

Sunday, July 27, 2008

Is I Corinthians 15:3-8 'Too Early' to Be Legend?

Christians hoping to validate their belief in a resurrected Jesus often seem to think that non-believers are somehow going to be impressed by the New Testament passage found in I Corinthians 15:3-8.

In their corny book *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, authors Norman Geisler and Frank Turek provide an example of how this passage is used in the defense of Christianity.

But the most significant aspect of this letter is that it contains the earliest and most authenticated testimony of the Resurrection itself. In the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes down the testimony he received from others and the testimony that was authenticated when Christ appeared to him:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also (1 Cor. 15:3-8, NASB).

Where did Paul get what he "received"? He probably received it from Peter and James when he visited them in Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:18). Why is this important? Because, 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. 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. If there was ever a place that a legendary resurrection could not occur it was Jerusalem, because the Jews and the Romans were all too eager to squash Christianity and could have easily done so by parading Jesus' body around the city.

Moreover, notice that Paul cites fourteen eyewitnesses whose names are known: the twelve apostles, James, and Paul [sic] himself ("Cephas" is the Aramaic for Peter), and then references an appearance to more than 500 others at one time. Included in those groups was one skeptic, James, and one outright enemy, Paul himself. By naming so many people who could verify what Paul was saying, Paul was, in effect, challenging his Corinthian readers to check him out. (pp. 242-243)

The statements made here are so misleading that it's amazing that any publishing house would have accepted this book's manuscript. But lies do sell in this day and age, just as they did 2,000 years ago and before.

Let's consider some of the statements made here in regard to this highly contested passage.

The authors tell us that the First Epistle to the Corinthian church "contains the earliest and most authenticated testimony of the Resurrection itself." I'm not so concerned about the "earliest" part here, since it is ultimately irrelevant; even a legend has to have its inception sometime. Rather, it's this claim, presumably regarding the specific passage cited (I Cor. 15:3-8), that it "contains the... most authenticated testimony of the Resurrection itself." I can only ask at this point, "authenticated" by what? And what specifically do the authors think is "authenticated" in this passage? The phrase "testimony of the Resurrection itself" seems to be used quite loosely here, for even the gospel depictions of Jesus' passion put no witnesses with Jesus when and where he was supposed to be resurrected - that is, in his very tomb!

The authors ask:

Where did Paul get what he "received"?

In answer to this, they say that Paul "probably received it from Peter and James when he visited them in Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:18)."

But Paul himself does not tell us this. For Jesus' death itself, Paul appeals to "the Scriptures." Throughout his

several letters, Paul relies heavily on Old Testament citations to buttress his points. Also, I find it puzzling that Geisler and Turek would reference the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians and not notice what he says just a few verses prior to the one they do cite. Paul makes it explicitly clear that the answer which our authors give us is not the right answer to the question they pose. Observe:

Dear brothers and sisters, I want you to understand that the gospel message I preach is not based on mere human reasoning. I received my message from no human source, and no one taught me. Instead, I received it by direct revelation from Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1:11-12)

So according to what Paul tells us, he "received" the gospel that he preaches to everyone else directly from Jesus as a revelation. (One wonders why that same Jesus doesn't reveal himself directly to everyone else as well rather than revealing himself to one person who then goes around telling everyone he meets about it.) Paul himself is telling us that what Geisler and Turek propose is precisely what did not take place.

Apparently having failed to understand this portion of Paul's epistle to the Galatians, or at any rate to factor into their thinking about the question they pose before themselves in regard to I Cor. 15:3-8, our authors find their proposal that Paul "received" what he states in that passage important because they want to see it as "part of an early creed that dates right back to the Resurrection itself - eighteen *months* to eight years after, but some say even earlier."

What I find curious at this point is how oblivious the authors seem to be of the quagmire they've gotten themselves into at this point. For one, they are clearly relying on the content of later writings - the gospels - to supply them with the dating they assume for the events that Paul mentions in this passage. 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. The erroneous nature of this assumption and its significance to my broader point will be brought out more clearly below. For the present, I'd like to focus on another problem that Geisler and Turek bring upon themselves. For if I Cor. 15:3-8 is part of an early creed which Paul has simply imported and woven into his letter, then obviously he is not recounting firsthand knowledge. In fact, if the gist of I Cor. 15:3-8 is a creedal formula passed down to him from other believers, it is at best hearsay that he inserts into his letter.

As if that weren't bad enough, notice the overtly question-begging nature of the following statement:

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.

It always strikes me as rather perverse when apologists tell us that it's impossible for a story to have legendary content while expecting us to believe in supernatural beings, resurrection of the dead, miracles, etc. But here Geisler and Turek insist that the testimony we find in I Cor. 15 could not contain any legend. 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. Nothing in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, let alone the passage in question, place Jesus' death and resurrection in any historical setting or even remotely suggest a date to the event in question. So given what Paul states in I Cor. 15:3-8, there's nothing there which tells us that his account of the resurrection is "early" or that "it goes right back to the time and place of the event itself." If the aim is to validate the resurrection story of the New Testament as authentically historical, Geisler and Turek simply beg the question by claiming that Paul's own statements about it could not contain elements of legend because it is too close in time to the event in question. If the event in question is in fact legendary, and Paul's own account of that event provide no indication of time or place or setting, then the accounts we find in the gospels, the earliest of which being written a decade or more after Paul's letter campaign, would simply be embellishments of the legend itself. If Paul were passing on a legend that he had learned (and maybe even helped embellish himself), what would keep later writers from adding to and elaborating that legend? And if the later writings - namely the gospels - are themselves legends, then using them to date an event which is itself legendary, simply immerses apologists deeper and deeper into the fake environment of their imagination. Having to rely on one legendary work to validate another legendary work can only mean that the alleged historicity of Christ will evaporate under examination.

But the question-begging doesn't stop there. Geisler and Turek continue:

If there was ever a place that a legendary resurrection could not occur it was Jerusalem, because the Jews and

the Romans were all too eager to squash Christianity and could have easily done so by parading Jesus' body around the city.

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.

As if this could be helpful to us today, Geisler and Turek fall back on the typical defense that anyone questioning Paul could have followed up on the claims he makes in I Cor. 15:3-8:

Moreover, notice that Paul cites fourteen eyewitnesses whose names are known: the twelve apostles, James, and Paul [sic] himself ("Cephas" is the Aramaic for Peter), and then references an appearance to more than 500 others at one time. Included in those groups was one skeptic, James, and one outright enemy, Paul himself. By naming so many people who could verify what Paul was saying, Paul was, in effect, challenging his Corinthian readers to check him out.

First of all, Paul does not name *fourteen* eyewitnesses. In fact, the details he provides are far less substantial. In I Cor. 15:3-8, Paul only names two other people: Cephas and James. He refers to "the twelve," which is nowhere explained in any of Paul's letters, and to "all the apostles." It is not even clear from what Paul gives us here that either Cephas or James were members of either group. Christians typically suppose that the Cephas Paul mentions in this passage corresponds to the Peter of the gospels (perhaps we're expected to accept that only one person in the entire first century bore the name Cephas). Of course, 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. 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. The question naturally arises: what exactly did Paul teach the congregations he visited on his missionizing journeys, and how can we know what he taught? If his letters are an indication of what he taught, what do they tell us about "the twelve" and "the apostles"? I Cor. 15:3-8 is the only passage in all of Paul's letters where he makes reference to this mysterious "twelve," and even here it is not even clear that "the twelve" and "the apostles" he references in the same passage are the same group. He certainly does not name them in his letter, and one can only speculate that he named them when he visited the church addressed by the letter. Moreover, if Paul is just repeating a creed here, as Geisler and Turek seem to think, then it's quite possible that even Paul himself did not know the names of those who constituted "the twelve."

Even when I was a believer, Paul's reference to "the twelve" here bothered me. Doherty sums up the problem succinctly when he writes:

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 I 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. (*Challenging the Verdict: A Cross-Examination of Lee Strobel's "The Case for Christ"*, p. 193.)

So indeed a list of the names who made up the membership of "the twelve" would be quite informative here, but Paul does not provide this. Simply assuming that his 1st century readers would have known what Paul meant strikes me as hasty, and even if it is not unjustifiable, it is certainly of no help to us today, and only raises further questions about what Paul might have taught on his missionary journeys. For instance, did Paul teach that Jesus was born of a virgin? His letters nowhere make reference to this feature which is not introduced until we get to the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which are the only two New Testament documents which mention it. Did Paul teach that Jesus assembled the disciples, or "apostles" which he mentions in I Cor. 15, during missionary work of his own? Paul's letters nowhere indicate this. Did Paul teach his congregations that Jesus performed miracles during an incarnate visit to earth? Nowhere do any of Paul's letters suggest this. Did Paul teach that Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot? Again, one would never learn about this gospel feature from anything Paul wrote.

Regardless, how would any of Paul's readers be able to investigate any of the things he mentions in I Cor. 15:3-8? He does not identify a place, so any reader would not be able to gather from what Paul writes in his letter where he should begin such an investigation. Where would a Corinthian go to seek confirmation on Paul's claims with "the twelve"? And would he be encouraged to do so? And what of the anonymous 500 brethren? We're not given one name here, let alone a time, place or setting. So the defense that Paul's congregants could have at any time gone out and checked out his claims is dubious. And our authors' suggestion that "Paul was, in effect, challenging his Corinthian readers to check him out," borderlines the ludicrous. If Paul really wanted his readers to check up on his claims, he should have done much more than make the passing references that he gives us in I Cor. 15:3-8.

To make matters even more problematic, Paul gives no details on what any of the people he mentions may have actually seen or witnessed. Did they see a resurrected man? How would they know that the man they saw was once dead? Did they have a waking fantasy, as believers today have when they're in worship? Believers today often refer to themselves as "witnesses" of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, and yet they can do this even though they weren't even alive back in the 1st century. If the word "witness" enjoys a very loose meaning for many of today's Christians (and it very often does), why suppose it didn't enjoy similar flexibility among the early Christians? Christians today are constantly exclaiming how Jesus is present with them, standing right beside them and encouraging them, giving them "strength" so that they can overcome the adversity of hardship, trials and tribulations, afflictions and persecutions. They obviously do not have a physical person in mind when they make these kinds of declarations, so why suppose the early Christians were speaking about a physical Jesus when they claimed to have "witnessed" him?

If 500 or so believers saw Jesus in the flesh (an interpretation which Paul's words do not require), who were they, and where is their testimony? It seems that, if so many people had more than merely a subjective experience of an imaginary Jesus - as today's believers frequently have in the ecstasy of church worship, we'd have more contributors to the documentary evidence than what we find in the New Testament. If I had seen a man who was actually resurrected from the grave, whom I thought was "the Son of God," I would waste no time in writing down exactly what I had seen, where I had seen it and when I had seen it. If I knew of others who had the same experience, I would not hesitate to get their testimony down in writing, or at least to have them endorse such statements of witness. But that's me.

Apologists can be expected to make the most of Paul's mention that most of the 500 brethren who saw something are still alive. But it is important not to read more into Paul's words than what they actually say. Apologists typically assume that Paul's words confirm that Jesus' death and resurrection were recent. Instead, however, Paul's own treatment here has the effect of "stamping [Jesus'] *appearances* as recent, but not the death, burial, and prompt resurrection..., which he merely says occurred 'in accordance with the scriptures'." (Wells, *Can We Trust the New Testament? Thoughts on the Reliability of Early Christian Testimony*, p. 7, emphasis added.) As I pointed out above, there is nothing in Paul's letter which lends itself to dating Jesus' death and resurrection in the recent past. Consequently, to claim that I Cor. 15:3-8 is "too early" to be legend, requires one to assume the truth of the basic portrait of Jesus found in the gospels, which simply begs the question at issue.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Legends](#)

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [5:00 PM](#)

10 Comments:

[Vinny](#) said...

I have my own theory about the sources behind 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

Isn't it possible that these were stories that Paul heard while persecuting early believers? I think history shows that persecutors don't generally have a very clear understanding of the beliefs of the people they are persecuting. Informants and torture victims have a tendency to invent stories that they think the persecutor wants to hear. I can imagine some suspect telling Paul, "No. I never followed that Jesus guy, but my neighbor says that he saw Jesus come back from the dead and appear to five hundred people!"

After Paul has his hallucination on the road to Damascus, I think he would naturally assume that every crazy story he

had heard was true. Several years later, when he finally met the men who had actually followed Jesus during his life, I doubt that any of them would have tried to disabuse Paul of any of his wilder notions. After all, Paul was much better educated than the peasants who had followed Jesus around Gallilee, he had been very successful in spreading the message of Jesus as Messiah which increased the original disciples' importance, and he was a man with a reputation for violent intolerance towards people who failed to share his beliefs. They would have been motivated to accept anything Paul had to say.

I realize that this is speculative, but I think it is at least as plausible as anything the apologists have to offer. I can't see any reason to be confident that anything in the passage from 1 Corinthians 15 actually came from anyone who was an eyewitness to anything Jesus did.

[July 28, 2008 6:36 AM](#)

[Robert_B](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[July 28, 2008 4:11 PM](#)

[Robert_B](#) said...

Then again the entire passage could easily be an interpolation. Dr. Robert M. Price wrote an essay describing the internal textual evidence that indicates interpolation.

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/robert_price/apocrypha.html

Apocryphal Apparitions
1 Corinthians 15:3-11 As a Post-Pauline Interpolation
Robert M. Price

[July 28, 2008 4:12 PM](#)

[Vinny](#) said...

I've read Price's essay. It certainly seemed like a reasonable hypothesis and far more likely than an appearance to five hundred that was well known to the early church but unknown to any of the gospel writers.

[July 28, 2008 4:30 PM](#)

[Robert_B](#) said...

I favor the following hypothesis.

Randal Helms in his book "Gospel Fictions" presents a viable case that Matthew, Luke, and John are each to some extent based on Mark's earlier story. Other scholars including Price agree. The canonical Gospels present a pattern of elaboration describing the resurrection. The proto-Catholic churchmen that put the New Testament together had little or no knowledge of Paul's writings prior to Marcion. When confronted with the Marcionite's Paulian corpus and Gospel of the Lord, they copied the docs and edited them to suit their preferred doctrines. In that effort, some early Catholic wrote the apparitional appearances into the text.

Its speculative, but then again so are all stories about Paul and the formation of his docs.

[July 28, 2008 8:21 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Vinny and Robert,

Thanks for sharing your thoughts.

I am aware of the view, championed very ably by Price, that this passage (Price extends it to I Cor. 15:3-11) has been interpolated into Paul's letter by a later redactor. Even JC O'Neill, back in 1972, called it "a later creedal summary not written by Paul" (*The Recovery of Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, p. 27n.6). Price himself even quotes

O'Neill on this in his paper (see n.98 of Price's [Apocrypha Apparitions](#)). I thought of raising this point in my paper, but I decided against it because I'm more or less allowing for the supposition that this passage is authentic to Paul's hand, if for nothing more than argument's sake. My point is that, even if I Cor. 15:3-8 is something Paul originally wrote in his letter, the claim that it is "too early" to be a product of legend-building or at least influenced by circulating legend, can only beg the question because of the need to rely on the later gospel traditions in order to estimate anything approaching a date for the resurrection.

As for Paul's own story, I don't think Vinny's hypothesis is at all implausible, and it has interest because it takes into account the idea that Paul was himself a persecutor of the church prior to his conversion. It also wrestles with the issue of where Paul got what he as a Christian convert began to believe, which is a huge unanswered question in the topic of Pauline Christianity. The idea that Paul was converted on his way to Damascus is something we learn from Acts, which I consider to be heavily influenced by later legends. Paul himself never says that he was converted on a road to Damascus, but maybe he said or suggested something like this at one point and it eventually ossified as part of the tradition about him.

Christians can be expected to dismiss Vinny's hypothesis because it is "speculative," which Vinny himself admits. But this would miss the point that we have so little to go on that speculation on the scant details that we do have, so long as it does not breach the bounds of what can be reasonably surmised about the situation, is pretty much all we have. Christians can also be expected to accuse us of "anti-supernatural bias," as if reluctance to accept Christianity's supernaturalism were unjustified, for preferring "naturalistic" explanations of the data. My so-called "anti-supernatural bias" is really nothing more than my rejection of the irrational (and I've already provided a strong defense of this [here](#)). Would Christians say that I am unjustified in my "anti-irrational bias"? That's fine by me.

Richard Carrier made some interesting points in regard to Paul's story:

Of course, one can still ask "Why Paul?" He wasn't among the disciples and experienced Jesus much later than they did. So what brought about his revelation? We can never really know for sure - Paul tells us precious little. But I can hypothesize four conjoining factors: guilt at persecuting a people he came to admire; subsequent disgust with fellow persecuting Pharisees; and persuasions (beginning to see what the Christians were seeing in scripture, and to worry about his own salvation); coupled with the right physical circumstances (like heat and fatigue on a long, desolate road), could have induced a convincing ecstatic event - his unconscious mind producing what he really wanted: a reason to believe the Christians were right after all and atone for his treatment of them, and a way to give his life meaning, by relocating himself from the lower, even superfluous periphery of Jewish elite society, to a place of power and purpose. ("The Spiritual Body of Christ," in Robert Price and Jeffery Lowder (eds), *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave*, p. 187.)

As for Helms' *Gospel Fictions*, I haven't read it, but maybe I'll put it in my Amazon shopping cart. Thanks for the tip, Robert!

Regards,
Dawson

[July 29, 2008 6:09 AM](#)

[Jon](#) said...

Great post, Dawson.

This claim of conversion of the "skeptic" James is another one of those instances where the apologist smuggles in dubious claims presented in the gospels and combines them with earlier claims from Paul to form a conclusion never stated in any text. In two of the gospels Jesus has a skeptical brother named James, but for Paul James is a leader of the Christian church. So this must mean that he was a skeptic prior to the resurrection and became firmly convinced of his brother's resurrection due to a dramatic post resurrection appearance. I write about this in more detail [here](#).

[July 29, 2008 7:45 AM](#)

[Kevin Brown](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[July 29, 2008 10:51 AM](#)

[Robert_B](#) said...

Mr. Bethrick, I posted a link to your blog on John Loftus' Debunking Christianity blog. There a commenter, david, has posted a reply to your essay.

[Link](#)

You may wish to read what david wrote in defense of Habermas.

[July 29, 2008 11:00 AM](#)

[DingoDave](#) said...

I hope this isn't a double post, but I don't think my original one went through. If it is, then I apologise.

It is not hard to find where Paul got many of his ideas from. According to the book of Acts, he was converted by a Christian named Ananias, in the city of Damascus.

Acts.9

[10] Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

[11] And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying,

[12] and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

[13] But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem;

[14] and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name."

[15] But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

[17] So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

[18] And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized,

[19] and took food and was strengthened. For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

[20] And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God."

[21] And all who heard him were amazed, and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests."

[22] But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Assuming for argument's sake that I Corinthians 15:3-8 is genuine (which I don't), then Paul was no doubt introduced to the Christian creeds by Annanius, and his fellow Christians at Damascus.

I believe that the 'Damascus' in the original story was probably the Essene community at Qumran. The Essenes referred to their settlement a Qumran as 'Damascus'. In my opinion, this interpretation makes more sense than assuming that Paul was visiting the Syrian Damascus, where it is very unlikely that he, or the Jerusalem priests, would have had any authority to persecute anybody.

[August 05, 2008 7:19 PM](#)

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