-first century thought of him, if anything, is not extant. Rabbinic traditions make their first extant appearance only a good century later, and moreover have been censored in the course of their transmission - “by Christians out of hostility... and by Jews as a means of self-protection” (Wilson [*Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70-170*], p. 170). Pagans, for their part, will have had little by way of open conflict with earliest Christianity, and surely not enough exposure to it for their writers to take note of it before the gospels had become available. Subsequent opponents, Jewish and pagan alike, will have gathered from these gospels that Jesus was a teacher and wonder-worker of a kind perfectly familiar in both the Jewish and pagan world. As he could thus be assigned to a familiar category, there was no reason to query his historicity. References to him as a teacher and ‘magician’ are prominent in the rabbinic notices (Details in Wilson... pp. 186ff). (Wells, *The Jesus Myth*, pp. 245-246)

David asked:

Yet haven’t answered my question: is it really more probable that Paul was writing nonsense?

As opposed to what? Paul was a religious missionary. In his mind, it was not nonsense. But to a sober, rational individual, it is certainly nonsense. Similarly with Marshall Applewhite: is it really more probable that he was preaching nonsense rather than, say, truth, when he claimed that a spaceship was hiding in the tail of a comet preparing to pick up the souls of him and his suicidal clan? In his mind and in those of his followers, this fantasy was certainly not nonsense. They demonstrated their faith in Applewhite’s premises by poisoning themselves in 1997. Many Christians have intimated that the apostle’s alleged willingness to die is evidence of the truth of their beliefs. If willingness to die is demonstrative of the truth of one’s beliefs, then Marshall Applewhite and his suicidal cult were demonstrating the truth of their claims. After all, who would die for the sake of nonsense or untruth? Certainly not someone who considered the beliefs he was willing to die for to be true and not nonsensical. Then again, the notion of dying for something has always struck me as odd. How is truth served if one dies for it? If it were true, it would have already been true, and one’s death does not make a truth truer than it already was.

David:

I think the legend theory per Wells has much more perhapsing to account for than any theory of New Testament origins.

Perhaps, but maybe not. Wells has modified his position (which demonstrates that he is not simply pushing a theory as some kind of publicity stunt), but throughout he is very careful to document support for his points and does so by deferring to the scholarly literature on the topic. In the introduction to his *The Jesus Legend*, Wells draws express attention to this feature of his writing:

Readers will see that in this book as in previous ones I owe a great deal to the painstaking work of the scholarly and critical theologians, and have not ignored that of their more traditionally-minded and conservative colleagues. I have thought it mostly unnecessary to indicate the clerical or academic status of any of them, but readers will be aware that books issued by SCM (Student Christian Movement), SPCK (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), and other well-known theological publishing houses were not written by partisan atheists. Indeed, nearly all my references are to scholars with theological commitments. Even the most skeptical of them manage somehow to soldier on. Adrian Hastings, whom I have already quoted, sees around him "almost infinite unanswered and seemingly unanswerable questions," but nevertheless abides by "that singular cornerstone of Christian belief: the mysterious universality and finality of meaning of Jesus the Christ" ([*The Theology of a Protestant Catholic*, 1990], pp. 2-3). Alan Sell, well aware of all the problems, seeks "a truly contemporary theology." It

will be fired by the Gospel, grounded in the Scriptures, nourished by the Catholic faith of the ages, fertilized by Reformation emphases, tempered by Enlightenment critiques, and applicable today.

This from his 1992 inaugural lecture to a Chair of Divinity in the University of Wales. One can envisage the thunderous applause. (p. xxxi)

In any case, given the scantiness of the record we have in the New Testament, some "perhapsing" is always going to be unavoidable as we seek to understand its origins. But this does not give one license to prefer the fantasy of supernaturalism. I've found nothing in Wells that stretches beyond a rational evaluation of the data. Even the hypothesis that hallucinations had some momentous impact on the origins of Christianity does not figure centrally in his case, a topic which seems to preoccupy many apologists.

Rest assured, there's much more to come.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Legends](#)

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

#### 9 Comments:

[madmax](#) said...

Great post Dawson. I am relatively new to the "legend" or "mythic" approach to New Testament scholarship. Could you give a basic overview of it? For example who are the most important writers and how new is this approach?

I see that Doherty believes in a mythic Christ and I believe Price does also. But now you indicate that Wells does not rule out a historical Jesus. Is there a consensus out there among the skeptical Biblical scholars? Also, how large and influential is this field? Do writers like Wells, Price and Doherty carry much weight as of yet?

I wonder if we are witnessing the spread of rationality into the domain of Biblical research right before our eyes? Is it possible that in addition to the philosophical attack on religion and superstition unleashed by the Enlightenment, that rational Bible scholarship will also aid in the destruction of religion and Christianity by ultimately proving the Bible as totally man-made?\* I guess what I am asking is if the works by Price, Wells, Doherty and any others is the beginning of the most devastating scholarly attack that Christianity has yet faced?

\*I know that rational philosophy has already invalidated religion and killed "god" but I mean that it seems to me that the skeptical Bible scholars might eventually crack through and prove that either Jesus was not historical or that Christianity did in fact start as a mythical tradition. This would utterly destroy the "Bible as inerrant" view for all but true believers.

[August 25, 2008 2:55 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

Dawson,



Looking forward to your posts. Just a quick response:

1. If you wish to demonstrate the G/T argument to be circular, it should be quite easy. Just formally notate the argument and demonstrate where the conclusion is present in the premises.

In your original post you said, *“To make this kind of claim, the authors must assume the historicity of the gospel accounts of Jesus, which are the only documents in the New Testament which place Jesus’ life, death and resurrection in a historical context. The authors are, in effect, using later documents to inform and corroborate earlier documents”*

And also:

*“But if the Jesus story were a legend in the first place - the very premise which our authors are trying to defeat, then appealing to what might have happened or could have happened to Jesus’ body simply begs the question”*

I think this clearly shows that you did not intend to deal with G/T’s argument in the context of merely a legendary resurrection.

The chapter’s stated intentions: *“We are simply trying to discover if the basic storyline is fact, not fiction. In order to discover this, we need to ascertain what kind of records comprises the New Testament. Are they documents written soon after the events by eyewitnesses or are they documents written much later by biased followers who simply embellished details about the life of a real historical figure?”* (pg 230).

You complain that they should not even assume Jesus’ body was in the tomb, which is not consistent with what G/T is arguing from or against.

Earlier in the chapter, G/T present 12 facts that can be adduced from non-Christian references within 150 years of Jesus’ life. Those 12 facts provide independent attestation to certain events in the Gospels, which can be used to date the crucifixion and thus assign an early date to the belief in resurrection. The whole purpose in assigning an early date is it makes the formation of legend less probable given the small window of opportunity for such to occur. Habermas’ argument is merely demonstrating that early resurrection belief weakens assertions of legendary embellishment. As G/T points out, *“there’s no possible way such testimony could describe a legend, because it goes right back to the time and place of the event itself.”*

*“dates right back to the Resurrection itself”* - as in the date given to the event by historians who study the documents. Some scholars don’t believe it actually happened, but that doesn’t stop them from assigning a date. As Blomberg points out, just because you think they lied about the resurrection doesn’t mean you should also assume they lied about the crucifixion. Indeed, dating Paul’s letters is based on the date of the crucifixion, not the resurrection.

2. The Wells quote you’ve provided further illustrates what I consider to be a major exegetical blunder; namely, lumping the Gospels and Paul’s Epistles into a single literary genre. It seems Wells has modeled his layers (you commonly use his term *“early epistolary strata”*), and in doing so looks at Paul’s letters as merely data with a date. That is a very simplistic approach (contextually vacuous with respect to any literary framework).

3. As for your dismissal of Geisler as a professional philosopher because he holds a religious view different than your own (which is worldview bias plain and simple)...He has a PhD. in philosophy, has written over 65 books, and taught at the graduate level for decades. Basically should he just become an atheist and then you’d accept his credentials as a philosopher? Given religious views have driven the development of philosophical thought, by what standard would you deem defense of a religious position anti-philosophical?

4. Dawson said *“, but there are some who do make the attempt to integrate their religious views with their life in the world. It’s not a very pretty sight.”*

What specifically are you referring to?

5. Dawson: *“The standard refrain that Paul’s intended audience would have just known what he was talking about, does not help us very much, because it does not supply the details which Paul fails to give, nor does it confirm that the individuals who made up “the twelve” were the disciples mentioned in the gospels.”*

When Paul leaves out details that his original audience would need in order to interpret his writings, you must agree that it is more probable that he is writing with his audience’s background knowledge in mind, correct?

6. Do you not think the legend theory of Wells to be rather ad hoc?

[August 25, 2008 9:11 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

David: "If you wish to demonstrate the G/T argument to be circular, it should be quite easy. Just formally notate the argument and demonstrate where the conclusion is present in the premises. In your original post you said, *"To make this kind of claim, the authors must assume the historicity of the gospel accounts of Jesus, which are the only documents in the New Testament which place Jesus' life, death and resurrection in a historical context. The authors are, in effect, using later documents to inform and corroborate earlier documents"* And also: *"But if the Jesus story were a legend in the first place - the very premise which our authors are trying to defeat, then appealing to what might have happened or could have happened to Jesus' body simply begs the question"* I think this clearly shows that you did not intend to deal with G/T's argument in the context of merely a legendary resurrection."

In the section which I quoted from Geisler & Turek's book, they raised numerous issues which I dealt with in my interaction with that quotation (e.g., where Paul got his testimony, the number of eyewitnesses he cites, as well as the earliness of the content in the passage). Their dismissal of the view that Jesus' resurrection is legendary was made in passing, and they do not seem to have mounted a full-fledged argument against this view. Their dismissal is typical from what I've seen from Christians, but at least here it has been published in a book by some big names in Christian apologetics. To reject the supposition that the resurrection is legendary, they have assumed a timeframe for it, which obviously comes from the gospels, and based on this timeframe claim that the creed which Paul is supposedly quoting in 1 Cor. 15 is essentially too early for it to have developed as a legend. But this procedure clearly assumes that the gospels' account of the resurrection is true, i.e., not a legend. This amounts to a circular argument.

David quoted Geisler & Turek: *"We are simply trying to discover if the basic storyline is fact, not fiction. In order to discover this, we need to ascertain what kind of records comprises the New Testament. Are they documents written soon after the events by eyewitnesses or are they documents written much later by biased followers who simply embellished details about the life of a real historical figure?"* (pg 230).

It sounds so innocent, doesn't it? "simply trying to discover..." But consider what Geisler & Turek say here, and consider what we know about the NT texts. Even on their own stated terms, problems abound. Paul was the earliest writer of the NT. He claims that Jesus had an earthly life, was crucified and resurrected. Was Paul an eyewitness to these things? No, he wasn't. So even if we want to say that Paul was writing "soon after the events" (something Paul himself does not indicate), he surely was not an eyewitness. The gospels, which do put a timeframe, location and situation to Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection, were written much later, and appear to draw on various traditions whose roots come from different corners of the cultic universe. Mark, the earliest gospel, appears to be a redaction of earlier traditions, while Matthew and Luke are clearly modeled on Mark's template, but incorporate - in different ways - source material which is foreign to Mark (the so-called Q or 'sayings' source). Furthermore, as we put the gospels under the jeweler's loupe, we see that the legend grows as it is retold. This trend continues beyond the canonical gospels and into other early writings. If I recall, the gospel of Peter, for instance, has the guards at the tomb actually observing the risen Jesus rising out of the tomb in the arms of two angels whose heads reach the heavens. When they report what they saw to Pilate, they claim that Jesus was "truly the Son of God" (or something like this).

David: "Earlier in the chapter, G/T present 12 facts that can be adduced from non-Christian references within 150 years of Jesus' life. Those 12 facts provide independent attestation to certain events in the Gospels, which can be used to date the crucifixion and thus assign an early date to the belief in resurrection."

The point in question, however, is not the date of the *belief* in the resurrection, but the time, place and circumstances of the resurrection as Paul understood it versus how the gospels portray it. As you yourself quote Geisler & Turek, they claim that the creed which Paul is supposedly reciting in I Cor. 15 "dates right back to the Resurrection itself."

David: "The whole purpose in assigning an early date is it makes the formation of legend less probable given the small window of opportunity for such to occur."

Understood. But how do they arrive at the date of "the Resurrection itself" without assuming the timeline

inferred from the gospels? I asked you this earlier in our exchange, and you seemed to concede that one would need to rely on the gospels for this.

David: "Habermas' argument is merely demonstrating that early resurrection belief weakens assertions of legendary embellishment."

This would miss the point. How is "early" being determined? In fact, it's not "resurrection belief" that is of concern, so much as when the resurrection was believed to have taken place by the earliest Christians. Paul is the earliest Christian writer on record affirming belief that Jesus was resurrected. But when does he say this resurrection occurred? He gives no indication to this; he certainly does not imply that it happened recently. He speaks of it as if it took place in the distant past. As I quoted Wells, "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.) Most of the distinctive details which the gospels give to their portrait of Jesus (e.g., virgin birth, escape from the slaughter of the innocents, baptism by John the Baptist, the choosing of disciples to accompany him on his missionary journeys, wonder working, miracle cures, resurrecting the dead, etc., etc., are absent from the early epistles (both Paul's and others). Contrary to the character we read about in the gospels, Paul's Jesus came to earth "emptied" of his powers, living in humility and obscurity.

David: "As G/T points out, "there's no possible way such testimony could describe a legend, because it goes right back to the time and place of the event itself." "dates right back to the Resurrection itself" - as in the date given to the event by historians who study the documents."

Which documents, if not the gospels? Paul does not put a date to the resurrection. You pointed to later sources (Geisler & Turek's "12 facts that can be adduced from non-Christian references within 150 years of Jesus' life"), and we can go through these one by one if you like. But even this statement assumes what is in question by putting Jesus' life in a certain timeline (e.g., early 1st century), which the earliest epistles do not at all indicate.

David: "Some scholars don't believe it actually happened, but that doesn't stop them from assigning a date."

There's no question that we can put some rough dates to the resurrection *if we go by the gospels*. But if their stories of Jesus contain legends which cropped in the first century, then such dating is worthless.

David: "As Blomberg points out, just because you think they lied about the resurrection doesn't mean you should also assume they lied about the crucifixion. Indeed, dating Paul's letters is based on the date of the crucifixion, not the resurrection."

But Paul never puts a date to the crucifixion either. He gives no details about it. Where would we get a date for the crucifixion? Again, from the gospels. So we're back to my point. It is inescapable. And no, I don't necessarily think that Paul was simply lying outright. I think he was deluded, but I don't think he was just making this all up from whole cloth. Paul came from a long tradition of mysticism, and was very likely exposed to many belief cults throughout his formative years.

David: "The Wells quote you've provided further illustrates what I consider to be a major exegetical blunder; namely, lumping the Gospels and Paul's Epistles into a single literary genre."

How am I "lumping the Gospels and Paul's epistles into a single literary genre"? And even if you think I am doing this in some way, how is this relevant to the points I've been raising?

David: "It seems Wells has modeled his layers (you commonly use his term "early epistolary strata"), and in doing so looks at Paul's letters as merely data with a date. That is a very simplistic approach (contextually vacuous with respect to any literary framework)."

How does noting that Paul's and other early letters came in a period well before the gospels were written equate to "look[ing] at Paul's letters as merely data with a date"? I'm not even sure what this is supposed to mean.

David: "As for your dismissal of Geisler as a professional philosopher because he holds a religious view different than your own (which is worldview bias plain and simple)...He has a PhD. in philosophy, has written over 65 books, and taught at the graduate level for decades. Basically should he just become an atheist and then you'd accept his credentials as a philosopher?"

There are many atheists with PhDs in philosophy whose views I also would consider anti-philosophical. Simply being an atheist does not mean one is therefore also rational.

David: "Given religious views have driven the development of philosophical thought, by what standard would you deem defense of a religious position anti-philosophical?"

By an objective standard, of course.

I wrote: "...but there are some who do make the attempt to integrate their religious views with their life in the world. It's not a very pretty sight."

David asked: "What specifically are you referring to?"

Ever hear of Jim Jones, David Koresh, Marshall Applewhite, etc.?

I wrote: "The standard refrain that Paul's intended audience would have just known what he was talking about, does not help us very much, because it does not supply the details which Paul fails to give, nor does it confirm that the individuals who made up "the twelve" were the disciples mentioned in the gospels."

David: "When Paul leaves out details that his original audience would need in order to interpret his writings, you must agree that it is more probable that he is writing with his audience's background knowledge in mind, correct?"

I'd say he probably expected them to remember things that he had taught them while he was missionizing them, if that's what you mean. But what exactly did he teach them? Paul does not say. We can only go by what he gives us, and what he gives us does not jive with what we read in the gospels, flat and simple.

David: "Do you not think the legend theory of Wells to be rather ad hoc?"

Not at all.

Regards,  
Dawson

[August 26, 2008 11:03 AM](#)

[david](#) said...

Dawson,

1. Now we're back peddling. The fact that you won't notate a formal argument shows me one of two things: a) you can't b) you know it will demonstrate that you are incorrect

If a) you shouldn't be accusing someone of circular argumentation in the first place.

If b) you should be intellectually honest and admit you were incorrect.

**Why and where** do G/T assume the gospel's account of the resurrection is true??? I'm sorry but you are plainly in error here, and yet you want to argue your way out of it.

2. Dawson: *"Even on their own stated terms, problems abound. Paul was the earliest writer of the NT. He claims that Jesus had an earthly life, was crucified and resurrected. Was Paul an eyewitness to these things? No, he wasn't. So even if we want to say that Paul was writing "soon after the events" (something Paul himself does not indicate), he surely was not an eyewitness. The gospels, which do put a timeframe, location and situation to Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection, were written much later, and appear to draw on various traditions whose roots come from different corners of the cultic universe"*

You consistently misconstrue the intentions of the G/T, which doesn't surprise me given how you interpret Paul. :)

Absolutely none of what you just said provides any refutation to G/T.

3. *"The point in question, however, is not the date of the belief in the resurrection, but the time, place and circumstances of the resurrection as Paul understood it versus how the gospels portray it. As you yourself quote*

Geisler & Turek, they claim that the creed which Paul is supposedly reciting in I Cor. 15 "dates right back to the Resurrection itself."

You've made it painfully clear you are incapable of reading G/T on their own terms and instead must import your position about the legend theory into every sentence. The consistency of Paul and the Gospels has nothing to do with this argument, absolutely nothing. If you are going to do an internal critique, you can't bring in external evidence, you must examine the argument on its own terms. See Drew's post on the problem of evil for an example:

[www.beginningwisdom.blogspot.com](http://www.beginningwisdom.blogspot.com)

4. Dawson said: "Understood. But how do they arrive at the date of "the Resurrection itself" without assuming the timeline inferred from the gospels? I asked you this earlier in our exchange, and you seemed to concede that one would need to rely on the gospels for this."

There is nothing wrong with relying on the Gospels. Earlier in the chapter they argued for the reliability of the Gospels (specifically non-Christian sources who would have no reason to corroborate the legend for its sake).

5. *There's no question that we can put some rough dates to the resurrection if we go by the gospels. But if their stories of Jesus contain legends which cropped in the first century, then such dating is worthless.*

Completely unable to see outside the goggles of the legend theory, it is amazing.

6. Dawson said: *How am I "lumping the Gospels and Paul's epistles into a single literary genre"? And even if you think I am doing this in some way, how is this relevant to the points I've been raising?*

Because you are assuming Paul should have given more historical data about Jesus. If Paul gave more data, you would have little ground for positing legend development. Paul wasn't writing a Gospel!

7. David: *"Given religious views have driven the development of philosophical thought, by what standard would you deem defense of a religious position anti-philosophical?"*

Dawson: *By an objective standard, of course.*

Is this really all the support you will offer for that claim, or are you playing games? I think an honest answer or a simple "never mind I don't know what I was talking about" will suffice.

8. Dawson: *"...but there are some who do make the attempt to integrate their religious views with their life in the world. It's not a very pretty sight."*

David asked: *"What specifically are you referring to?"*

Dawson: *Ever hear of Jim Jones, David Koresh, Marshall Applewhite, etc.?*

So what exactly is your point? Some people have religious views that in practice don't agree with your personal moral standard?

[August 26, 2008 3:54 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

David: "Why and where do G/T assume the gospel's account of the resurrection is true???"

I've spelled this out for you several times now. I'm not sure what doing so one more time will do if you don't see it yet. But I'll do so again just for grins if nothing else:

By assuming the accuracy of the dating inferred from the gospel narratives (which they clearly do when they claim that the creed which Paul is supposedly quoting in I Cor. 15 is too early to be a legend), Geisler and Turek are

assuming that the resurrection actually took place according to the gospel accounts. They wouldn't be able to make the kind of claim they do make without this assumption. They're essentially saying that the story of Jesus' resurrection couldn't be a legend because belief in it arose too close to when the resurrection happened. That's simply a circular argument.

Now I've asked you yourself to explain how we can get a date for the resurrection (not for belief in the resurrection, but for the event itself) without relying on the gospels, and you've not been able to come up with anything. Unless you can explain how we can date the resurrection to ca. 30 AD without appealing to the gospels, then clearly one must rely on the gospels to come to this date. It's not in Paul, that much is clear, otherwise by now I think you'd have supplied it.

Regards,  
Dawson

[August 26, 2008 4:50 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

By assuming the accuracy of the dating inferred from the gospel narratives (which they clearly do when they claim that the creed which Paul is supposedly quoting in I Cor. 15 is too early to be a legend), Geisler and Turek are assuming that the resurrection actually took place according to the gospel accounts.

No need to grin, this is simply false bro. You continue to insist that one must either reject or the accept the entire Gospel account as historical, and thats clearly a false dichotomy.

Furthermore, I initially said that I didn't think the creed could be dated outside of the Gospels. You can't simply toss your demands at me or G/T unless we are dealing with your argument.

[August 26, 2008 5:18 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

"They're essentially saying that the story of Jesus' resurrection couldn't be a legend because belief in it arose too close to when the resurrection happened."

You are consistently confusing conclusions:

1. The resurrection really happened
2. Historian date the resurrection at 30AD

[August 26, 2008 5:28 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

Dawson,

In the interest of fairness here is my exposition of the G/T argument from page 241-243:

- P1. Legends require sufficient time for development (implicitly assumed)
- P2. As corroborated by multiple independent attestation, the crucifixion happened around 30AD
- P3. The Gospels record that the Resurrection happened 3 days later
- P4. The Corinthian creed predates the writing of Corinth (56AD), probably within 0-3 years of the Resurrection.
- P5. 0-3 years is not sufficient time for legend development.

Conclusion: The window between Resurrection and resurrection belief is insufficient for legend development.

Related conclusions of this argument that other apologists use:

- C1. Early belief in the Resurrection requires an alternative explanation.

C2. The Resurrection actually happening is the best explanation of early resurrection belief.

Again let me just point out that G/T says "There's no possible way that such testimony could describe a legend, because it goes right back to the **time and place** of the event itself."

They do **not** say "It could not be a legend because the Resurrection actually happened."

I remain firm in my stance that you are incorrectly evaluating the argument when you conclude it is circular.

[August 26, 2008 11:02 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

You have said that you are more of a philosopher than a historian, and also you have contended that the accusation of ad-hoc has no merit, indeed "not at all" was your response.

I would merely like to cite a fellow atheist philosopher on the matter. You have consistently derided and sneered any Christian who would disagree with you and Wells, proclaiming "well I expect such comments from Christian apologists." Most of those articles were not even apologetic (not giving a defense) in nature, but I digress.

Michael Martin has pointed out that "Wells' thesis is controversial and not widely accepted." (*The Case Against Christianity*, pg 67).

Martin also postulates that at times Well's position seems ""ad hoc and arbitrary" (pg 55).

Well of course that isn't intended to prove anything Dawson, but I'm simply pointing out that one of your fellow philosophers disagrees with you, and he isn't just saying "what you would expect to hear from Christian apologists."

[August 30, 2008 11:56 AM](#)

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